1
I'm a Noble on the Brink of Ruin, So I Might as Well Try Mastering MAGIC
author
Nazuna Miki
illustrator
Kabotya

1
I'm a Noble on the Brink of Ruin, So I Might as Well Try Mastering MAGIC
author
Nazuna Miki
illustrator
Kabotya

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. I’m a Noble on the Brink of Ruin, So I Might as Well Try Mastering Magic: Volume 1
4. If He Were a King...
5. Afterword
6. Bonus High-Resolution Illustrations
7. About J-Novel Club
8. Copyright

.01

“What’s the matter, young master?”

“Huh...?”

Somebody was tugging on my sleeve. I felt like my mind had blanked out for a second, like I was just about to doze off, when my surroundings came into view.

“Huh?”

This “huh” had a completely different meaning from my earlier “huh.”

Why am I here...?

I looked around. This place looked like the main hall of some mansion. There were lots of people gathered for what seemed to be a party—and I was among them, for some reason. I should have just been enjoying a drink after a hard day’s work... Wait.

“HUUUH?!”

Unlike the first two times, I yelled out this third “huh” at the top of my lungs.

I looked down at my own body and stared at my palms.

I’m a kid...?

Patting my face, I realized that my wrinkles were gone—and so was my beard! The little stubble that always remained no matter how thoroughly I shaved was gone without a trace, and my skin was absolutely glowing. Silky smooth, even!

I had been downing my after-work drink just a second ago when suddenly, I turned into a kid. Saying it myself didn’t help it make any more sense. I felt like I was going crazy.

“What’s wrong, Liam?”

I heard a man’s stern voice from afar. That moment, the lively sounds of the banquet died down a little.

As I was looking around in confusion, the woman beside me—a *maid*—

whispered in my ear. “Young master, the master is calling you.”

“Huh?”

I followed her gaze and found a single nobleman seated on the most distinguished seat in this banquet hall. The slight flush in his cheeks gave away how he must have been drinking, and he still seemed to be in a good mood as he stared at me.

“Oh, um... Congratulations?” I didn’t really get what was going on, but it felt like they were celebrating something, so I tried congratulating him.

The nobleman looked satisfied. “Yes. Enjoy the party tonight.”

Seems like I got past that safely, I thought with a sigh of relief.

Then, while making sure not to stand out, I took a quick look around and listened in on some conversations to gather information. Around thirty minutes of that reaped me a few findings.

First, my name—or rather, the name of this child whose body I somehow entered—was Liam Hamilton. He was the fifth son of Count Hamilton.

Second, this party was being held by the current family head, that nobleman who spoke to me earlier, to celebrate the birth of his first daughter after having five sons in a row. It was hosted by him, his legal wife, his concubine who birthed the daughter, and his five sons.

I got all that.

What I didn’t get was... *Why in the world have I become Liam Hamilton?*

The night had come to an end, but I was still Liam. Thinking I might have been under a dream or illusion or whatnot, I immediately went to sleep after last night’s banquet ended, yet I still woke up as this twelve-year-old boy.

As I gave my face another few pats while on the bed, I began feeling a little bad.

A beard was proof of one’s manhood. As someone who was (originally) baby-faced, whether I had a beard made a big difference on which jobs I could get. I was talking about the good, high-paying jobs—those that actually placed some

responsibility on your shoulders. Oftentimes, it would be hard to land those without a proper beard.

My lamentation was cut short when a young maid around twenty years old opened my door with a greeting. “Good morning, Young Master Liam.”

“G-Good morning.”

“What do you wish to wear today?” she asked, bringing along three outfits in a trolley.

“You mean... I can choose?”

The maid looked like she was wondering why I even asked but simply answered, “Yes.”

So I can choose what to wear for the day... I really am a noble now, huh?

Since it was really looking like I wasn’t going back to normal anytime soon, I started indirectly asking the maid a bunch of stuff to gain a better grasp of my situation—starting with the party yesterday.

Nobles could pass their titles down for up to three generations. During that time, they had to achieve something that benefited the country to extend their succession rights; otherwise, they would become commoners from the fourth generation onward.

The current family head and Liam’s father, Charles Hamilton, just so happened to be the third-generation head. If he didn’t achieve something within his generation, then our house would become commoners from the next generation onward. Incidentally, the easiest achievement he could gun for was having his daughter be selected as the emperor’s wife—and gun for it he did, but alas, Charles had nothing but sons five times in a row. Until recently, that is. That seemed to be the reason for yesterday’s grand party: to celebrate having finally given birth to a daughter with his concubine.

Thus, at present, Charles was fixated on only his eldest son and daughter, and nothing else.

“We’re still nobles anyway, so whatever.”

Liam’s older brother and the fourth son of their family, Bruno, laughed bitterly. Considering he was just one year older than me at thirteen, though, even that nihilistic little laugh of his looked kind of endearing. Boys his age did like acting cool for no good reason.

We were currently in our town’s private school. I came here with him after getting changed and eating breakfast this morning. Now that I’d gathered some information from my maid, I next asked Bruno what he thought about our sister, and *that* was his answer.

“We get to attend this private school and live as we please every day.”

“Do we really, though?”

Bruno scoffed. “Oh, I’m so thankful I could cry,” he said sarcastically. “We go to private school and live without want all for the sake of saving face as nobility. We *are* the oldest noble family still, even if our house is like this now.”

“The oldest noble family?” I asked.

“All it actually means is we’ve been nobles for many generations. But ’cause of that, maintaining our reputation is all the more important.”

“I see.”

The oldest noble family... This would explain the whole party Charles held for the birth of his daughter, who might just help them extend the family’s succession rights.

An emperor or prince falling in love at first sight with a woman of lowly status, whose family eventually rises in the ranks when she becomes empress—this was a well-worn cliché in stories and plays that even a former commoner like me was familiar with.

I was starting to piece everything together... Well, not quite *everything*.

Seriously, why did I end up like this? What happened to my original body? When can I go back? And what if I can’t go back and have to stay like this forever...?

“Ho ho ho.”

An old man entered the room with a relaxed laugh. He looked very much like a friendly and good-natured grandpa, to the point that a foulmouthed person might even say he was starting to go senile.

“I see you are both here. In that case, I will begin today’s lesson.”

“Take it easy, gramps. No point in putting your back into it,” Bruno dismissed him with the same nihilistic tone, acting like someone who had his life all figured out.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. I was born the fourth son of a noble house. I can just call it good here and enjoy the rest of my life.”

The old man and I both fell silent at his statement.

Call it good and enjoy my life... Should I do that too?

“Magic?”

After our unenthusiastic study session, Bruno responded to my question with an incredulous look.

“Yeah. I want to learn.”

“You’ve changed,” he said, stunned.

Of course, I didn’t say this for no reason. Magic was a greater form of knowledge than whatever we were going to learn in private school, and that knowledge was power that the imperial family and nobility almost exclusively monopolized. As a commoner, I knew that magic existed and had seen nobles using it, but not how they used or even learned it.

When I heard Bruno talk about calling it good and enjoying life, I immediately thought about learning magic.

“Am I not allowed?”

“’Course you are,” he immediately refuted. “There’s an archive room in the manor, right?”

“Yeah.”

I hadn’t actually known that, but I nodded anyway because “Liam” would know. I could just ask one of the maids about it later in some roundabout way.

“Then you can just read the grimoires in there. Well, only one in a hundred people have the talent for magic, so you’re just wasting your time, if you ask me.”

Maintaining his nihilistic shtick till the very end, Bruno left the private school.

As for me, I made a beeline for the manor now that I knew about the archive room. There were a bunch of things I wanted to check out in this new town I found myself in, but I returned home without sparing any of it a glance—magic came first for now.

A maid greeted me when I entered the manor. “Welcome back, Young Master Liam.”

“Where’s the archive room?”

“Er...” She frowned in confusion, clearly wondering why I didn’t know.

“Come on, show me!”

Maybe the excitement got to me since Bruno told me I was free to read the grimoires; I didn’t bother beating around the bush and instead straight-up demanded to know where it was. The maid looked at me strangely, but fifth son or not, I was still a “young master” of this noble house. In the end, she meekly guided me through the halls.

Eventually, we arrived in front of a rather grand-looking door. The moment she opened it and entered the room, an odd smell tickled my nose.

“What’s this smell?”

“It is the smell of books,” she answered. “This happens when many books are stored in an enclosed space.”

“I see.”

As a former commoner, it was my first time encountering a room full of books and the smell that came with it. Equipped with that new experience, I entered the archive room and looked through the book spines, scouring the shelves for what I came for.

I soon came across a book titled *Beginner Flame Magic*. I pulled it out, opened it up, and read from the very first page, which began with a rather long-winded preamble. Starting from an introduction to flame magic, it talked about how raising the temperature was an easier form of magic, meaning one in a hundred people had the talent for it. On the other hand, lowering the temperature with frost magic—which was mentioned here even though it was a book on flame magic—was more difficult. Only one in a thousand had the talent for it.

I skipped all that and flipped right to the page that explained how to actually cast the spell. It said that I should first try creating a small flame on the tip of my finger like a candle. The book outlined the concentration, breathing, and movement techniques I needed in order to pull it off, so I went ahead and tried them out one by one.

Following the book's instructions, I closed my eyes, focused, and controlled my breathing with the technique I just learned. Then—just as it instructed—I poured power onto the tip of my finger!

"It worked! It's magic!" I exclaimed with a gasp.

"Wow, congratulations!" The maid who guided me here clapped her hands.

A small candle-like flame flickered right on the tip of my index finger.

Looking at the shelf, there were more magic books—or grimoires, as they were called. I still didn't quite get what just happened, but I seemed to have learned magic—and I could keep learning it from now on too.

This noble life that I was suddenly tossed into for god-knows-what reason was starting to get me real pumped up.

.02

“U-Ummm...”

Inside his study, Liam’s father, Charles Hamilton, was busy writing something at his grandiose office desk. Even after I entered the room, he never once raised his head and simply continued writing.

“What is it, Liam?” he asked, still looking down.

“Well, about our grimoires...”

“Our grimoires? Did something happen to them?”

“No, I just wanted to ask if I could take them out of the archive room...”

I had just entered this body and suddenly became a noble yesterday. Without any idea of how their etiquette and speech worked, I ended up asking my question rather clumsily.

“Take them out? You want to read them?”

“Yes.”

“Do as you wish.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you very much.”

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s all.”

“Then leave. I’m busy.”

“I-I understand.”

I turned around and left the study. Although I looked back one last time, Charles, in contrast, didn’t tear his eyes away from his paperwork, so I stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind me.

I went in, talked, and left. During that time, Charles never once raised his head; he didn’t even turn me down. He was apathetic till the very end.

“I kinda understand how Bruno feels now.”

I found myself sympathizing just a little bit with the rebellious fourth son who had lost hope in the future and gave up on studying.

Having gained permission, I took *Beginner Flame Magic* out of the archive room and went to the manor’s garden. The Hamiltons ruled over this territory, so while we called it a manor, it was actually the size of a small castle. Even the woods behind the garden were big enough to contain an entire village.

In fact, when I grabbed a maid before leaving the manor and asked her how far the Hamilton family’s territory spanned, I got a rather crazy answer in response.

“As far as your eye can see.”

Nobles really are amazing, I marveled.

If the next generation took over right now and we became commoners, all this land and even our manor would be confiscated by the country, so I totally got why Charles was so desperate about this.

I walked into the huge woods owned by our family and settled down on the ground after reaching a clearing. There, I opened up the grimoire.

I focused, controlled my breathing, and formed a clear image in my mind. After concentrating for three straight minutes, a faint, elongated flame appeared around one meter in front of me.

This flame blade was one kind of beginner flame magic.

A grimoire was a magic book that served as a guide. You could use magic you hadn’t mastered yet as long as you held the grimoire in your hands; in this way, it provided support for you to learn how to use the magic. However, magic took a long time to master, and until you did, you wouldn’t be able to use the magic without the grimoire. When I actually tried letting go of it, the flame blade that I made disappeared without a trace.

“If you practice every day, the activation time will shorten, and eventually, you’ll even learn how to activate it without the book,” I read aloud from a page

on the grimoire.

Basically, it was like a baby walker that toddlers used to learn how to walk. If I kept practicing while holding on to the grimoire, I'd eventually learn how to cast the spell even without it.

I'd always wanted to learn magic, and it turned out to be much simpler than I thought. No wonder nobles kept these grimoires stored away like valuables.

I continued practicing making the flame blade spell, or Flame Cutter, as it was officially known. It wasn't like I had anything else to do. Before entering this body, I had to go to work every day, but I had no such responsibilities as Liam. Even the fifth son of a noble was still a noble, and nobles looked down on physical labor as unsightly.

Left with no real need to work, I was all too happy to focus on my magic each day given how I'd always admired it. Slowly but surely, the time it took for me to activate my magic while holding the grimoire grew shorter, and I could tell too, which only made me all the more enthusiastic to practice.

Day in and day out, I continued to practice magic.

"Oh, there you are. So you were playing out here."

"Hm? Bruno?"

Today, I was practicing in the woods as usual when my older brother Bruno came up to me. A month had passed since I first became Liam; I'd grown familiar with the Hamilton house, so I could now comfortably speak with this cynical fourth son as if he really were my older brother.

Bruno let out a huff and strode right over to me. "I heard you were practicing magic."

"Yeah. Father gave me permission to use our grimoires."

"'Course he did. I know that," he said with a roll of his eyes. "That guy has nothing but his marry-Sarah-to-the-emperor plan in that head of his. He doesn't care 'bout us anymore."

"Ha ha..."

Bruno was right. That was how father had been when I asked for his permission to use the grimoires a month ago, and that hadn't changed one bit over the past month. He never looked me in the eye, and even when we talked, he would always be doing something else at the same time.

"So? How much have you learned? Show me."

"Yeah, so..."

I put the grimoire down on the ground.

By the way, grimoires were apparently treated with a special coating, so they didn't get damaged or dirty unless hit with an especially powerful attack.

Having set the grimoire down, I closed my eyes, focused, and cast Flame Cutter to make a flame blade.

"I can do this, I guess."

Bruno stared at me wide-eyed. "Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

"Y-You can use magic...without a grimoire?"

"Uh?"

"N-No way. It should normally take an entire year to master magic to the point where you can do *that*... Are you saying you learned it in only a month...?"

Suffice it to say that Bruno was utterly and thoroughly shocked.

.03

“How did you learn magic in such a short time?!”

“How...?”

Overwhelmed by Bruno’s intense gaze, I began to wonder if I‘d done something bad and tried recalling everything I did until now.

“I just followed the grimoire’s instructions every day...”

“So...is that grimoire special somehow?” Bruno held his chin and began mumbling to himself. “Yeah, that might be it. We’re the oldest noble family, so I can imagine we have some crazy things stored in our archives.”

I didn’t feel like interrupting him and all his mumbling, so I just watched for a while until he spoke up again.

“Hey, Liam. Gimme that.”

“O-Okay. Here.”

Overwhelmed by his intense gaze yet again, I handed him the grimoire. He opened it up, pored over the same pages I’d been staring at for the past month, and started practicing as well.

If he’s going to start practicing magic, then I should be off so I don’t get in his way—

“Say, Liam.”

“Hm?”

Just as I was about to leave, Bruno called out to me. I flinched and turned around, only to find that he was still staring at the grimoire, but this time with an expression that spoke volumes of how tedious he found it to be.

With his face scrunched up like that, he asked me, “Are you working so hard ’cause you wanna be the next family head?”

“The head? Why?”

“’Cause you’re the same as pops.”

I frowned in confusion. *The same as Charles—as father? How so?*

“Don’t tell me you don’t know,” Bruno said ominously, “why pops is so desperate about all this.”

“Is there any particular reason?” I asked slowly.

“Well, it’s normal for nobles to pass their title to their heir after they reach a certain age, right?”

“Oh, really?” I didn’t know that, and Bruno could tell.

“So you really didn’t know. Well, can’t say I’m surprised, what with how easygoing you are,” he said, smoothly dismissing my ignorance. “You see, things get complicated if the heir succeeds the position after the family head dies. It’s much easier to manage all the trouble that comes after if the title is passed while the head’s still alive.”

I hummed in response. *I never thought about that. I guess nobles have it hard too.*

“There’s less room for arguments that way,” he added, “and that’s also why the rest of us can do whatever we want.”

“Right...”

“But you see, that’s where another problem crops up: the moment pops passes his title down, our family will enter its fourth generation, meaning we’d have to relinquish our nobility and become commoners.”

I blinked. “Oh.”

“It’s normal for family heads to toss all the work to their heirs then enjoy the life of a retired noble with their authority still intact, but pops can’t even do that as things are, which is why he’s oh-so-desperate.”

I see... That’s true. Come to think of it, it *was* kind of weird for him to be so desperate just because the generation after his would become commoners. Father always looked so cornered, as if he himself were in trouble. So this was why—

“Argh, what a pain in the ass!”

“Huh?”

Bruno suddenly lashed out and threw the grimoire at me, exclaiming, “This is way too boring for me! See ya!” before leaving just as quickly as he came.

I silently stared at him and let out a wry chuckle. *It hasn’t even been ten minutes since you started practicing, though.*

In any case, the grimoire was back with me now, so I could start practicing again.

A few days later, I went back to the archive room. Now that I learned all the spells from *Beginner Flame Magic*—the first grimoire that I took out—I borrowed *Beginner Frost Magic*.

Unable to wait until I got to the woods, I started practicing while walking.

One in a hundred people could use flame magic, but lowering the temperature was more difficult than raising it, so apparently, only one in a thousand could use frost magic. That explanation made sense to me; after all, it was easy to start a fire even without magic, but it was impossible to make ice—you could only wait for winter to do that. Thus, there were very few people who could use this difficult type of magic.

All this just served to make me feel even more excited. I loved magic, and frost magic was especially challenging. Just how fun would it be once I finally learned it?

I continued practicing magic with the grimoire as I walked down the hall.

As was the case for flame magic, I sometimes practiced by casting the magic directly onto the book. Apparently, it was easier for grimoires to assist with magic if it were cast on the book itself, hence why they were treated with a protective coating.

That was why I gave it a try...

“Whoa!”

...but it didn’t go so well, and the grimoire in my hands caught fire.

I tried using frost magic but ended up casting Fireball on it instead. Startled by the burning grimoire, I dropped it to the ground before frantically picking it back up and putting the fire out.

“Who in the world is starting a fire in the—Liam?”

“Father!”

My panic surged even more as I turned toward the voice I’d heard. Father was coming this way while speaking with the butler. He was probably headed somewhere, as he wasn’t even looking me in the eye, as usual.

“Don’t play with fire in the hallway...” He trailed off. “Is that a grimoire?”

“Yes.”

“*Beginner Frost Magic*... Hm? Was that not fire just now?”

“Yes, my apologies. I struggled with frost magic and ended up casting flame magic on accident.”

“I see... Wait, what?” Father was about to leave when he stopped and turned back around—and for the first time, our eyes met. “You’ve been studying magic?”

I asked for his permission to use the grimoires, but I guess he doesn’t remember...

I hesitated for a moment but ended up just nodding. “Yes.”

He gazed at me for a while. “You must have mastered flame magic, seeing as you can use it without a grimoire. When did you start studying?”

“One month ago.”

“One month ago?!” he echoed in shock. “Are you saying you learned magic in one month?”

“Yes.”

He looked at me in disbelief as he muttered, “You...had talent?”

I recognized that look in his eyes. It reminded me of the first time I woke up as Liam, back during that banquet when he was celebrating the birth of his daughter.

.04

With a serious look on his face, father stared at me for a moment more before finally asking, “Have you learned frost magic already?”

“No, I was just going to start today.”

He hummed. “Show me,” he ordered, then turned around and walked down the hall.

I watched him in a daze until the butler beside him gave me a look that seemed to be telling me to follow, so I hurried after him. We eventually reached a large sitting room with a fireplace. Father had called a maid along the way and ordered her to pull a seat over.

“Go on,” he urged as he sat down.

“O-Okay.”

I was a little confused, but after thinking about it, all I really had to do was what I always did. I’d gotten the hang of things from practicing flame magic, and since I still had to rely on the grimoire, it wasn’t like I could do anything flashy anyway.

Thus, I made the wise decision to start with something simple.

I opened the grimoire up and followed the instructions. What caught me by surprise was that, although I had been expecting frost magic to have instructions opposite to those of flame magic, it seemed like I was completely off the mark. I had assumed beforehand that since I had to gather power for flame magic, then I’d have to be relaxed and calm for frost. But in actuality, it seemed like I needed to gather my power the same way to use frost magic.

I controlled my breathing and gathered my power, imagining it all flowing through my body as I carefully followed all the grimoire’s instructions. I didn’t know how long it took, but I eventually felt the grimoire in my hands faintly frosting over the surface.

“I did it...”

“Goodness! You really froze it...”

Father stood from his seat, walked over to my side, and held the grimoire to check its condition. His eyes grew wide when he felt the crispy layer of ice and the cool air surrounding it.

“This is truly...”

Father’s butler lowered his head. “Congratulations,” he said—but to my father, not to me.

Why him? I wondered, considering I was the one who succeeded in casting the magic.

However, father accepted it with a nod. “Yes! The heavens truly are on my side!” He looked far more pleased than I had ever seen him before. This was the first time I saw him in such a good mood; he wasn’t this happy even back during the banquet.

“Liam,” he called.

“Y-Yes?”

“Do you like magic?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. I like it.”

“Good. Then I will collect more grimoires for you. If there is a particular grimoire you want, then feel free to let me know.”

“Huh? O-Okay.”

I didn’t get why he was in such a good mood, but he was saying he’d gather more of these precious grimoires for me, so I gladly accepted.

“Now, show me more magic,” he ordered.

“All right.”

I tried to focus on magic practice again, but just then, somebody knocked on the door. The butler answered it and listened to the other person, then shut the door and returned to Charles’s side.

“Master, that man has...” He leaned over and whispered in my father’s ear.

“What? You mean to say that he’s fled into my territory?”

“It seems likely.”

Father groaned. In a complete change from his good mood earlier, he scrunched his face up in bitter displeasure. Then, without a single word, he and the butler left me behind in the room.

What was all that about?

The next day, I went to the woods as usual with *Beginner Frost Magic* in hand. Father said that he’d bring me any grimoire I wanted, but magic wasn’t so simple. Throughout the past month I had spent as a noble, I’d come to learn that it was something I needed to diligently practice one-by-one through repetition every day. Thus, just as I did with flame magic, I decided to learn all the frost magic spells first.

With that in mind, I headed for my usual spot. However...

“Who...?”

Somebody was already there. In the clearing located farther inside the woods, one man sat limply on the ground with his back against a tree.

Hearing my voice, he lifted his head and looked at me. “Those clothes... You’re Hamilton’s kid?”

“Huh? Um, yeah. I’m Liam Hamilton,” I said, introducing myself without much thought.

“Well, I sure screwed this up. They say it’s hardest to see what’s right under your nose, so I never expected you to come here on the very first day.”

I frowned in confusion at this man’s rambling.

“Well, this must be fate,” he went on. “Go on. Do what you must.”

“Um... And that would be what, exactly?”

The man looked at me weirdly. “Didn’t you come to catch me?”

“Why?”

He fell silent and stared at me for a while—*observing* me, as if he could see right through me, all the way to the deepest recesses of my mind. It was a little unsettling.

His gaze continued to linger until one corner of his lips curled up. “I must’ve been too on edge,” he said with a huff. “If they’d really found me, they wouldn’t have sent this kinda kid my way.”

I was still confused, but it seemed like the misunderstanding—at least, I think it was—had been cleared up.

“Oh? So you’re studying magic?” The man looked at the grimoire in my hands and hummed. “Can I see that?”

“Huh? Oh, sure.”

I handed it over to him—and then realized that I might have messed up. Unlike Bruno or father, this man was a complete stranger. Moreover, nobles considered grimoires as valuable items. It had only been a month since I became a noble myself, so it didn’t occur to me how bad an idea this was until after I passed it to him.

While I was panicking internally, the man said, “Wow, this is amazing.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Are you the last person who used this?”

“Yeah.”

“So this residual mana is yours. It’s not every day you see this kind of talent.” Still seated on the ground, he let out an impressed hum as his gaze flitted between me and the grimoire.

“Er... May I have that back now?”

“Oh, my bad,” he said as he nonchalantly gave it back.

I guess I was just overthinking things. Now I felt a little awkward because I almost suspected him of something bad. In an attempt to brush the thought off, I started practicing frost magic with the grimoire. The man watched me silently for a while but eventually spoke up again.

“Don’t you wanna know a more efficient way to learn that?”

“A more efficient way?” I asked.

“That’s right. Oh, I’m not suggesting anything weird, I assure you,” he added immediately. “That’s beginner magic, right? You’re at the stage where you learn through repetition—that’s not about to change.”

“Right...”

“What I’m talking about...is *this*.”

Without budging from his spot, the man held his right hand out with his palm facing me. Then, he cast a different type of magic on each finger—fire on his index, ice on his middle, electricity around his ring, and a whirlwind swirling over his pinky. Lastly, his thumb was glowing like a burning metal rod.

“Using multiple magic spells at the same time,” he elaborated. “I know that grimoire too. It teaches Ice Needle, Freeze, Frost Nail, and also a bunch of other spells, right? And you just tried to cast them in succession, yeah? Well, I’m saying that you can save so much more time if you just practice them all at once instead.”

“I-Is that even possible?”

“See for yourself,” the man said as he waved his right hand.

“Th-That’s true... How did you do that?”

“Oh? Nice! I like you, kid. You don’t have that useless sense of pride other nobles have. Any other noble kid would’ve been too prideful to even ask me that.”

“Er...”

Well, I certainly am not a “noble kid,” I thought with a wry smile. I just entered this body for god-knows-what reason. I wasn’t originally a noble, so I didn’t really understand that sense of pride they had.

“Let’s check first,” the man began. “Try drawing on the ground—a circle with your right hand and a square with your left, both at the same time.”

“Okay...”

I had to wonder what exactly he was checking for, but I still listened to him and drew a circle and a square with both my index fingers.

“Oh, nice. Have you done this before?”

“No, only just now.”

“Then you have a good affinity for this, it seems. Since you can do that, there’s no need for any tricks or twists. Now try using any magic you know—one on your left hand and another on your right. I just showed you, so you should still have a feel for it if you try now.”

As instructed, I cast Flame Cutter on my right hand and Fireball on my left. I managed the task with ease.

I nodded in understanding. “I see.”

It wasn’t until some time later that I found out using different magic spells at the same time was a special technique so difficult that only one in a hundred thousand could pull it off.

Back then, though, I didn’t know this just yet.

.05

“Interesting. Very interesting.”

“What is?”

“Try three at once this time.”

“Okay... I understand.”

I actually didn’t, but I went along with it and did as he said. I selected three spells from *Beginner Flame Magic*—Fireball, which made a ball of fire; Flame Cutter, which formed a flame blade; and Blazing Floor, which slightly heated up the ground—and tried to cast them all at the same time.

“I did it—oh.”

The next moment, the fireball I made burst apart. Rather than exploding, it was more like the flame had failed to maintain its form, and like a bubble—*pop!*—it was gone, just like that.

“I couldn’t do it.”

“No, that was a success. You really are interesting.”

I raised a brow at him.

“You were able to do it; you just didn’t have enough mana,” he explained. “This technique uses up nearly twice as much mana as casting each spell individually, after all.”

“I see...”

“You’re already plenty amazing for being able to activate three whole spells at your age. That said, activating all three at once is way more impressive.”

The man was in an even better mood now, seemingly delighted at the fact that I was able to cast three spells simultaneously.

“Since you don’t have enough mana, I’ll just explain verbally from now on. Sit down.”

“Okay.”

I did as I was told. I didn’t even know his name yet, much less where he even came from, but already I was viewing this man as my teacher.

“If you keep using this technique, you’ll eventually run into an inane obstacle.”

“An inane obstacle?”

“Right. Long story short, this technique only activates at prime numbers. You know prime numbers?”

“No.”

“All right, then study up on that in your own time. You nobles go to private schools, right? I’ll just tell you which numbers are prime numbers for now.”

The man eyed the ground between us. He was making no other visible movements, yet some characters—or more precisely, *numbers*—began appearing on the ground, as if someone were writing with a stick.

Two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen...

“These are prime numbers,” he said.

“Okay...”

“As you progress, you’ll hit your first hurdle at four. You won’t succeed no matter what. Even if you could use five spells at once, you wouldn’t be able to do the same with four—that’s simply how it works.”

“I see. In other words, I might end up going around in circles trying to do it with four or six, even though in reality, it just isn’t possible with those numbers.”

“Good, you seem pretty smart too—but that’s not quite right. Once you’re past four, that experience will help you get over six more easily.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

“Moving on, the next point you get stuck on after that is nine. By then, experience would tell you that this technique just doesn’t work with an even number of spells, but then you’ll just realize one day: *‘Huh? That can’t be right.*

Didn't I start out with two spells?"

"Right... I get it."

I stared at the numbers the man had written. I still didn't understand these "prime numbers" or whatever they were called, but I should remember them for now. It wouldn't be too hard if it was just these numbers he wrote down; I memorized them immediately.

"By the way, this is my limit," the man said as he cast several magic spells at once.

Fire, ice, lightning, wind... Various spells activated at the same time and floated in the air.

"Thirteen," I counted.

"Yeah. I can feel that I have enough mana to get to sixteen, but it's not possible to use sixteen at once; after thirteen comes seventeen. If I had to say, this is the weakness of this technique—any little bit of growth will still recalibrate you to the smaller prime number, making it seem pointless. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen all become thirteen spells in the end."

"But you'll show improvement all at once when you get to seventeen."

"That's how it goes." The man grinned. "You really are a clever kid. How old are you? Twelve? Thirteen, maybe?"

"Um, I'm twelve."

I was actually way older, but I couldn't tell him that. I didn't even know why I changed bodies in the first place.

"If you're this smart at twelve, then you have a promising future ahead of you. You might even surpass me one day."

"I wonder."

"Your youth is your weapon—and your willingness to listen to others, I might add, is an even greater weapon."

"Okay..." I nodded hesitantly.

I strongly agreed that youth was a weapon. Before entering this body, I

always had to worry about muscle pain the following day and had to be careful not to get injured since it wasn't easy to heal up.

But listening to others... Isn't that a normal thing to do?

The man looked down at the frost magic grimoire in my hands. "A grimoire, hm... Do you have any more?"

"No," I answered. "But I want to learn more, so father told me he would get some for me."

"You wanna learn?"

"Yes!" I responded immediately, full of conviction. I loved magic and wanted to learn a whole lot more.

"In that case, I'll give you this," he said.

The next moment, something floated through the air and stopped right in front of me.

I stared at it. "A ring?"

"It's called a magicpedia."

"A magicpedia..."

"Simply put, it's a grimoire."

"Huh?"

"It's a specially coated practice item that contains a hundred grimoires' worth of information, to be exact."

"A hundred grimoires?! I-Inside this thing?"

"Yeah, but that's all it is. It doesn't make it easier to learn magic—it's just jam-packed with spells. About the only benefit it has is that you don't have to walk around with a hundred books in tow."

I stopped listening to him halfway through. A hundred grimoires—just that alone turned this into a precious treasure in my eyes.

The moment I gently held the floating ring, the names of more than three hundred magic spells appeared in my head.

“F-First, I’ll try Wind Shot.”

Using the ring as a medium, I immediately followed the instructions that appeared in my head and began learning Wind Shot.

Three hundred magic spells! That thought completely took over my mind, and I could no longer think of anything but this ring.

“You really are an interesting kid. That enthusiasm of yours is your greatest weapon of all.”

.06

It was my first time trying beginner wind magic, so I wasn't able to activate it. The movement techniques and imagery needed were different from those of flame and frost magic, leaving me feeling very oddly disjointed, as if I were trying to eat with my fork and knife in opposite hands all of a sudden.

However, I didn't see this as a problem. This much was expected when learning something new. Emptying my heart and mind, I continued practicing Wind Shot.

Then, around one hour after I started...

"I did it."

A bush that my hand was facing visibly swayed, not because of any natural breeze, but because of my magic.

Looks like I'll be able to learn wind magic too. Now, I just need to do it again and—

"—ter? Young master!"

"Huh?"

Someone's voice cut through my concentration. When I turned around in surprise, I came face-to-face with a rather angry-looking maid.

"Wh-What's wrong?" I asked her.

"I have been calling for you since earlier, young master," she chided. "It's dangerous to be here by yourself. This area has not been cleared of beasts as per the master's orders, and there may even be poisonous bugs or snakes nearby."

"Oh, but I'm not alo—" I turned around, but the man was gone. "Huh?"

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, um..." I looked between the spot where the man had been and the maid

who was looking at me strangely.

He was there just a second ago... Where'd he go? He couldn't have been a ghost, right? In which case, should I just not mention it at all? If I went and said, *"There was a guy right here, wasn't there?"* then she'd probably just give me a funny look.

That train of thought flitted through my mind for a split second. In the end, I decided to change the topic.

"More importantly, did you need me for anything?"

"Oh, yes. I came to deliver this to you."

"This is...a grimoire?"

The maid gave me a grimoire titled *Beginner Summoning Magic*. It looked much older than any of the other grimoires I had seen until now.

"Master ordered me to hand it to you."

"I see. Thanks. Tell him I'll thank him in person later."

"Understood."

The maid bowed deeply before turning around and leaving, eventually walking out of sight.

"A grimoire from your dad? Great timing."

"Whoa!" My heart nearly jumped right out of my chest. I spun around to find the man sitting in the exact same spot in the exact same position. "Wh-Where have you been?"

"Nowhere. I used magic. I hid myself using a spell called Invisibility."

"I see..." I muttered, astonished. *So there's that kind of magic too.*

"It's in the ring as well. It's a bit difficult, but you can take your time and learn it."

"Yes!"

"Now then, seeing as people actually come by here, I can't afford to stay too long."

“Huh? Wh-What...”

What did he mean by that?

“I’ll teach you one last thing. Open that grimoire up to any page with a spell, then use the ring to practice the contents.”

“Right... Okay.”

I opened up the grimoire and looked through the first page that had a magic spell on it. It was a spell that summoned a Salamander, a low-rank fire spirit.

I followed the instructions written there. It was my first time using this magic, so normally, it would’ve taken me at least an hour to see results—but surprisingly, a result came in an instant this time, just not the one I expected. I looked at the ring in shock.

“It’s in,” the man confirmed.

“Wh-What’s this?”

“Nothing big. The magicpedia just imported the grimoire’s contents,” he explained. “You can think of that ring as a notebook with an infinite supply of empty pages.”

“I-I see...”

“It doesn’t do anything to the contents other than import them, though. Well, it saves you some space in your bag, right?” The man grinned.

“Yes! This really helps!”

“Try importing the others too.”

“Okay!”

I went on to do the same with the three other spells left in the grimoire that father got for me, each of which summoned a low-rank elemental spirit: a Sylph for wind, an Undine for water, and a Gnome for earth. It only took a second each, and I finished right away.

“I’m done—huh?”

By the time I raised my head, the man was gone. I thought he’d used Invisibility again, but I immediately realized that wasn’t the case; words were

being scribbled on the ground before me the same way when he taught me about prime numbers.

“Good luck practicing magic. Let’s meet again someday. PS Don’t tell anyone about me.”

I could tell that he didn’t just go invisible and was actually gone for real this time.

I silently erased the words with my feet. I didn’t know what his reasons were, but since he told me so, then I wouldn’t tell a single soul. We only talked for a short while and I had no idea what his name even was, but I had completely accepted him as my teacher.

“Goodness! At the same time?!”

Father was baffled when he saw me practicing magic.

Because I didn’t have enough mana, one spell would always disappear whenever I tried using three at once. That didn’t serve as much practice for me, so I went about casting two spells at once.

Learning magic using grimoires—or, well, a magicpedia now—was essentially learning through repetition, so naturally, doing two at once increased the efficiency. Day and night, I kept going on and on. My mana gradually increased, soon followed by the number of spells I could activate at once, ultimately leading to yet another boost in efficiency.

Eventually, after one month, I’d become capable of activating five spells at once, and the total number of spells I’d learned had reached a hundred.

.07

Recently, I'd taken to doing *a certain something* while practicing magic.

Whenever I walked around the woods behind the manor—which, by the way, had begun feeling more like home to me than the manor itself—I would pay close attention to the ground in search of a particular thing.

Looks like I found some pretty quickly again today.

Beneath a tree, nurtured by the morning dew, an herb called lekukro grass had grown. The color of the soil surrounding that herb was clearly different.

"Gnome!" I called, summoning before my eyes a low-rank earth spirit that looked like a mole.

And just to make things clear, "Gnome" wasn't the individual spirit's name but their species name. I could currently use five magic spells at once, meaning I could summon five Gnomes at the same time. As such, it was highly likely that this Gnome was different from any I'd summoned before.

Thus, rather than assuming it knew what to do, I gave it clear and detailed instructions. "I want you to dig out that different-colored soil around the lekukro grass and compress it into balls for me. Avoid the herb itself."

The Gnome nodded.

The next moment, the soil around the lekukro grass floated up and was compressed into balls beside the Gnome, which hadn't moved an inch. It seemed like manipulating soil was as simple a task for an earth spirit as breathing was for humans.

Afterward, I shot out three fireballs, engulfing the lumps of earth in flame.

"Sylph!"

For the last of the five spells I could simultaneously activate, I summoned a Sylph, a low-rank wind spirit that had the form of a naked adult, although its skin was green and its size was one-third that of a human's. As a side note, its

appearance would fall under what humans categorized as female.

“Control the air so that the fire burns hotter.”

The Sylph nodded. Unlike the earth spirit that didn’t have to move, the wind spirit raised its index and middle fingers in a V shape over its mouth, then blew out.

Fanned by the wind, the flames burned even harder, reaching out for the sky in a straight line as if they were guided by a long and invisible chimney—and with the same effects of an actual chimney too, as the fire engulfing the soil grew even stronger.

That was how I used five spells at once to heat up the soil.

In a while, it began melting into a sludge. Normal soil wouldn’t melt so easily under heat—in fact, it would harden, which was how clay and pottery were made—except this particular type in front of me actually was. Somehow, wherever lekukro grass grew, it altered the composition of the soil around it into something else, hence why it melted. Eventually, it formed into a hexagonal crystal.

This was called a lekukro crystal.

After putting the fire out and stopping the wind, I held the crystal between my index finger and thumb. Closing one eye, I took a closer look and saw that the inside was completely see-through, revealing not even a single impurity.

A lekukro crystal could be sold at a fairly good price. Its effects were simple: it instantly recovered any mana that was consumed when casting magic. This could earn me some good money—although a noble, fifth son or not, had no real need to earn money in the first place. Regardless, it had only been two months since I entered this twelve-year-old body, so the instincts I had from my original lifestyle in my previous body remained strong; I felt restless if I didn’t work, so I’d begun making lekukro crystals.

By supporting the multistep process with all the beginner magic I’d learned over the past two months, I was able to produce these crystals while also practicing my magic. The bigger my pile of lekukro crystals grew, the more my magic proficiency improved as well.

This two-birds-with-one-stone approach raised my mana with each passing day.

“Liam.”

“Oh, father.”

When I got back to the manor, father called out to me, his eyes never once leaving me as I ran over to his side. Ever since he learned that I could use magic, he would always call me over like this whenever we ran into each other in the manor. In my first month here, we barely exchanged ten words of conversation despite us living together in the same house. All things considered, it was a pretty incredible change of heart.

“Did you go into the woods again?”

“Yes. I was making lekukro crystals.”

He hummed. “Show me.”

“Okay.”

I took out the crystals I’d just made and handed them over. Father held them between his fingers like I did, bringing them close to his face and observing them closely.

“Quite the high level of purity,” he observed. “It’s just shy of a hundred percent—close to perfect.”

“Is that so?”

“The higher the purity, the quicker it recovers mana.”

“That’s true.”

Impurities impeded mana absorption—that was written in the book where I first learned about lekukro grass from.

“With this level of purity,” father continued, “this would be the kind of crystal that the captain of an imperial magus unit would keep for emergencies.”

“Is that so?”

“How did you make it?”

“Well...”

I laid out the whole process to him: I ordered a low-rank earth spirit to extract soil that had been altered by lekukro grass and heated it up with three fireballs that were further fanned by a low-rank wind spirit, ultimately melting the soil.

I explained it all to him without hiding a single thing, after which he looked at me with the gaze of a proud parent.

“So you used five spells at once, meaning you did five magi’s worth of work by yourself.”

“Yes.”

It was only sometime after my teacher taught me that I learned very few people could actually use this technique. Apparently, among the publicly recognized magi—in other words, those who either served the country or registered as adventurers—there were fewer than five who could pull it off. That was just how rare this special technique was.

“Well done. Keep it up.”

“Thank you.”

It had only been two months since this man became my father, but it still made me happy when he looked at me so proudly and praised me like this.

.08

One day, while scouring the woods for more lekukro grass, I noticed a one-meter-wide elevated patch of soil that looked particularly dark in color. Curious, I got closer and grabbed a handful of it.

“Wait, this isn’t soil...” I muttered to myself. “Is it iron sand?”

I pinched some of that grainy material and sprinkled a tiny bit of it on my tongue as a test. It certainly was iron sand—it tasted like it—and looking at the elevated patch, there seemed to be quite a lot of it buried underneath.

Iron, huh...

Back in the day, I would sometimes find patches of iron sand in the wild. They were usually too small for any decent merchant to ever consider digging up to sell, but they were still enough to be useful to one’s daily life on an individual level.

Although in my case, I usually dug them up and sold them in town for some small change...

However, from what I could tell, the pile of iron sand before me now was big enough for a single commoner’s house. Still not enough to sell for much profit, but it felt like such a waste to leave it be too.

I stared at it for a while.

Iron is smelted under high temperatures, right?

I returned to the manor and looked through our archives. As one would expect from a noble’s grand collection, it even contained a book that outlined how to refine iron, which was kept a secret from commoners. I may be the fifth son, but I was still a noble through and through. Nobody could stop me from reading how to purify iron.

Armed with knowledge, I went back to the patch of iron sand that I found.

“Gnome!”

First, I summoned a low-rank earth spirit. When the mole-like spirit appeared before me, I ordered it, “Make a big earthen pot and have it float at the height of a table.”

The Gnome nodded before taking some earth from the ground and making a bucket-sized pot. Then, I threw in some of the iron sand—about one person’s worth, for starters.

“Salamander!”

Next, I called on a Salamander, a low-rank fire spirit that looked like a giant flaming lizard. It was surprisingly cute in appearance but was made of fire and thus couldn’t be touched or petted.

“Heat up the iron sand in the pot,” I told it. “Slowly raise the temperature and stop when I tell you to.”

The Salamander wordlessly jumped into the pot, gradually heating up the iron sand inside until it melted. The color changed as the temperature rose, and as the grainy bits began merging together, it slowly turned into a pool of viscous orange liquid.

“Stop.”

When the Salamander stopped raising the temperature at my word, the melted sand’s color stopped changing too. This was why I summoned a Salamander instead of casting Fireball—it was so I could adjust the temperature.

When I made lekukro crystals, all I needed was to make the flame hotter and hotter until it reached the soil’s melting point, then I just had to stop the fire altogether before cooling off the crystals. However, that wouldn’t work when smelting iron. This time around, I needed to keep the fire at a temperature at which iron would melt but earth wouldn’t—a task that called for a fire spirit rather than some fireballs.

“Gnome,” I called again, summoning a third spirit at the same time.

Incidentally, so long as a summoned spirit was still manifested, the spell was

considered as “currently in use.” In other words, although I had summoned them at different times, I was still technically using three spells at once. It was why summoners with sufficient mana mainly summoned high-rank spirits rather than low-rank ones; since they could only summon one at a time, high-rank was clearly better than low-rank.

Anyway, I digress.

“Make an earthen mold,” I ordered the second Gnome.

After I additionally detailed the shape I wanted to the spirit, it quickly made a twenty-centimeter-wide hollow block of earth with a hole at the top and placed it beneath the pot.

Then, I told the first Gnome, “Open a hole at the bottom of the pot and let the iron drip down from there.”

A hole opened up at the bottom of the pot, through which the iron dripped down. This was exactly what I needed the spirits for—their mastery over their respective elements. Thanks to that, the iron flowed perfectly into the mold without ever straying by even a single millimeter.

“Stop.”

When I gave the order, the bottom of the pot sealed up completely. The iron that had flowed into the mold began rapidly cooling off, eventually settling from the burning orange color down to a typical metallic color.

“Remove the mold,” I instructed next.

The second Gnome cleanly peeled the earthen mold off, leaving not even a single speck of dust behind. Having lost its support, the iron on the inside clattered onto the ground; although a Gnome could make earth float, it couldn’t do the same with iron.

“Undine.”

To finish things off, I called an Undine to cool down the iron before I picked up the finished product: an exquisitely beautiful rose. Each individual petal was so well-made and realistic that it felt as if a fresh rosy scent would be wafting through the air at any moment.

“I’ve never seen such precise iron craftsmanship before,” I couldn’t help muttering in awe.

The finished product was so impressive, if I said so myself, that it would undoubtedly be worthy of becoming a region’s local specialty, provided there were blacksmiths or craftsmen who could make something of this caliber.

The book I had read said that anybody could melt iron, as all they needed to do was to toss some ore and iron sand into a furnace, feed it some charcoal, and crank the heat up. The problem lay in shaping that untouchable burning iron into the form you wanted. Using an earthen vessel to contain the iron was also an idea I got from the book, but it warned that this method produced uneven surfaces and could thus only be used to make simple things like an axe’s blade.

With the help of the Gnomes, however, I was able to use this method to produce a beautiful iron rose, marking it a complete success.

In which case, I could even try making a golden rose—no, I can shape any metal as I please!

Because I was the fifth son of a noble, I knew that I had to put my efforts into this. This skill could keep me fed for the rest of my life—I was *sure* of it.

.09

This iron rose was nice and all, but I wasn't quite sure if it'd make me much dough. It wasn't a commodity, after all; in fact, no matter how I sliced it, this was clearly a luxury good. Whether this could even serve as a proper source of income for me was shaky at best.

As I was trying to brainstorm for better ideas, I caught sight of the patch of iron sand... That black iron sand... Black...

"White is better," I quietly mumbled to myself.

This was something I knew about even before I became a noble.

I didn't even need to return to the manor's archive room to do research. I only had to use some knowledge I'd always had from the start but simply never had the ability to make use of.

"All right."

Deciding to give it a try first, I used Flame Cutter to cut down a tree trunk that was about as thick as an arm.

"Gnome," I chanted next, summoning the mole-like earth spirit in front of me. "Encase this trunk in earth and make sure it's sealed airtight. Add a small hole at the top too."

The Gnome nodded and obeyed. This was normally done with mud, but while mud was fine while it was wet, air would get in once it dried up. With a Gnome's help, however, the earth could be controlled such that it wouldn't let any air through, so there was no need to use mud in the first place.

"And just to be safe..." Next, I summoned a low-rank wind spirit. "Sylph. Can you split the air into its burnable and unburnable components?"

The air contained components that could and could not be set on fire. I knew that there was a difference but not what exactly that difference was. All I knew was that there was "burnable air" and "unburnable air."

The Sylph clearly nodded in response to my question.

“In that case, I’ll start burning this now. Make sure to keep any unburnable air out of it.”

The wind spirit firmly nodded again. Ordinarily, this would be quite the ridiculous request to make, but this here was a spirit that held power over wind. Splitting the components in the air must be a walk in the park for it.

And with that—

“Fireball!”

I used the last three slots of magic that I could use at once to make three fireballs. I just needed pure firepower to raise the temperature as much as I could, so this was better than calling on a Salamander.

As the fireballs continued to burn the trunk encased in earth, smoke gradually began coming out of the hole.

“Seal the hole, Gnome.”

The Gnome obeyed my order, closing it up so the smoke couldn’t escape. Thus, the lump of earth continued heating up under these extremely high temperatures, courtesy of the complete airtight seal and segregation of unburnable air, both of which were normally difficult to achieve. More than ten minutes passed like that.

“It should be done soon,” I decided, muttering to myself. “Gnome, peel the earth off once the flames are put out.”

As I had ordered, it peeled off the earth encasing the trunk at almost exactly the same time as when the flames went out.

What emerged from beneath all that was now *white*. It also used to be as thick as an arm but was now only as thick as a bone. I picked it up and knocked on it with my middle finger’s knuckle.

Knock, knock. It made a clear metallic sound.

What I had just created was charcoal—specifically, white charcoal.

Normal black charcoal was made under moderate heat in a moderately closed-off container. It was easy to make in large quantities, so commoners could easily purchase it too.

In contrast, white charcoal was made under extreme heat and under extremely airtight containment. It produced much higher temperatures compared to black charcoal, and most important of all, it barely produced any smoke, making it last longer as well. It was characterized by the metallic glass-like sound it made when knocked on, as well as how much tougher it was than black charcoal. Because of how difficult it was to make, it was more expensive than its counterpart, but it also went for a pretty good price thanks to its high heat production and significant lack of smoke.

That about summed up this white charcoal I just made, but...

“Isn’t this tougher than Suncoal?”

Suncoal was the most popular brand of white charcoal around. It was named as such not only because of the product itself but also because of the intense heat and sunlike color it produced when burned.

When I tested my charcoal out, it started burning even hotter and brighter than the Suncoal I once saw before.

“This could actually be...”

“Th-This is...”

I brought one box of my white charcoal to one of the charcoal guilds in town. Craftsmen of many trades gathered in this town of Seranoia where the Hamilton manor was located, leading to the establishment of all sorts of guilds for them. Among those were several different charcoal guilds, as they handled a resource that commoners made frequent use of in their daily lives.

When I visited the guild with this box in hand, the look in the guild master’s eyes changed the moment he caught sight of its contents.

“Did you...buy this from somewhere?”

“No,” I said with a shake of my head. “I can’t tell you how I made it, but I can at least tell you that I used magic.” As proof, I summoned a Salamander and placed it on my shoulder.

For a craftsman, sharing your method of production was akin to giving away the seeds that would grow into the food that would fill your belly. Most kept theirs a secret; in fact, this was considered to be common sense in the industry.

“That’s a fire spirit!” the guild master exclaimed. “I-I see...”

The involvement of a fire spirit seemed to quell his curiosity. He held a chunk of white charcoal in each hand and lightly knocked them together.

“That’s a real nice sound,” he muttered in awe. “This could even compare to Suncoal...”

“You think so?”

“W-Won’t you wholesale this to us? If you promise not to bring it anywhere else, I swear I’ll offer you the best prices possible.”

The guild master sought to monopolize these goods. Based on his reaction, I became certain that white charcoal produced with this method would sell for a really good price.

.10

I left the charcoal guild after reaching an agreement with the guild master. As the fifth son of a noble house, I had to become independent no matter what, and the money I would make from this white charcoal venture was one step toward that goal.

However, this wasn't enough. As was the case for anything else, wielding only one weapon left you vulnerable in case of emergencies. I needed another weapon—another *product* that I could profit from—and I wanted it to be something like white charcoal rather than an iron rose, something intrinsic to daily life.

I pondered on that as I wandered the streets.

When it came to necessities, salt was the first to come to mind.

"Gnome," I chanted, summoning an earth spirit.

Some passersby looked startled and shot me curious stares for summoning a spirit in the middle of town, but I paid them no mind and asked the Gnome my question.

"Say I gave you some rock salt. Would you be able to extract the salt from the other components?"

The Gnome firmly nodded.

So, it can do that too? That's impressive.

"Undine," I called next. "Can you extract water from salt water?"

When Undine confirmed that it was possible, I came to the conclusion that, be it salt water or rock salt, as long as I had the materials, I could use my summoned spirits to extract high-quality components out of them.

I'd like to actually give it a try...

Salt water aside, I might find some rock salt in the woods. With that in mind, I spun around and headed back to the manor, but I stopped short when my

stomach let out a splendid growl.

Guess I should get a snack.

It just so happened that my pocket currently housed the income I had earned from that box of white charcoal I had sold earlier, so I approached a nearby food stall and ordered one bowl of noodles.

One thing I learned from all the times I walked around town these past few months was that the people here loved wheat noodles. It was easy to find a stall that served noodle-based dishes, and people would even start queuing up come noontime. These people just loved noodles that much.

I mutely stared at my own bowl of noodles for a while.

“That’s it...” I eventually muttered to myself.

I returned to the manor and immediately entered the woods, which at this point might as well be called my workshop.

As I took out the raw noodles I purchased in town, I thought about the other reason food stalls were so popular in this area: it was because raw noodles couldn’t be preserved. Although the local climate also played a role in this, the noodles could go bad as soon as overnight, which was why everyone ate them in dining establishments.

Consequently, this meant that preservable raw noodles would make an absolute killing.

“When it comes to food preservation, I could either go with freezing or drying.”

After giving it some thought, I started with the method that was more likely to end in failure.

“Freeze!” I chanted, casting the beginner frost spell at the raw noodles. It froze solid, crackling as it did. However, it started melting not even a minute later, droplets forming over the surface.

“Figures.”

I saw that failure coming, but I gave it a try anyway. Ice melted after some

time—even a three-year-old knew that much. While it was true that freezing food could preserve it, it would also melt right away.

But there was another possibility: drying it. I took another bunch of raw noodles in hand.

“Salaman... No, Undine.”

My initial thought was to summon a fire spirit, but it came to me that an Undine would be the better choice, considering what I had asked it earlier.

“Can you extract the water from this, like you said you could with salt water?”

The Undine nodded and extracted the moisture from the raw noodles in my hands. In the blink of an eye, the soft noodles shriveled up and hardened, barely even changing in color. Seeing that, I nodded in satisfaction.

“Good. And just to be sure,” I added, “Salamander.”

This time, I summoned a fire spirit. Being careful not to burn it, I broiled a separate bunch of raw noodles at low heat. This also extracted the moisture from it, taking about the same amount of time as it did with the Undine. The only difference was that the dried noodles made with fire were slightly golden brown.

I then started a fire and cooked both types of noodles in a pot I had brought with me. The noodles I made with the Undine went back to how they were before, while the noodles I made with the Salamander were still slightly golden brown. They both tasted the same when I tried them, but I was somehow underwhelmed by the Salamander’s noodles.

I soon figured out where this sense of disappointment had come from.

“Oh... I must’ve been expecting them to have flavor since they were golden brown,” I deduced. The added color led me to believe they’d taste different, though in reality they were just as tasteless.

If it had some flavor to it, this wouldn’t be half ba—

“Oh!” I gasped, a brilliant idea flashing through my mind. “This will work!”

By the time I finished collecting my thoughts, I was certain of my victory.

Carrying everything I made, I went back home and entered the kitchen.

“Young master, h-how may I help you?” The lone young maid in the kitchen rushed over to me in a panic.

“What’re you so flustered for?” I asked.

“My apologies. I did not hear you calling for me...”

“Hm?” I paused in thought. “Oh, I haven’t called for you at all. I just came here myself.”

“Huh? I-I see...” She visibly let out a sigh of relief.

So she thought she’d be scolded for not noticing her master’s summons. Looking back on it now, be it my father, mother, or brothers, the servants of our house always came as soon as we called for them.

“More importantly, do you have hot water here?”

“Yes, I’ve just finished boiling some now.”

“And a bowl?”

“Yes.”

The maid prepared everything I needed in a flash. I placed the golden brown dried noodles in a bowl and poured some hot water into it. I watched as they loosened up and turned back into soft noodles. Unlike earlier, however, the water gained color as well.

“This is...?”

“Try a bite,” I urged.

“Understood.” The maid ate a mouthful of noodles and hummed. “Oh, it’s delicious... Huh? But you just poured in some hot water...”

“Guess it’s a success.”

I had used an Undine to enhance what I made with the Salamander. Making dried noodles with a Salamander produced an underwhelming dish since it was golden brown in color yet had absolutely no taste—in which case, I just had to give it some flavor. After letting it absorb a thick broth, I had the Undine extract the moisture from the golden brown raw noodles. Once placed into some hot

water, the noodles would regain their moisture and also produce the broth.

That was how these dried noodles were made.

“Dried noodles...” the maid muttered in awe. “And it tastes good even though it’s preserved food... This is rather unbelievable.”

“It can be eaten immediately, so maybe I’ll call it instant noodles.”

The maid was utterly shocked.

“*You* made this, young master?!”

.11

One month had passed since I invented instant noodles. As per usual, I made my way into the woods, and in the spot that I had turned into something of a home base was a huge pile of white charcoal and instant noodles.

Just as the maid had been stunned by the instant noodles, the guild master of the noodles guild was also thoroughly astonished. These instant noodles tasted just as good as any other dish, and all they needed was some hot water, not to mention they could be in practically any flavor I wanted. (An Undine just needed to extract the moisture from it.) When the guild master heard about all that, he looked just about ready to pay for a thousand packs upfront.

But no deal was struck that day.

When he learned that I was Liam Hamilton, the fifth son of Count Hamilton, the guild master's face twisted in reluctance. That was when I learned that any noble's son who wasn't the eldest—in other words, the heir—was not allowed to conduct business without his family's permission.

There were two ways to go about dealing with this issue: the first was to come of age and become independent, while the second was to do business in some land far away from the Hamilton territory. These were my only options, but I could execute neither at the moment, so my stockpile simply kept growing by the day.

The reason I was letting this stockpile grow in the first place, however, was that a solution was on its way.

Inside the ring, or rather, the magicpedia that I received from my teacher was a certain magic spell that had no level attached to it, meaning it wasn't classified as beginner, intermediate, or even advanced magic. This spell was called Item Box.

"Item Box."

After using the magicpedia as a medium to cast the spell, a one-meter-wide

box appeared in the air in front of me. Opening it up revealed a mottled rainbow pattern inside.

I took one chunk of white charcoal and one pack of instant noodles from their respective piles and put them into the box. They were swallowed right up, disappearing from view. In exchange, a list popped up in my head.

Pure white charcoal: 84 grams

Instant noodles: 1 pack

This list showed the details of the items inside the box.

When I placed another of each into the box, the white charcoal went up to 152 grams and the instant noodles up to two packs. I stuck my hand in and took one pack of instant noodles out. Now, the amount of white charcoal stayed the same, while instant noodles went down to one pack.

I dispelled the item box then cast it again before placing one of each inside once more.

Pure white charcoal: 61 grams

Instant noodles: 1 pack

As if everything I put in earlier had disappeared, the list only reflected the newly added items.

Normally, Item Box was a convenient magic spell that could be used to store and retrieve items freely. However, if you tried to use it without having completely mastered it yet and, say, cast it using a specially coated magicpedia (normally a grimoire) as a medium instead, then its contents would be erased and reset each time. It was a wonderfully convenient magic spell, but it was unique in the sense that it was also absolutely useless until you fully mastered it.

This was a rather extreme example, but say there were ten thousand townspeople in the middle of a war. If you distributed a beginner flame magic grimoire to all of them, then you'd have essentially made an entire battle unit of ten thousand magi. Fireball, for example, could produce a ball of fire even if

the caster hadn't fully mastered it yet, and the same went for most other spells. There were drawbacks, sure—they would need to hold the grimoire, and would need some time to cast the spells—but they still produced definite effects.

It was in stark contrast to an unmastered Item Box. Since its contents vanished once dispelled, unlike most spells, using it was entirely pointless until mastered.

Over this past month, I'd been maintaining two production lines for the instant noodles and one for white charcoal—the former powered by two Undines, and the latter by a Gnome and three Fireballs—as well as persistently casting Item Box. Seven spells altogether.

With that routine doubling as magic training, the number of spells I was capable of using simultaneously eventually went up from five to seven, until finally...

Pure white charcoal: 101 grams

Instant noodles: 1 pack

"Oh?"

Although I'd dispelled it, the items I placed inside the box the last time I cast it were unchanged. I tried dispelling it once more before summoning it again.

Pure white charcoal: 101 grams

Instant noodles: 1 pack

It was exactly the same.

I took my magicpedia off and cast the spell, and the box manifested in place.

I've mastered Item Box! I cheered in my mind.

I went on to toss all my white charcoal and instant noodles into the box. It took quite some time, what with a mountain of each having piled up over the last month, but I eventually finished the task.

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Instant noodles: 1,045 packs

Even after I resummoned the item box, everything I placed inside it was still there. The list in my head felt less like a list of my personal belongings and more like a list of supplies.

Now I can finally go and sell these.

If I wanted to conduct business, I had two choices: one was to come of age and leave the house, while the other was to bring my goods to a land far from the Hamilton territory. I decided to go for the latter since it would be a long while before I came of age. However, I would have to travel very far to sell these, so I wanted to bring everything in one go if I could. That was why I learned Item Box in the first place.

I left the woods and returned to the manor. After making it back to my room, I asked a maid to bring me a bowl and some hot water, which I used to cook one pack of instant noodles that I took from my item box.

Yeah, I can totally bring these anywhere, I concluded while eating my noodles. *So I'll bring 'em to another town and turn 'em into cash!*

.12

Now that I had made the products and learned the magic I needed to carry them, all that was left was a method of transportation.

Being able to carry everything I needed using my item box already made transporting my goods so much easier than normal. However, I noticed that there was one magic spell in the magicpedia that, if used properly, could very well cut my travel time down by half. It wouldn't be the way it was intended to be used, but it should be possible.

First, I needed to test it. I removed my magicpedia and placed it in my item box, since I wanted to confirm if I had mastered the spell now, then I walked around the woods in search of any suitable target. Eventually, I ran into a wild rabbit.

"Bind."

I used a beginner constraint spell called Bind, which stopped a target's movements. It was a beginner spell, so it wouldn't work on stronger targets, and the constraints could be undone if the target were so much as *touched*. It was quite the quirky spell, but it would do for now.

I approached the wild rabbit I had restrained with Bind and firmly grabbed it, holding it in place. And then...

"Contract Summoning: Form Contract."

I cast a spell on it.

Summoning magic was largely split into two kinds: spirit summoning, which summoned one of the many spirits that existed in every essence of nature in the world, and contract summoning, which summoned living beings that were bound by contract.

For contract summoning, it was necessary to establish a contract with the target, as I just did with the wild rabbit. Once the magic's light was absorbed right into its body, I followed it up with another spell while keeping a tight grip.

“Contract Summoning: Wild Rabbit.”

As magic was heavily reliant on the caster’s imagination, the chant here could be anything, even a simple incantation like this. It proved to be effective, as another wild rabbit materialized beside the one I was still holding. They were completely identical. This second rabbit tried to run from me, but...

“Release,” I chanted, and the rabbit I summoned disappeared with a *poof*.

This was another characteristic of contract summoning—it summoned not the actual target with whom the contract was formed, but rather a near perfect clone of the target.

I freed the wild rabbit since my test was a success.

Now, onto the main test.

I took a deep breath as I activated the magic at my feet.

Whether a contract succeeded would depend on the gap in power and will between the caster and the target. It wouldn’t work on anyone stronger than me, and even if we were on equal footing, the contract wouldn’t be established so long as the other party resisted.

With all that in mind, I cast this spell on *myself*.

“Contract Summoning: Form Contract.”

A target who was on the same level as the caster and would not resist—I thought my chances here would be half-and-half, but it seemed to be a success.

“Contract Summoning: Liam,” I chanted, summoning my own clone.

“Is it a success?”

“Looks like it.”

“How’s it feel?”

“Normal. Aside from seeing myself in front of me, nothing’s off.”

“Great.”

I was able to converse with my own clone.

“All right. Let’s move on to the last test.”

“Oh, will I put it in? Or take it out?”

“I’ll put it in first. If it works, then you try too.”

“Got it.”

My clone and I nodded at each other. I was up first.

“Item Box,” I chanted, summoning it on the spot and tossing in a rock I picked up from the ground. Then, I dispelled it.

“All right,” my clone said next. “Item Box.”

He cast Item Box and took out the rock I just put in.

“Looks like it works,” he said.

“You try too.”

“Yeah.”

My clone nodded and put in a twig he picked up, but not before marking it by snapping it in the middle. It went into the box still just barely attached as one piece. Finally, my clone dispelled Item Box as well.

This time, I cast Item Box and put my hand in.

Here it is, I thought as I took out a still barely intact twig bent in the middle.

“This means that the original and the clone...”

“...both share the same item box.”

“Looks like it. I’ll leave it to you, then.”

“Yeah. See ya,” my clone said before leaving the woods.

I closed my item box and checked the list.

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Instant noodles: 1,045 packs

Now then, let’s see how this goes...

For the next three days, I continued practicing magic while paying close

attention to the contents of my item box.

By the way, I hadn’t added anything in since. I decided not to until I determined this test to be a success. I knew that it would take around three days to get to the town I wanted to sell my goods to.

And at noon of the third day...

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Jamille silvers: 36 coins

“It’s here!”

I let out a cheer the moment the contents of my item box list changed.

I took out a silver coin from inside—this was what the instant noodles I had made were converted into. I had my clone travel for three days, sell the noodles in my item box, then place the coins earned back inside.

Finally...

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Jamille silvers: 35 coins

Hamilton crest: 1 piece

The item that served as our signal was placed inside as well.

“Release,” I chanted, undoing my own clone.

Thus, the six-day round trip it would have taken for me to sell my goods and bring the income home had instead been shortened to a three-day one-way trip.

.13

Today, I came to the ocean that was half a day's walk from town because there were two things I wanted to test out. This expansive coast was lined with both a beach and a cliff. I decided to go to the former in consideration of what I wanted to test.

There, I summoned an Undine and asked, "Undine, can you extract the water from salt water?"

I wanted to extract pure water the same way I did with the instant noodles. Needless to say, water was a very important resource. It was by no means a high-class commodity (though that depended somewhat on the place), but it was very much a necessity in a person's daily life; clean water, in particular, could even be worth more than some low-quality crops. Thus, I had called an Undine, hoping to extract some.

However...

"Why the look?" I asked after seeing the spirit make a reluctant expression.

Regardless, a summoned spirit was absolutely subservient to its summoner, so the Undine did as it was told. It raised some salt water up in the air and attempted to extract the water from it. However, it took quite some time, and the spirit seemed to be struggling too. After gritting its teeth for five minutes, it finally managed to extract no more than a spoonful of water.

When I tried asking it further, it told me that salt water was a *natural resource* that was difficult to break down, unlike man-made creations. For the Undine, salt water was its own type of water, and forcefully segregating it into its different components took every ounce of its strength. By no means was it an impossible task, but it was apparently so difficult that creating a spoonful over five minutes was the best it could manage.

That said, it admitted that a high-rank spirit could easily accomplish this.

I'd assumed this would be a piece of cake for an Undine, so I had to rethink

my plan. After taking some time to draw a new one up in my head, I started over—this time, with an earth spirit.

“Gnome. Can you control sand?”

It nodded in affirmation, claiming that sand was no different from soil for a spirit of nature.

“In that case, make this,” I ordered as I drew a shape in the sand. “Think of it as a huge pointy hat. The base should be ten meters in diameter and the height fifteen. The walls should also repel water. Can you do it?”

It was rather similar to the order I gave back when making the iron rose. The Gnome gave me the same nod again, so I put it to work right away. Since what I requested was too big for a single Gnome, I summoned six more to help with the construction, meaning I used my full capacity of seven spells at once on summoning spirits. The seven Gnomes gradually completed the huge cone-shaped structure from the ocean floor.

“With this size, the base should be all good,” I assessed. “Now add an opening on all four sides, and make sure they’re big enough for a person to walk through.”

As this instruction was far easier than the ones I gave earlier, the four entrances were completed in less than ten seconds.

“Good work.”

I released their contracts and sent them back.

Entering the cone, I stood at the center and looked up at the fifteen-meter-high ceiling that gradually narrowed into a tip. At the very top, however, was a small inverted cone that pointed back down. Having confirmed that everything was made properly, I moved on to the next step, which was opening my item box right beneath that downward tip. Then, I summoned six Salamanders inside the cone and had them heat up the salt water around the structure.

After I left the cone to observe from afar, salt water gradually began evaporating into steam, eventually dripping down as water from the tip in the ceiling and into the item box. At first, it trickled down at a very slow pace, but in time it began pouring like a small waterfall.

Fresh water: 3 liters

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Jamille silvers: 36 coins

The fresh water in my inventory increased as time passed.

People who lived in areas with little water used a uniquely shaped pot called a tagine. This cone-shaped structure that I made was inspired from that very pot. It was used by placing it over a fire so that the water boiled and evaporated, rose to the top, cooled down, then dripped right back into the pot. Basically, it was a huge still.

While watching the water trickle down like a waterfall, I paid attention to the changes in the numbers in my item box and calculated that it was producing fresh water at a rate of around twelve liters per minute.

Eventually, excess steam began seeping out of the openings I had installed to observe the process. Thinking it to be a waste, I considered closing it up before I thought of something else.

“Frau.”

I dismissed two Salamanders and summoned two Fraus, or low-rank ice spirits, in their place. A Frau looked like a small three-or four-year-old child with long white hair that grew just past its feet.

“Cool this cone off,” I ordered them.

They did as they were told, and the steam eventually stopped seeping out, in turn increasing the water output. I narrowed my eyes at my item box list and ran the calculations in my head; it was now producing around twenty liters per minute. This wasn’t a bad rate, considering no steam was seeping out anymore.

As I kept that up, the sun began to set beyond the ocean’s horizon.

“I should get a move on,” I muttered to myself, deciding to proceed to the second and most important thing I wanted to test by the ocean today.

I sent the Salamanders, Fraus, and my item box away before walking into the water myself. Once I reached the point where my knees were submerged, I

summoned my item box underwater—then, I opened it up.

Salt water began pouring in at a tremendous rate.

Salt water: 292 liters

Fresh water: 5,788 liters

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Jamille silvers: 36 coins

The volume of salt water in my item box increased several hundreds of times faster than the still had produced fresh water. I continued watching it as the sun completely set and the moon rose high into the sky.

Finally, having accomplished my goal, I wrote a letter detailing everything and put it into my item box.

And that was when my consciousness faded away.

Releasing my own clone from inside my room in the manor marked the successful end of that series of tests. From my clone's letter, I learned that an Undine couldn't extract fresh water, but I could make a still with some Gnomes, Salamanders, and Fraus instead.

Salt water: 5,000,029 liters

Fresh water: 5,788 liters

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Jamille silvers: 36 coins

Pouring some salt water and fresh water from my item box into a cup each, I pondered on the two goals I had this time around.

Between those two goals, making fresh water was more of a secondary goal, and so was the still. My initial plan had been to produce the water in one go using an Undine; I just ended up succeeding with a different method instead.

The five million liters of water, however, was going to be crucial. It was said that nobles used up to two hundred and fifty liters of water a day, while commoners used up to a hundred liters, so all in all, five million liters could

supply a town of roughly forty thousand people for a day. Needless to say, I couldn't use the salt water as-is, but that didn't matter much.

What *did* matter was that I could combine the use of Contract Summoning: Liam and Item Box to transport a town's worth of supplies, and very easily, to boot. I'd been eager to test that the most, and it yielded me my biggest harvest from this experiment: the confirmation that I had the capacity to transport a volume of goods that would normally need several tens of thousands of people.

With this, whether I fell to ruin as the fifth son of my noble family or left of my own accord, I was certain that my future had gotten more secure than ever.

.14

Deep in the woods was a small lake just about wide enough that, if one ever wished to cross it, a rowboat would still be a far better option than swimming.

Just as my clone did by the ocean, I opened up my item box inside the lake and let the water get sucked right in. In about ten minutes, fish were jumping and jerking about on the muddy bed of the now-empty lake. Next, I flipped my item box over and poured all the lake water back out. Some fish and seaweed had gotten in, though, so I made sure that all living things were taken out.

This was what made Item Box so convenient: as the caster, I could decide what I wanted to take out and what I wanted to keep in. I could fill this empty lake with salt water, or heck, even sand if I felt like it. I could also choose *how much* of something I wanted to take out, so I could easily fill the lake back up so long as I had an estimate for the volume I needed from my list.

Feels like I can make even better use of this. I mulled over the possibilities as I watched the lake fill up with water once more.

“There you are.”

“Huh? Oh, Bruno.”

My older brother Bruno approached me from behind, his eyes sweeping across the woods with a rather bored expression.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I heard you always come out here to play, so...”

“Do you need something from me?”

With a chuckle, Bruno wore a cynical smile and stood before me. “My marriage has been decided,” he declared.

“Huuuh?!”

“I’ll be marrying into a low-ranking noble family. They’re poorer than our house, but they’re still in their first generation, so it’s a great place where I can

stay a noble even after I retire."

"I see... Well..." I hesitated, dazed by the sudden news. "Congratulations, I guess?"

"Yep. This fourth son here has no complaints with this life path." He shrugged with a grin on his lips.

Right, there's that option too, I realized. Rather than staying as a dependent in a noble house until adulthood, it certainly would be better to marry into and become the head of a nouveau riche family.

"Congratulations, then," I said again, more certain this time.

Bruno just scoffed. "Lemme tell you something good," he then added. "You're a good kid, so you probably don't know 'bout this."

"About what?"

"Pops's huge failure."

"Father's?"

Bruno, wearing an even snarkier grin than usual, went on to share the story.

Several years ago, Charles, in his capacity as the head of House Hamilton, dispatched a thousand soldiers to subjugate a rather powerful monster sealed within our territory. He planned to unseal and then defeat the monster so that he could gain the achievement he needed for the family. However, the result was a crushing defeat. They lost ninety percent of the one thousand soldiers and just barely managed to reseal the monster before it could harm any civilians as well.

"That's why pops gave up on achieving something himself," Bruno finished. "It probably traumatized him."

I looked down in thought. "I see..."

"By the way, that monster was sealed by our family head two generations ago—in other words, the previous third-generation head. Seems like it was a pretty well-known monster. One achievement for sealing it and another for subjugating it—they probably planned to sustain six generations with that one monster, but pops went and messed it all up."

“Oh...”

“Basically, what I wanna say is,” Bruno went on, his lips blatantly twisting into a cynical smirk, “pops isn’t planning anything aside from using his daughter to preserve his status, so you better start considering leaving this house soon too.”

“Ah... All right. Thank you, Bruno.”

“Hmph. Well, give it your best shot.”

Having said his piece, he spun around with a wave of his hand and left the woods. Although he did it in his own snarky little way, he was undoubtedly giving me advice. Maybe he was somehow trying to motivate me too.

During our conversation, I’d finished emptying my item box of the entire lake, reverting the body of water to how it was before. With the test now over, I put my item box away and moved on to my next agenda item... However, shortly after, I was stunned.

Salt water: 5,000,029 liters

Fresh water: 5,788 liters

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Jamille silvers: 36 coins

Gold dust: 100 kilograms

Letter for Liam

After pouring out everything I had sucked into my item box, its contents should have returned to how they were before the test, but it seemed like a couple other things had gotten inside.

Gold dust...and a letter?

I took the letter out first since it seemed to be addressed to me.

“It’s waterproof paper...” I was able to tell immediately from the sensation of the sheet under my fingers. At the same time, I also realized that this had been inside the lake and was among the things my item box had sucked in.

I opened the letter...

It was written by my teacher.

“Dear Liam,

If you’re reading this, then you must have nearly mastered Item Box already. If you haven’t, try opening your item box in the lake so that everything gets drawn in, then expel only the water and living beings.”

“He totally saw through me...”

My teacher seemed to have predicted what I was going to do.

“A gold bar wouldn’t go in, so I scattered some gold dust around the lake instead—a hundred kilos’ worth. If you can fully utilize Item Box now, then you must’ve also nearly mastered all the other spells in the magicpedia. Consider this gold as my graduation gift for you.”

“Teacher...”

“I heard you’re the fifth son of your family. You can use this as funds when the time comes to leave your house.

P.S. If you feel bad about receiving all this, then try thinking about why I gave you exactly a hundred kilos. That’ll be your graduation test.”

The letter ended there.

I took another look at the list. It was just gold dust, but there was precisely a hundred kilos of it, no doubt because he took out exactly a hundred from his own item box. Understanding that meant that I had solved the graduation test he left for me, which made me kind of happy.

A hundred kilos of gold were suddenly added to my assets. *Someday*, I swore to myself, *I absolutely have to meet and thank my teacher in person.*

.15

Inside the woods, I stood facing my clone who had stuck his fist out toward me. After we both nodded, he shot out five magic spells from his fist.

What he just used was a beginner nonattribute spell called Magic Missile. It was said to be the easiest magic spell, as all you had to do was fire your mana toward a target and nothing more. Thus, it was said that half of the people who had talent for magic could also use Magic Missile.

Just as my clone fired off his five spells, I also stuck my fist out and chanted, “Magic Missile!” to fire off five more, intercepting them in midair. This was the training method I’d adopted.

If summoning magic could be viewed as “automatic” since the summoned spirits did the work for you, then regular magic would be “manual.” Giving spirits orders was convenient and all, but gaps in communication and understanding could lead to discrepancies when it came down to the finer details. In that sense, regular magic gave room for more accurate controls and finer adjustments—as long as the caster were capable enough, of course. I learned that after all the work I did with spirits lately.

I thought that Magic Missile would be the best way to sharpen my control; since all the spell did was release mana, I needed to do any minute adjustments myself. That was why I was practicing by intercepting my clone’s attacks.

By the way, I was using five spells instead of my maximum seven because I was already using one slot to summon my clone using contract summoning. Multicasting bumped me down to the lowest prime number, and since I could only use a prime number of spells, six was out, leaving me with five spell slots available.

While firing magic missiles at one another, I fell into thought for a bit. Summoning magic was a type of magic that I had to *maintain* to use; simply put, it constantly used up one slot of my magic, and because of the prime number rule, summoning just one clone essentially used up two slots in the end.

It would be nice if I could summon someone else too.

As I mulled over that while shooting magic with my clone, he narrowed his eyes at me.

That's the signal.

I released my summoning magic and sent my clone away, then heard the sound of a twig snapping underfoot a moment later. When I turned around, I was shocked—standing before me was a young man I could recognize instantly: Albrevit Hamilton, the first son of Charles and our family's eldest child.

"So this is where you were, Liam."

"Is something the matter, brother?"

I never expected Albrevit to initiate a conversation with me... This was the first time he'd done so ever since I took over this body a few months ago. Though we were brothers, the eldest and fifth sons were worlds apart when it came to our status and the futures we had ahead of us.

Incidentally, the second and third sons just lazed about every day like Bruno; we'd say hello and have some small talk whenever we ran into each other in the morning. Only the eldest son was different.

"Were you practicing magic?" he asked.

"What? Oh, yes."

"I see. Seems you've been on a roll recently."

"Huh?"

"It's all the servants talk about these days, you know—how good you are at magic and all that."

Just then, I felt a chill crawl up my spine. At the same time, I noticed—Albrevit's lips were curled up in a smile, but I could see clear and unbridled hostility in his eyes.

"The servants have a lot of time on their hands, so they talk about just about anything, you see." I chuckled, hoping to feign ignorance. *I probably shouldn't butt heads with him here.*

“Hm. By the way, Liam,” he continued, “I’ve been meaning to ask: what do you want to be when you grow up?”

I held back a gasp. My gut was telling me that I had to answer very carefully here, so I considered my choice of words. *He’s the eldest son and the next head... He’s probably suspicious of me,* I deduced. *In that case...*

“If possible, I would like to become independent,” I declared clearly.

“Oh?”

“Become independent and, hm...” I paused, pretending to think. “I suppose it would be nice if I could find work where I can make good use of my skills.”

“You’re an odd one.”

“I can’t help what I like.”

Albrevit hummed in thought. That seemed to be the correct answer; I indirectly told him that I had no intention of fighting for the position of family head, so the hostility in his eyes faded.

Finally, he asked, “You’re good at magic, right?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, how about I introduce you to the hunter guild?”

The hunter guild... Considering that time I went to the charcoal guild, I decided it would be in my best interest to accept this introduction he was offering to do for me.

A guild could be seen as a gathering of people of the same trade, and the hunter guild, as the name suggested, was a place for those who excelled at hunting beasts and monsters.

When I arrived at the only hunter guild in our town, all the gazes fell on me. The place was structured pretty much like any old tavern, with a counter on the deepest end and tables scattered here and there. People who appeared to be hunters were seated everywhere, watching me.

“What? A kid?”

“This ain’t some playground, kid.”

“You runnin’ an errand for mama?”

Ignoring all the hecklers, I strode toward the counter on the inner end and spoke to the plump and chubby man seated on the other side.

“Are you the guild master?” I asked.

“Liam Hamilton, right?”

I nodded.

“I’ve heard from Lord Albrevit.”

I nodded again.

“Then let’s get right to the exam.”

“Exam?” I echoed questioningly.

“You may have been introduced by Lord Albrevit, but hunters value ability first and foremost, you see. We’d be in big trouble if you died after we sent you someplace you couldn’t handle.”

“I see.”

“I heard you’re good at magic, so give it a shot. You can even take your time with the aria if you want.”

“Aria?” I asked.

“You don’t know?” The guild master snorted and looked down at me like an exasperated babysitter. “It’s like a chant that assists in magic activation. For humans, chanting with an aria always, without exception, produces stronger magic than without.”

“Oh.”

That was the first I’d heard of that. I wanted to ask more, but it didn’t seem like he was willing to elaborate. If anything, he looked rather grouchy, like he wanted me to hurry it up already.

“I want to use offensive magic,” I told him. “Where should I aim?”

“At me.”

“Okay.”

Not much I can do, I thought in resignation—and so I fired off five magic missiles.

The guild master was stupefied. The mana bullets crashed into something, followed by the sound of glass breaking. Four were blocked, but the last one grazed the guild master’s cheek like a hook.

“The hell was that just now? You guys see that?”

“I’ve never seen that kinda magic before. Is that some advanced version of Magic Missile?”

“So he’s an advanced mage?!”

My clone was currently busy with something else, so I’d resigned myself to casting only five, but it looked like I still surprised everyone.

“Not bad...” The guild master wiped off the blood trickling from the corner of his lips. “At that level, I can give you a C-rank—no, a B-rank license.”

Well, somehow or other, I guess I passed.

.16

The guild master gave me my license, which served as proof of my affiliation with the guild, engraved with my name and current rank. Just as I put it away and was thinking about my next move, I heard someone speak behind me.

“Hey, are you really a Hamilton?”

Turning around, I came face-to-face with a cheery girl who appeared to be around fifteen or sixteen years old. She stood at around a hundred and fifty centimeters tall, with her high ponytail swaying charmingly behind her.

“Er, that’s right. I’m Liam Hamilton.”

“Nice! I’m Asuna. Asuna Aquage,” she said brightly. “Cool surname, right? I may not look like it, but my family was actually part of the nobility until ten generations ago, you know?”

“Wow...” I nearly nodded but then did a double take. “Wait, ten generations ago?”

Did she mean that literally? But she looks so smug, and it sounded like she’s bragging too... Maybe it has some other meaning I don’t know about?

Seeing the confusion written all over my face, Asuna laughed. “Aha! Sorry, sorry. It’s just this little thing I do. Makes me easier to remember, yeah?”

“O-Ohhh, so that’s what it was.”

“Oh, but the ‘nobility until ten generations ago’ thing is true, though.”

“Gotcha. It’s nice to meet you.” I reached out and shook her hand.

Bright and friendly, she was just the type of kid I liked. Well, I called her a kid, but I was technically younger than her now that I had become the twelve-year-old Liam.

“Say, wanna go hunting together?” she suddenly proposed.

“Together?”

“Yeah, as a party. Hunting’s pretty dangerous, so wouldn’t you feel safer that way?”

“I guess so... All right.”

“That’s the spirit!” Asuna snapped her fingers with a grin.

I left the guild with Asuna and was walking along the main road that led from the town to its outskirts.

“By the way...”

“What?”

“Was it fine to not take a commission first? Or did you already accept one?”

Based on what I’d heard in taverns before, I was under the impression that hunters accepted specific commissions before going off to subjugate some ferocious beasts or monsters.

“Well, only A-rank commissions or above need to be accepted beforehand.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Commissions that are A-rank or above,” Asuna explained, “are for targets that are too dangerous to leave be or are already wreaking havoc, so a hunter would accept the commission and go off to specifically hunt that target. Normally, though, we use *this*.”

She handed me a note that was jam-packed with names of monsters and beasts.

“We defeat anything we find nearby that could potentially pose a threat, then report it to the guild and receive a reward. For example...”

“Hm?” I took a peek at the note as Asuna pointed at one of the names.

“Ugliboars regularly pass through this area, kinda like migratory birds. I don’t know if there are any around now, but they’re definitely a hazard whenever

they come by.”

“I get it... It’s kind of like we’re cleaning the area up.”

“Exactly! That’s exactly it. You sure are quick on the uptake, Liam.”

“Am I?”

I chatted about this and that with Asuna as we walked. Lately, I’d been off practicing magic without anyone for company, so speaking with such a cute and friendly girl like her now was very enjoyable. It barely even felt like we were strangers at all.

Suddenly, Asuna screamed, “Ahhh!”

“What’s wrong?”

She stopped in her tracks and pointed up front. “There!”

I traced the direction her finger was pointed at and spotted a bee about twice as large as a honeybee.

“That bee? What about it?”

“That’s a goldbee,” she told me.

“A goldbee?”

“Yeah! They like to gather metallic fragments, so their hive is kinda like a treasure chest of sorts.”

I hummed, intrigued. “I didn’t know that kind of bee existed.”

“Oh no, it’s flying off! What do we do? Goldbee hives are notoriously tough to find. How’re we supposed to follow it?”

“You can leave that to me.”

“Huh?”

“Paint,” I chanted, casting magic on the goldbee right as it fled after sensing our presence. Pink smoke began forming a long, long trail from its body, like from fireworks shooting up into the night sky.

“What did you do?”

“Oh, right.” I snapped my fingers.

The pink smoke was normally only visible to the caster, so some adjustments were needed so that others could see it as well. To that end, I cast some magic on Asuna too.

“Oh! There’s something pink...”

“It’s a magic spell called Paint,” I explained to her. “Apparently, it’s often used to track prey while hunting.”

“Sounds cool!”

“It’s just hunting basics. Practically an essential.”

The goldbee itself was already far out of sight, but the trail of pink smoke it left behind was clear as day, so Asuna and I followed it off the road and into the forest. With nothing but that trail of pink to guide us, we proceeded down the pathless wilderness, eventually spotting a beehive on a rather unassuming patch of ground.

“There it is!” Asuna cheered. “So it was all the way out here. We definitely wouldn’t have found it without your magic, Liam.”

“So there’s treasure inside that hive? What do we do about the bees?”

“Um, drawing them out with some metal then burning them all up together would be the best method, but...” she trailed off, frowning. “Darn, I don’t have any on me.”

“I’ve got that covered. Will some gold do?”

“Even better! They’ll bite for sure if it’s gold.”

“In that case...” I went ahead and summoned my item box.

“Wh-What’s that? Is that also magic?”

“Yep.” I stuck my hand into the box and took out one kilo of gold dust.

“Wow! So you can take your things in and out as you please.”

“That’s pretty much how it works.”

Nodding my head, I scattered the gold dust over the ground. In no time at all, a horde of bees came flying out of the hive and flocked around the gold.

“Hold on...”

“What?”

“Can’t we just burn them down along with their hive to start with?”

However, Asuna immediately shot my suggestion down. “That’s a big no-no. You see, the substance that goldbees secrete somehow fuses metals together. They sometimes combine to form some pretty rare metals, so the hive totally sells for higher if you take it intact.”

“I see.”

While we were talking, nearly all the bees had come out to flock around the gold dust, so I chanted, “Salamander!” to summon a fire spirit and lit them all up.

“Guess that’s that,” I said, satisfied. “Hm? What’s with the look?”

“Liam... Just how many spells can you use?”

Asuna seemed quite surprised at how I was using one magic spell after the other. Grinning, I retrieved the gold dust I used as bait and returned it to my item box, of course not forgetting to collect the goldbee hive as well.

Guess we should head back to town and have this appraised.

Blessed with both quantity and quality, the contents of the hive ultimately sold for three hundred Jamille silvers, which I split fifty-fifty with Asuna as she was the one who found the goldbee for us.

.17

“Liam! Thanks a bunch for yesterday!”

The moment I entered the hunter guild, Asuna grabbed me and showered me with thanks. By “yesterday,” she was talking about when we exchanged the goldbee hive for money.

In this region, commoners typically used a currency called Jamille silvers in their daily lives. The value of a currency changed depending on the silver, gold, or copper content of the coin, as well as the trustworthiness of the country issuing it, among other factors. Jamille silvers were widely used thanks to the stability of both its silver content and minting quality. To illustrate its value, I would say that an unskilled laborer would earn around a hundred silver coins per month. Jamille golds were also a thing, with one gold piece equaling roughly twenty-five silvers. Its value was too high to be used in daily life, so it instead usually found its use in business transactions or for state-issued rewards for nobles.

Asuna and I evenly split the three hundred coins we got from the goldbee hive yesterday, which meant that we both earned a month’s worth of a commoner’s income.

“Really, thank you!” she said again.

“Not at all. You’re the one who found the goldbee, so I should be the one thanking you.”

“He he...” Asuna grinned. “Hey, what should we do today? Since you came here, you must want to go hunting again, right?”

“That’s the plan. I heard from some hunters I passed earlier that they’re sweeping the western main road of some wild dogs. Wanna check it out?”

However, Asuna didn’t answer and just stared widely at me.

“What’s wrong? You look like your eyes are ’bout to pop out.”

“Oh, um... I’m just surprised,” she admitted. “Here I was thinking that you’d get all excited by the goldbee hive yesterday and you’d be raring to go looking for another one.”

“Yeah, well.”

I got where she was coming from, but that was more like casual income. Relying on something like that would make me a gambler, not a hunter.

“You still aren’t insisting we go even after I reminded you of it,” Asuna mused. “How mature of you!”

I went to the western main road with Asuna.

“Apparently, this road needs to be cleaned up ’cause some big shot’s gonna pass by soon.”

“A big shot...” I paused in thought. “Maybe it’s, uh, Count Something?”

“Count Something?”

“I don’t really remember his name. I just happened to hear that my father’s acquaintance would be coming to visit with his wife soon.”

“Oh yeah? Well, not that it matters,” Asuna said, brushing it off. “What *does* matter is that the guild will give us more rewards depending on how many wild dogs we hunt from that area.”

“True.”

Asuna was absolutely right. For hunters on the job, it didn’t matter if a count or whatnot were passing through; all that mattered was that we could exchange any of the prey we hunted for cash.

I asked her, “What kind of wild dogs are we looking at?”

“They’re a bit bigger than normal, and they’re also super violent and can infect you with a pretty bad disease if they get a bite in.”

“I see. Have you ever hunted them before?”

“Yep. I may not look like it, but I’m pretty good at handling these,” she said as she brandished a pair of blades. She looked quite cool, holding them both on a

backhand grip like that.

“So you fight in close quarters.”

“I just suck at using bows and all that.” She laughed nervously.

I nodded in understanding. “In that case... Shell,” I chanted, casting a beginner physical enhancement spell on her.

Asuna blinked curiously. “Oh, what? Did you do something to me?”

“It’s magic that strengthens your body,” I explained. “Simply put, it raises your defense. It’s a simple spell, though, so the effect’s just as tame.”

“So you can use that sort of thing too!”

“It’ll only help ease your mind at best, but it’s better than nothing, right?”

Asuna hummed pensively. “Say, is there some sort of magic that can strengthen weapons too?”

“There is...” I answered hesitantly. “But I’d advise against using it.”

“Why?”

“Strengthening a weapon with magic *does* raise its power, but at the same time, it also makes it that much more fragile and susceptible to breaking.”

“Well, I can’t have that,” Asuna easily agreed.

This advice only came to me because I was a commoner who’d just become the fifth son of a noble. Commoners normally owned and took very good care of only one set of work tools. Some people even handed their tools down to their children, keeping them in use for decades. For them, any magic that would make a weapon temporarily easier to use by sacrificing its durability was not welcome at all. As a commoner herself, Asuna agreed with that sentiment immediately.

I continued down the road with her, and eventually, we encountered a pack of medium-sized wild dogs. Five of them pincered us front and back.

“Not good. They’ve surrounded us.”

“No problem,” I told her. “Can I leave the finishing blow to you?”

“Huh? What will you do?”

“*This*. Gnome!”

I summoned five low-rank earth spirits and sent them charging toward the dogs, who then bit into them, digging their sharp canines into their mole-like bodies—but just then, the Gnomes’ bodies began to swell. In just a second, they grew twice—no, *thrice* their usual size. With their canines still lodged into the Gnomes’ inflating bodies, the wild dogs’ jaws were pried open as wide as could be, leaving them unable to either open or close them at will.

“Asuna!”

“Nice one! Leave the rest to me!”

Now that the dogs’ greatest weapons, their canines, were disabled, Asuna jumped right in. The dogs had fallen into disarray at the sight of their prey suddenly inflating in size, and she used that chance to accurately stab her blades into their vital points, ending all five of them in no time at all.

At a snap of my fingers, the Gnomes were sent back.

“That was great, Liam! I didn’t know you could bait them like fish.”

“That’s where I got the idea from, actually.”

“Really now?” she mused. “All right, let’s take these back and cash ’em in.”

But I suggested instead, “No, let’s keep going,” and with a chant, I summoned my item box and loaded the wild dogs’ carcasses in.

Salt water: 5,000,029 liters

Fresh water: 5,788 liters

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Jamille silvers: 186 coins

Gold dust: 100 kilograms

Wild dog carcasses: 5 carcasses

The prey we just caught were added to the list.

“I’ll take them out when we get back to the guild, so there’s no need to make

so many round trips. Let’s keep going.”

“That’s some super handy magic right there!” Asuna exclaimed in excitement.

.18

“You hunted this many?!”

After we returned to the hunter guild and piled up all the wild dog carcasses from my item box, the guild master jumped out from the other side of the counter, looking utterly shocked. He poked and prodded and flipped them over, assessing their authenticity. Needless to say, they were as real as real could get, so he ended up looking at us with even more astonishment than before.

“We brought...forty-two?” Asuna looked at me with uncertainty.

“Yeah, forty-two in total,” I affirmed for her. Unlike Asuna who had to rely on her memory, I had confirmed the total beforehand from my item box list.

“Wow... What you have here already makes up ninety percent of everything brought in today.”

Asuna snickered at that. “Come on, master. Give us our reward already,” she pestered playfully.

“Yeah... Okay. It’s three Jamille silvers per head. You two splitting it?”

I nodded before Asuna could respond. “We are.”

The guild master signaled to his subordinate, who then came over and started counting the carcasses.

However, the guild master chided them, “Save that for later. Just bring twenty-one heads’ worth of rewards for each of ’em,” sending the flustered subordinate to the back of the guild.

Asuna watched, looking somewhat pleased.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

“Doesn’t that kinda make you happy? I mean, he trusted our word for it and was even being considerate. He didn’t wanna offend us by counting where we could see.”

“Ah. I see what you mean.”

Even before entering Liam’s body, I’d seen it happen with some business transactions. Not counting the number of goods or payment on the spot certainly indicated the level of trust that had been built up between the two parties. I could see why Asuna was so happy and proud about it.

“You two are amazing,” the guild master commended, “and because of that, there’s something I want to request of you.”

“Huh?! Really?!” Eyes widening in shock, Asuna now looked even happier than ever before.

“You look really happy.”

“Of course I am. It’s unusual for the guild to request a hunter directly. It’s normally only for those who’ve been acknowledged for making great contributions.”

Now that she mentioned it, that did make sense—which meant that the guild master had acknowledged us... No, he was looking straight at me rather than Asuna. It seemed like I was the one being acknowledged this time.

“What do we need to do?” I asked.

“There’s a monster on that main road. I need you to exterminate it.”

“A monster?!” Asuna gasped.

The rest of the guild also began buzzing.

“Whoa... Are you sure you wanna send those kids on a monster subjugation?”

“Then *you* try hunting forty wild dogs in a day.”

“Tsk.”

Some were still raising their voices in doubt, but more and more were speaking up in my defense, acknowledging my strength.

The main difference between monsters and beasts was that monsters had a magic crystal in their bodies. Thus, unlike beasts that moved on their instincts, monsters sometimes used magic and showed combat prowess akin to that of humans. Even if the two looked the same on the outside, monsters were said to

be five to ten times more dangerous.

“How about it?”

“All right, I accept.”

The next day, I met up with Asuna and headed out for the western main road once more. We waited another day for two reasons: one was that it wasn’t an urgent matter since the western main road was being “cleaned up” for the big shot who was coming to visit, while the other was to spend one night recovering mana, just to be safe.

I was constantly using up my mana. Generally, one’s maximum mana capacity increased the more mana was used, and such was the case for me, on top of also increasing the maximum number of spells I could cast simultaneously. Fighting an ordinary beast while not on a full tank was manageable, but I wanted to be absolutely safe since I was going to be fighting a monster. After all, everything would be over if I died.

“Hm... I don’t think I like this monster,” Asuna admitted with a frown. She was reading the note we received from the guild master while we were on the move.

“A carnivorous caterpillar... All it says is that it’s like a huge caterpillar.”

“Apparently, it’s as big as a human.”

“Well, that sucks. If it’s that big as a caterpillar, then how much more when it becomes a butterfly?”

“Well, there’s no problem there,” she assured me. “It’s a monster, not a normal living being; it may look like a caterpillar, but it’s actually fully matured already.”

“Oh. Got it.”

I guess it isn’t a good idea to think of monsters within the frame of common sense.

“Oh well. Work is work!” Asuna slapped both her cheeks to get into gear, then turned to look at me. “I wouldn’t wanna take too long, so let’s find it in a jiffy

and finish the job within the day.”

“Agreed,” I said. “In that case...”

I stopped walking. Asuna also halted her steps and sent me a curious look.

“This’ll be my first time using this for real,” I prefaced before chanting, “Enemy Search.”

I used a beginner search spell called Enemy Search, which allowed me to pinpoint a monster’s location for just a moment. Apparently, this plus Paint was a standard combination among beginner magic spells, although there *was* a higher-level spell that had both effects in one. *I’d love to learn it someday.*

“What? What did you do?” Asuna asked, puzzled.

“It’s a spell for finding monsters.”

“You can do that too?! Wait, just how many spells can you use?”

“Around a hundred.”

“A hundred?!” Her mouth fell agape in shock and disbelief. “With a hundred spells, wouldn’t that make you the strongest in our hunter guild...? Are all nobles this incredible?”

“I wonder,” I answered with a cryptic smile, before shifting my attention to the spell. “Huh?”

“What is it?”

“There are two monsters.”

“There are what now?” Asuna furrowed her brows. “I didn’t hear anything about that.”

“What do we do?”

“Hang on a sec. I’ll go back to the guild and ask.”

“Huh? Hey, wait—”

Leaving me no time to stop her, Asuna went off and ran like the wind back toward town. Since I now had some spare time on my hands, I gave Enemy Search another go.

Yep, there really are two. *There's a tiny bit of distance between them, though.*

After waiting a while, Asuna returned with her shoulders heaving from running at full speed. However, she looked a little happy. Smug, even.

"How was it?" I asked.

"They said they didn't know about it. If there really are two of them and we hunt both, they'll give us five times as much for the reward."

"Five times for two, huh?" I wasn't quite expecting that.

"It'd be real bad if they let the big shot pass through that road with the monsters still on the loose, after all."

I nodded in agreement. "That's for sure."

"You're awesome, Liam! That was one hell of a find," Asuna cheered, her excitement written all over her face.

.19

“We’re in quite the pickle, aren’t we?”

“That we are.”

Asuna and I had retreated behind a big rock in the middle of a barren wasteland located far from the main road. Barely anything else was in sight, except for one rocky mountain in the distance.

“That caterpillar sure is a tough one.”

“*Very* tough,” I agreed. “I didn’t think none of my spells would work.”

“Yeah, but I’m more surprised at how many spells you could use in the first place, Liam.”

“Huh? Didn’t I already tell you that I could use a hundred?”

“You did, but anybody would take it as a joke, you know?”

I didn’t say it like it was, though...

That aside, we really were in a bit of a tight spot here. This huge monster caterpillar was way tougher than we expected. Nothing I’d thrown at it made a dent, no matter if it was Fireball or Ice Needle or whatever else. I even had some spirits like Salamanders and Sylphs attack it, but that, too, was a no-go. On top of all that, Asuna’s blades just bounced right back, instead ending up with a few nicks as if she’d just slammed them against a huge lump of metal. None of our attacks were working, so we retreated before we could sustain any damage.

“This is my first time fighting against a monster, and boy, can I see why the guild gives these things special treatment,” Asuna mused wryly.

“Same here.”

After a brief pause, I heard her speak again. “Say, Liam.”

“Hm?” I turned to meet her gaze; she had the look of someone who just had a

brilliant idea.

“You cast a spell called Shell on me yesterday, right?”

“Yeah... What about it?”

“Well, if that magic raises defense, then there should also be magic that raises offense, right? Maybe you’ve got that up your sleeve too?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it.”

She pouted at the instant rejection. “Why not?”

I held my palm up toward her. “Try punching my hand lightly.”

“Like this?” she asked, her fist making a clean and sharp sound against my palm.

“Now as hard as you can.”

“Okay.”

SNAP*!* Her fist made a more crisp sound than before.

“Your hand hurt more when you punched harder, right?”

“It sure did.”

“I *can* raise your attack power, but it places a proportionate burden on your body too. You ever heard about people breaking an arm from swinging a rod against something?”

“Ahhh... I get it. Definitely wouldn’t want that.”

It was like a pitfall. If you raised your attack power, your body wouldn’t be able to adapt to and bear with the increase in strength. Of course, desperate situations *could* call for gaining as much power as possible in the moment, but ours was not one such situation.

“Awww, and here I was getting all giddy that the guild requested us too. What a bummer. Where’s a random meteorite when you need one? Is it *that* hard to crash perfectly into that caterpillar for us?”

Asuna started whining, already poised to give up. Of course, since she’d seen for herself how none of our attacks got through to the caterpillar, I was more

inclined to commend her for her speedy situational awareness instead.

I paused for a moment. “Hm...”

“What’s up?”

“Nice,” I said. “Great idea, Asuna.”

“Huh?”

“As for where... Around here should be good. Asuna, can you lure the caterpillar over here?”

I learned over the past few days we’d spent together as a party that agility was one of her strong suits, so I knew she was up to the task.

“Lure it out here?”

“Yeah. To that big empty space over there.”

She looked at me thoughtfully. “You have a plan.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I do.”

“Got it. Leave it to me, then. Are we getting right to it?”

I took a look around and quickly found exactly what I was looking for.

“We sure are.”

I watched from a short distance away as Asuna ran from the caterpillar on the path we’d been on earlier. Its body size was comparable to that of ferocious beasts such as tigers and lions, yet its appearance was that of a caterpillar through and through—and it was chasing Asuna like a predator. She sometimes stopped and threw in an attack, taunting it so that it would keep up the chase.

“Now should be good.”

Muttering under my breath, I fired off seven fireballs toward the sky, all of which collided in midair and exploded far above Asuna.

Although far from breathtaking, they nonetheless served their purpose as impromptu fireworks. Spotting our signal, Asuna moved with more haste. Her speed was by no means lacking—she'd already successfully fled from the caterpillar once—and now that she stopped taunting it, the gap between them only widened further.

After confirming that there was now plenty of distance between them, I summoned my item box upside down above the caterpillar—and a huge boulder that easily spanned around twenty meters in diameter came bursting right out of it. It was the boulder that I had mistaken for a rocky mountain while I was having that strategy meeting with Asuna; I had taken it into my item box.

It fell straight down—and *crushed* the caterpillar.

I approached the boulder before taking it back into my item box, and in its wake was nothing but a gigantic crater with a squashed caterpillar carcass at the very bottom.

"Wooow! What *was* that?! What! Was! That?!"

Returning to my side, Asuna seemingly lost the ability to say anything else from all the excitement as her eyes sparkled expectantly at me. I explained the item box to her, taking the giant boulder in and out to demonstrate, and impressed that it wasn't actually that complicated, but her eyes only seemed to sparkle even more.

After squashing the other caterpillar using Asuna's brilliant random meteorite idea, we brought them both back to the guild.

"They hunted *two* monsters?"

"Those carcasses... Just how in the world did they take 'em down? I can't even begin to imagine."

"And they look like they were taken down the same way too. It *has* got to be some sort of tried-and-tested method..."

The other hunters began clamoring at the caterpillar carcasses we brought as proof for our commission. It was starting to look like more people had come to

acknowledge us since yesterday.

.20

A few days later, when the long-awaited big shot finally arrived, Asuna and I were called by the hunter guild to help welcome him. Our task was simple: line up outside town and clap when he arrived. Of course, the ordinary townsfolk would be doing the same thing, but those recommended by a guild would stand at the very front.

For people who made a living off of their respective trades in guilds, catching the eye of nobility could greatly influence their lives thereafter. Thus, being able to stand all the way up front where it was easy to be spotted was considered a huge reward of sorts. Since we had the achievement of defeating two monster caterpillars under our belts, Asuna and I were recommended by the hunter guild.

That was how I ended up standing here.

Incidentally, my father Charles and eldest brother Albrevit were tasked with receiving the VIP. Father looked a bit conflicted about my being where I was, but Albrevit just came up to me with a full-faced smile and said, “The fact that you’re already standing there means my eyes didn’t fail me when I recommended you to the hunter guild. Keep up the good work,” before leaving right away.

Asuna, who’d been beside me the whole time, heard everything. “Was that your big brother, Liam? Can’t say I like his vibes,” she mumbled, looking uncharacteristically disgruntled.

“What do you mean?”

“Wasn’t he trying to rub it in your face just now? *You’re there, but I’m here,* or whatever.”

I paused for a moment before realizing what she meant. “Ahhh...”

Actually, that fit in nicely with what I knew. It had only been several months since I became the fifth son of this noble family, but that was enough for me to

have heard this and that about their family issues. It wasn't very hard to draw up a picture: as the eldest son, Albrevit saw his younger male siblings as obstacles that could threaten his inheritance rights if something were to go awry. That spurred him to recommend me to the hunter guild, as the better I performed as a hunter, the further away I was from the inheritance race.

That's what he was happy about? Well, I also want to get stronger and become independent, so it's a win-win for us, I guess.

Soon, a grand procession of guards and servants headed by a single carriage arrived. After being welcomed by the waves of clapping hands along the street, it eventually stopped in front of father and Albrevit. A single elderly man alighted from the carriage, and although the two of them seemed to be speaking perfectly fine with him on the surface, I could tell they were coming off as rather awkward.

He must be a very distinguished individual, I thought to myself.

"Oh, he looked this way!"

Asuna, probably hoping that someone like him would show interest in her, got excited the moment his gaze fell our way.

"What am I doing here...?"

The VIP was provided a mansion in one of the best areas in town, and I was currently waiting inside a parlor of said mansion after being summoned there by myself.

As I sat utterly clueless as to why I was called over, the door opened with a soft click, and the elderly man came in. A guard tried to enter with him, but the man raised his hand and sent him back out before closing the door, leaving only the two of us alone in the room.

He then sat down in front of me. "I'm James Stanley," he began curtly.

"I am Liam Hamilton."

"Hamilton? Charles's son?"

"His fifth."

“I see... Well, that matters not.” The elderly man, James, didn’t beat around the bush and demanded, “More importantly, what is your relationship with Raymond?”

“Raymond?” I tilted my head in confusion. I didn’t have any recollection of someone with that name.

“That ring is Raymond’s, no?” With a grim expression, James pointed at my finger—to be exact, at my magicpedia. “Did you take it after killing him?”

“You’re mistaken. This is something I received from my teacher.”

“Your teacher?”

I explained how I happened to encounter my teacher in the woods, and how he taught me magic and gave me the magicpedia. After silently listening to my recounting of that series of events, James eventually threw his head back and burst into laughter.

“Ha ha ha! So he snuck in there thinking they’d never look right under their noses? That sounds very much like him indeed. I see, so he took on a pupil, did he?”

Seems like he believed me... But, Teacher, for your acquaintance to say that that’s very much like you... Are you always getting into such sticky situations?

“Since you were standing where you were along the street earlier, you must have been there not as a Hamilton but under a guild’s recommendation, yes?”

“Yes. The hunter guild’s,” I clarified.

“What did you do?”

When I told him about how I dropped a boulder on a monster caterpillar, he burst into yet another bout of laughter.

“Ha ha ha ha! Nice, very nice indeed! Raymond truly found himself a good pupil who isn’t at the mercy of his own magic... Very well.” Then, he called out, “Simon!”

The door immediately opened, and in came one man: the guard who tried to enter the room with James earlier but was told to stay outside.

“Stand right there,” James ordered him. “Liam, try hitting him with your best offensive magic.”

“Huh?”

“I want to see how strong you are.”

I hesitated for a moment before agreeing. “I understand.”

After taking a deep breath and collecting myself, I turned and faced the man named Simon.

I did some research after learning about arias a while back. Apparently, chanting an aria temporarily raised the upper limit of your mana output. As for the aria itself, it was defined as “something that moves your soul,” so it was best to choose words that resonated strongly with your heart, which led me to my own aria:

“*Amelia Emilia Claudia*...”

I chanted the names of the three songstresses I adored.

“Magic Missile, eleven rounds!”

My limit without an aria was seven spells, but with an aria, I was able to break right through that limit and cast eleven. Thus, eleven magic missiles headed right for Simon—but then they crashed into *something* before they could land a hit: a magic barrier.

The barrage of missiles hammered into the barrier one after the other, until it finally shattered with a glass-like sound. Two missiles managed to break through and strike Simon’s body.

“Ugh!” With his barrier broken, Simon staggered back with a look of anguish.

Meanwhile, James let out a hearty laugh. “That’s his favorite multicasting technique. Wonderful. Well done.”

“Yes... Thank you very much.”

“Seeing as you are the fifth son and chose to join a guild, I take it you must be planning to leave the nest in the future?”

“I am.”

“Good. In that case, let me first grant you knighthood.”

“Huh?”

“You may use that to establish your independence.”

“Huh? Huh?!”

Matters progressed without a hitch, and by the next day, a state-issued directive had officially conferred upon me the title of knight.

Knighthood was among the statuses that were recognized by the state, and those granted such status were even called quasi-nobles by the commoners. Although they were far from nobles in actuality, being a knight was as good as being acknowledged as a full-fledged adult by the state itself.

In other words, though I was still going to stay in the Hamilton house until I came of age—which Albrevit said he was fine with after deciding I was no longer a threat—I was in essence independent and had already left the nest.

.21

I was kneeling down in front of James in the same room we talked in yesterday. The ceremonial sword he had prepared for me was sheathed by my waist, the hilt of which I slightly thrust outward for him to reach. James drew it out and carved a few empty swings in the air. This was a ceremony that portrayed how a knight's sword belonged to his lord and must be swung only for his lord.

After doing that for a while, James returned the ceremonial sword into my sheath before finally declaring, "It is done."

I stood up and released a breath. All these formalities got me really nervous.

"With this, you are now officially a knight."

"Thank you very much."

Sitting down on his own couch, James pointed at the one across him, urging me to sit as well. Not that it helped—I remained as tense as ever. I was literally just conferred knighthood.

Regardless, James continued, "I've granted you the title of a knight, but there is nothing in particular I need you to do. You may act as you please, as you always have."

"Understood."

"You may even have more freedom now, especially since your elder brother will no longer see you as a threat," he judged. As one would expect of a noble, he thoroughly understood the relationship between the eldest son and his younger brothers. "Your father, on the other hand, may have a hard time coming to terms with this."

"Huh?"

"You hold great power, after all. He must have been planning to use you to gain an achievement for your family."

“Ah...” Things suddenly clicked. *No wonder father looked so conflicted back then.*

“Well, that can be handled any number of ways hereafter. Perhaps you can simply cooperate with your father. If you participate as a soldier among Charles’s troops, then the achievement will still be Hamiltons’ in the end.”

“I suppose so.”

“Now then...” Setting all the serious talk aside, James suddenly grinned like a mischievous little kid. “Raymond was quite the mischievous fellow.”

“Oh? O-Okay...” I could only tilt my head in confusion at his sudden change of topic.

“I forgot when this happened, but he once dug out a pitfall, you see,” he said with a chuckle. “He even lined the brim with dog feces so that whoever fell in would be done in a second time when they try to climb out.”

“Wow...” I said blandly.

“He’s the type of man who loves plotting such twofold tricks.” James paused for a moment there and looked at me with a playful grin. “Tell me, have you ever felt like you were ‘pranked’ by Raymond?”

“Er... Yes, actually,” I answered immediately. It wasn’t too long ago that I drained a lake of water and found a hundred kilos of gold dust that he left for me as a graduation gift.

When I told James all about it, he chuckled in amusement. “I can promise you this,” he then declared, full of confidence. “That gold is a red herring. Your true graduation gift must still be around that area, and it must have been hidden in some inconspicuous way too.”

My eyes widened in shock.

“Whatever it is should be the real treasure—your *true* graduation gift.”

After parting with James, I returned to the manor and entered the woods. First, I took out my item box and drained all the lake water until it was empty, leaving nothing but the muddy lake bed and several fish flapping about here

and there.

I paused to think back to what James said—that my teacher had hidden *something* here—and took his letter out.

“Dear Liam,

If you’re reading this, then you must have nearly mastered Item Box already. If you haven’t, try opening your item box in the lake so that everything gets drawn in, then expel only the water and living beings.

A gold bar wouldn’t go in, so I scattered some gold dust around the lake instead—a hundred kilos’ worth. If you can fully utilize Item Box now, then you must’ve also nearly mastered all the other spells in the magicpedia. Consider this gold as my graduation gift for you.

I heard you’re the fifth son of your family. You can use this as funds when the time comes to leave your house.

P.S. If you feel bad about receiving all this, then try thinking about why I gave you exactly a hundred kilos. That’ll be your graduation test.”

I read it from top to bottom, desperately racking my brain for anything I might have missed between the lines. Eventually, I mumbled under my breath, “Could it be...?”

Something came to mind, so I first returned to the manor and asked a maid if we had any gold dust. While she was struggling to answer, Albrevit happened to pass by, and when I told him I needed any little bit of gold dust we had, he immediately ordered the maid to go fetch some from our treasury.

“You’re a full-fledged knight now, so you can take responsibility for your own actions,” was all he said before leaving.

It was kind of baffling how he could just come up to my face and remind me that I was now “unrelated” to him and this house, but I let it go considering he’d definitely be less hostile to me from now on.

I took the gold dust back to the lake and opened up my item box.

Salt water: 5,000,029 liters

Fresh water: 5,788 liters

Pure white charcoal: 318 kilograms

Jamille silvers: 249 coins

Gold dust: 100.1 kilograms

The gold dust had increased by a bit, and I dumped all of it into a pile over the lake bed. Nothing happened. I proceeded to pinch one speck at a time, storing each back into my item box, and eventually, the list reflected that there were 0.1 kilos of gold inside. In that precise moment, a change occurred.

From the surface of the lake bed, a magic circle suddenly began shimmering. It opened up like a gift box, revealing a passage with a set of stairs leading farther down.

What I'd done so far was drain all the water and use my item box to place exactly a hundred kilos of gold dust on the lake floor. In other words, water was at a zero and gold dust was at a hundred—the complete opposite of how it was that day.

"How the heck would I know to do that, teacher?"

"Whatever it is should be the real treasure—your true *graduation gift."*

James's confident voice echoed in the back of my mind, along with the declaration he made as someone who knew my teacher well.

My heart pounded in excitement at what this treasure could possibly hold.

.22

I walked down the stairs and reached the bottom rather quickly. Using a standard house as the measure, this pit I was in was barely even three stories deep. At the end of the stairs was a small door, and beyond that door was a simple stone pedestal, atop which lay a single grimoire and a letter.

Taking the letter first, I recognized that it was my teacher's writing, just like before.

"Dear Liam,

If you're reading this now, it means that you've completely seen through my hidden scheme."

His opening sentence wasn't very different from his last letter's.

"You must've also mastered Item Box, which is the rarest spell in the magicpedia. As a reward, I'll give you the greatest grimoire in my possession. It's classified as supreme magic."

I looked at the top of the pedestal and placed my hand on the grimoire.

So this...is his greatest grimoire.

"By the way, I couldn't use that grimoire, in part 'cause I had no talent for it, and the other part being 'cause I didn't have enough mana."

"Even teacher couldn't use it..." I mumbled in a daze.

"I pray that you'll be able to use it in my stead."

His letter ended there. I folded the paper back up and carefully slid it into my inside pocket. Then, I took the grimoire and opened it.

"Another World... I wonder what kind of magic it is."

As I'd always done until now, I decided to give it a try first and began reading the grimoire, starting with the instructions on how to cast the spell so that I could get to practicing. After cramming everything into my head, I gathered my

mana with the grimoire still in hand. All the while, I never made a single peep, as was the case whenever I had a new grimoire in hand and new magic to learn.

And right now, I could tell—I wasn't mistaken.

Ever since I began using arias, I'd gained a better sense of the way mana flowed within my body and how it circulated in order to cast the spell. Thus, I knew that I wasn't doing anything wrong—the spell simply hadn't activated yet.

With my newfound knowledge, the rest was easy: practice, practice, and more practice. It was what I'd been doing until now, and what I had to do this time around as well. It was, after all, the only way to learn magic.

And so, I stayed underground and practiced this spell called Another World. I followed the instructions on the grimoire, carefully and thoughtfully performing all the steps one by one. This was usually how learning new magic went—or maybe the same went for anything in this world, really. I could develop my own method once I was accustomed with it, but right now, all I had to do was to carefully and patiently follow the right steps.

A few hours had passed before I knew it. In that time, I couldn't activate Another World even once. This wasn't beginner, intermediate, or even advanced magic—it was supreme magic that far surpassed all of those together. I never expected it to be easy, though, so I didn't grow impatient at all.

Eventually, my surroundings grew darker. It might have been partly because of this whole underground setting, but I could also tell that the sun would be setting soon based on how much time had passed.

"Wisp," I chanted, summoning a low-rank light spirit. It was a rather adorable fist-sized ball of light with a pair of tiny wings. The moment it appeared, the underground space grew as bright as day.

With this, I could continue practicing Another World, and I didn't even need to worry too much about having to maintain the Wisp all the while as it was only two simultaneous spells in the end.

I kept practicing...

And practicing...

And practicing...

Being able to feel the way my mana flowed in my body helped me keep it up without losing heart. At last, when the Wisp's light was washed out by the even brighter sunlight that began pouring into the room...

"I did it!"

A *door* appeared before my eyes.

The spell finally activated for the first time after an entire half day of effort. Although it looked nothing like your typical door, I could tell the moment I activated the spell that it *was* a door, so I walked right through it—and into a completely different location.

In a far cry from the underground room, I now found myself in a closed-off pure white space that spanned two meters square, with the ceiling being higher up by around half a meter more. This space was like a room, yet it wasn't.

Turning around to look back through the door, I could faintly see the morning sunlight pouring into the underground room on the other side.

I opened the grimoire again and read the part that I had set aside: the explanation on what Another World actually did.

Another World was a spell that created a space in a different world, which grew in proportion to the caster's proficiency and mana. Once opened, it wouldn't go away as long as the caster was still inside, even if the caster hadn't mastered the spell just yet. Nobody could infiltrate this space without the caster's permission, the only exception being anyone else capable of using the same magic. Finally, once mastered, the contents of the space would no longer disappear.

It was very similar to Item Box, which could hold an infinite amount of space but couldn't store living beings inside. In contrast, although the amount of space in Another World was dependent on the caster's mana, living beings and humans could enter it, as my very own presence inside it was currently proving.

"I can have my own house here," I mused out loud, "if only it'll fit."

Since I'd already been using Item Box to its fullest, I clearly saw how useful

Another World would be to me. If I mastered this spell, I'd have a house, base, hideout, or whatever else I could possibly call it, that I could freely enter and exit at any place and time.

"Thank you, teacher."

It would take a few months, but my experience until now told me loud and clear that I'd master it eventually as long as I continued working on it. This magic was the best thing I could ask for in my quest to become independent.

With this supreme magic, I had acquired the best house in the world...or, well, the land I could build it on, at the very least.

.23

“...Ngah?!”

My eyes snapped open with a jolt. As I got up and stretched, I caught sight of a ceiling as white as snow—actually, so was everything else in this room.

It seemed I dozed off while practicing magic inside Another World.

Recently, I’d been making very good use of this place. I stayed over nearly every night since it would never disappear as long as the caster was still inside. I hadn’t mastered it just yet, so whenever I left then cast the spell again, it would always create a brand-new space. In essence, it was like an inn that automatically tidied itself up. This feature would disappear the moment I mastered the spell, which felt like a bit of a waste to me.

Other humans could enter this space as well, by one of two means. The first were the people that I, the caster, permitted entry to... Well, that much was a given. The other category, however, were those who could force their way through with their mana. To illustrate, imagine a contest of strength wherein an unlocked door was being pushed on either side, one person trying to keep it closed on the inside and another trying to force it open from the outside. I found this much safer than just any old lock or security guard.

Both convenient and safe, Another World had hooked me into staying the night time and time again.

Soon, a month would pass since I first held the grimoire in my hands. As a result of practicing day after day, the time it took for me to activate the spell had greatly decreased.

Now, I was able to summon Another World in just ten minutes.

“Argh! This guy’s tougher than tough!”

In a forest clearing surrounded by countless hundred-year-old trees, Asuna and I were fighting a nearly two-meter-tall monster that looked like a huge frog

—yet for all that it looked like a frog, its skin was unbelievably tough. Asuna had even dashed up a tree and pounced on it from several meters above, but her blades barely made a dent. It was like fighting a huge boulder.

The monster that the guild commissioned us to subjugate this time around was a giant frog. In a way, this A-rank commission also served as their test for me since I had just become a knight.

"*Amelia Emilia Claudia*... Come forth, Salamander!"

With a grimoire in hand, I chanted an aria and summoned seven Salamanders. The fire spirits heeded my command and flung themselves toward the giant frog all at once.

"Asuna, get back!"

"Got it!"

Asuna used the giant frog's unscathed back as a foothold to leap backward, grabbing a vine along the way and using the momentum to swing away from the monster. Just a split second later, the Salamanders latched onto the giant frog, engulfing it in flames. The frog snapped at the flaming lizards in retaliation.

Spirits manifested into this world were fueled by their caster's mana. One could even call them the caster's "incarnation," and as the word implied, they were granted physical bodies.

Despite having caught on fire, the giant frog continued biting onto one Salamander after the other.

"Liam!"

"Looks like fire doesn't work. Asuna! I'll slam some spears into it—make sure to attack the same spot!"

"Roger that!"

After chanting another aria, I cast Ice Needle and sent seven spears of ice hurtling between the giant frog's eyes. They all landed on the same spot one after the other, and though they failed to penetrate its skin, they succeeded in making it stagger heavily—an opening that Asuna used to jump right in.

With her natural agility, she leaped and leaped until she reached the giant

frog's head. Then, she swung down on it with both her blades in a backhand grip.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The crisp sound of metal repeatedly striking a tough surface rang incessantly in the air, until it was replaced by a single grotesque flesh-stabbing sound—Asuna had finally impaled its head with her blades. The giant frog let out an anguished cry, sounding more like a beast in pain than a monstrous frog, and its shriek then grew into an enraged roar. The bloodlust it was emanating left the hairs on my skin standing on end.

The next moment, the giant frog opened its mouth wide and began sucking in the air around it. Its stomach inflated, growing far larger than it already was.

"Ack!"

"It's coming! Fall back, Asuna!"

"On it!" She yanked her blades out and jumped back.

"You felt it?"

"Sure did. I started getting all tingly."

Just as Asuna was nodding, the giant frog's inflated body began discharging electricity. This was the most troublesome part of dealing with a giant frog: when enraged, its entire body would inflate and discharge electricity up to a radius of a hundred meters. It was a range wide enough to leave us no place to run away to in a forest like this.

But today, I came prepared.

I'd stuck to using seven spells even with an aria and been holding this grimoire in my hand since the battle began all for this moment. At last, the magic housed within it, Another World, activated.

"Get in!"

"O-Okay!"

Despite her bewilderment at this brand-new spell of mine, Asuna did as I said and went in. I followed after her, and we both found ourselves in a white two-

meter-wide space.

Outside, the giant frog's electric rampage had begun. Waves of electricity scorched the surrounding greenery, along with any small animals that failed to flee. Regardless, none of it could breach Another World.

"Wow," Asuna marveled. "So you had this up your sleeve, huh?"

"Fortunately, that frog's electricity is naturally produced by its body," I remarked. "We might've been in trouble if it were simply magic."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yeah."

Asuna hummed. "Still, I'm impressed."

We watched the giant frog's electric rampage from the safe confines of Another World. It went on for a minute or so until the surroundings were charred black. Then, having used up all its electricity, the giant frog reverted back to its original size and slumped over the ground.

"Let's go."

"Right behind ya!"

The two of us jumped out of Another World.

Now that we had essentially brushed off its trickiest attack, it was time for us to throw everything we had to defeat the monster. With the grimoire still in hand, I dispelled then started activating Another World once more, all while chanting an aria and firing off seven offensive magic spells. Meanwhile, Asuna was cutting the giant frog up with her pair of backhanded blades.

The frog, thoroughly exhausted after its rampage, helplessly took all our attacks.

In the end, we made the guild master's jaw drop by clearing this A-rank commission completely unscathed.

.24

The guild master sputtered repeatedly as he stared hard at the magic crystal we brought back to the hunter guild, the disbelief written all over his face.

“This...is definitely a giant frog’s magic crystal,” he eventually confirmed.

“What’s with that? *You’re* the one who commissioned us for it, remember?” Asuna pointed out.

“I am... I just didn’t expect you to finish so early,” he admitted sheepishly. “I thought this’d take you a week, but you actually only needed, what, a day?”

“Half a day. Right, Liam?”

“Right.”

I recalled our battle against the giant frog, and just as she said, it certainly did take us that much. Maybe even less.

“Half a day...” The guild master began sputtering once more, his voice nearly being drowned out by the buzzing murmurs of the other hunters in the guild. “Well, I guess I should’ve expected no less from you. Thank you, Liam... Oh, and Asuna.”

He seemed to tack on Asuna’s name like an afterthought along with his thanks for me. Her face scrunched up, various emotions flitting past.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to,” the guild master said when he realized how it sounded.

However, Asuna slowly shook her head. “No, I get it. Liam’s been doing all the heavy lifting, while I haven’t done anything noteworthy myself. Honestly, he could’ve taken the giant frog down on his own too.”

“That’s not—”

“It *is* true and I know it.” Her lips twisted into a bitter smile. She spoke the same way she always did, but I could sense a strong conviction in her voice as she declared, “I need to get stronger. Otherwise, I won’t be able to keep up

with you anymore.”

“In that case, why not form a contract and become his familiar?” the guild master suddenly suggested.

“My familiar?”

“What’s that?”

Asuna and I were both clueless.

“Do you know how mages can take on familiars?”

Asuna shook her head, but I nodded. “I know about that.”

Ever since I began studying magic, I had read through not only the grimoires but also other magic-related books and documents we had in our archives.

“Familiars are bound to the mage by a contract of absolute subservience, right? But isn’t it for monsters? That’s what it said...”

“Not necessarily,” the guild master corrected. “Most mages just form contracts with monsters since they’re better in battle.”

“I see...”

“Hey, what are familiars? What happens when a contract is formed?” Possibly having found hope in his suggestion, Asuna pressed the guild master for further explanation.

“Once you form a master-servant relationship using contract magic, the familiar won’t be able to disobey their master’s orders. Canceling the contract is kinda tricky too. However, the familiar’s abilities will improve based on how strong their master is. It’s generally believed that they grow stronger to protect their master.”

After quietly listening to his explanation, I surmised that it was basically the same as what I already knew. It sounded like it’d be similar to the type of summoning magic known as contract summoning, but it was actually vastly different. Contract summoning called forth a clone of the contracted individual. On the other hand, a familiar contract was formed with and thus subordinated the individual themselves.

Between a clone and the original, it was a very decisive difference.

“I see...” Asuna looked at me. “Hey, Liam... Won’t you form a contract with me?”

With her eyes turned upward like a child begging for sweets, she wore a rather soft expression that was far removed from her usual cheery energy. She looked so cute that my heart actually skipped a beat.

“I don’t mind...” I began hesitantly. “But it’s a contract of absolute subservience, you know? You won’t be able to refuse my orders.”

I took care to ask her if she was sure first, a gesture that the guild master seemed to agree with, going by the look he was directing toward her.

However, Asuna just said, “It’s fine. I trust you.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. We haven’t known each other that long, but you’re a very kind and sincere person. I trust that you won’t do anything weird.”

“Okay...”

Trust, huh? Such a difficult thing to build, but I apparently gained hers without even realizing it.

“...And it’s not like I’d mind if you did.”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“Nope, nothing.”

She *definitely* said something just now, but Asuna firmly shook her head and brushed it off, instead looking at me once more.

“Come on, please?” she begged yet again.

I stared back at her for a brief moment before finally relenting. “Okay, if you insist... But it’s a magic spell, isn’t it? I don’t know if I can use it.”

“No issue there,” the guild master piped in. “This is the kind of magic someone else casts as the witness to your contract. I’ll do it for you.”

“Really now? It kind of...”

It kind of feels like a wedding, I nearly said out loud before swallowing the words back.

With all that decided, the guild master began his preparations. Meanwhile, the hunters that had been scattered all over the guild were now gathered around us, looking like they were having a blast watching all this play out from the sidelines.

After making me and Asuna stand facing each other, the guild master cast the spell, and a magic circle began expanding with me at the center. He also instructed Asuna to kneel, to which she complied without any hesitation.

That caught me a bit off guard. This pose must be necessary since it was a contract between master and servant.

“Give her the back of your hand.”

“All right.”

“Now kiss the back of his hand. Imagine a knight and his lord.”

“Okay.”

Asuna obediently kissed the back of my hand, sending a sweet, tingling sensation spreading across my knuckles. Light enveloped us both, and for an instant, it burst into an intense glow, making me avert my eyes.

Once it subsided, I faced Asuna—and was *stunned*.

“Asuna...?”

The girl before me had changed ever so slightly. Her breasts grew fuller, the curve of her waist became more pronounced—and more than anything, she was *beautiful*. She was still the same at first glance, but the closer I looked, the more clearly her beauty began to stand out.

Just as I was scrutinizing what exactly was making her more beautiful, she suddenly disappeared before my eyes.

“Whoooa!” All together, the hunters around us raised their voices in shock.

“Behind you.”

My shoulders jumped as I whipped my head around. Before I knew it, Asuna

had circled around and reappeared behind me.

“What did you do?” I asked, bewildered.

“I just moved really fast.”

“Really fast?”

“Yep. The moment the contract was established, I heard this voice in my head. It told me that I awakened a unique skill called Speed Star,” Asuna explained.

That moment, the guild exploded into an uproar.

“What did she just say?!”

“Awakened a unique skill?”

“Doesn’t that only happen in contracts with supreme magi?”

Everyone around us was buzzing clamorously, still unable to process what had just happened. All their gazes fell toward the guild master in demand of an explanation.

“Basically...”

The guild master’s eyes were gleaming in awe as he met mine.

“You just made her evolve.”

.25

“Hmmm...”

The next day, I was waiting for Asuna in front of the hunter guild since we’d made plans to go hunting again together. However, she arrived while tilting her head left and right, seemingly deep in thought.

“What’s wrong, Asuna?”

“Oh, Liam. Well, you see...” Her lips twisted into an awkward, unplaceable smile. “Take a look.”

“These are...” I paused, looking at what she was showing me. “Envelopes?”

“They’re love letters.”

The unexpected word made me do a double take. “Love letters?” I looked back at Asuna in surprise.

She had taken out three letters and spread them out like a fan in her hands. “I was stopped three times on my way here.”

“Oh, wow...”

“I wonder what this is all about. This never happened to me before. Maybe it’s ’cause we beat a giant frog?”

Asuna looked like she was racking her brain, but since I knew she was way off the mark, I told her, “It’s because of the contract.”

“The contract?”

“The familiar contract,” I clarified. “I guess you didn’t notice? You got super pretty after it was formed.”

“Oh...” Asuna blinked. “Wait, *WHAT?!* R-Really?”

So she really didn’t notice, I mused. “You didn’t look in a mirror or something?”

“Come on, Liam. We commoners don’t have such expensive stuff in our

houses, you know? Mine might've had some ten generations ago, though."

"Oh... Right."

I'd been living with one recently, so it completely slipped my mind. Mirrors were typically high-class goods that commoners wouldn't bother furnishing their houses with so long as they could help it.

"Anyway," I continued, "I think all those people approached you because you've become really pretty."

"Wait, so my face changed?"

"No. You're still you, just prettier now."

Asuna smiled uncontrollably. "Well, I'll be. Not only did that contract give me a new skill, it even made me prettier. Wow!"

"I looked through the archives in our manor after that yesterday, and apparently, the body evolves into its optimal form so that the familiar can use their skill to its fullest."

"I see, I see. So that's why..." Asuna began patting her own face as if the change didn't feel real to her just yet. All the same, she didn't look too dissatisfied about it—which wasn't so surprising, since no girl would hate being called pretty.

Meanwhile, I held my chin and hung my head in thought.

"What's up? Something on your mind?"

"Yeah. At this point, I want to try this familiar contract out a bit more, but unlike with normal magic, there's the whole issue of finding someone to try it out on in the first place, so..."

It was different from contract summoning, where I could test as much as I wanted since I was only summoning a clone.

Asuna hummed contemplatively before suggesting, "In that case, I have someone in mind."

"Hm?"

I lifted my face to see Asuna's lips curling into a rather excited grin.

I followed Asuna to the outskirts of town, specifically to a typical commoner's bungalow that looked just about as ordinary as the one I used to live in myself. With purposeful strides, she headed straight for the door and knocked.

"Ms. Jodie, are you home?" she called out with another knock, but no answer came.

"Someone you know?" I asked her.

"Yep. She's a hunter who helped me out a lot back when I was new to stuff."

"Hm... So why are you—"

My question was interrupted by the door opening, accompanied by the creaking of its aged hinges. Emerging from behind that door was a middle-aged woman who looked to be more or less forty years old. Along with the gentle expression on her face, her very presence alone seemed to exude good-naturedness all around.

"Long time no see, Ms. Jodie."

"Oh dear, if it isn't Asuna. What brings you here today?"

"Just a little something I wanna talk about. Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course. You're welcome too, young man."

Ms. Jodie let me in without even asking who I was, and although she sounded just as gentle as she looked, she didn't come off as careless to me. It was easy to sense the profound intelligence and understanding hidden beneath her voice.

After we entered her house, she offered us a seat in her modest living room and served us some tea. Asuna then gave Ms. Jodie an explanation on familiars and contracts.

"Oh my, is that why you've gotten so much prettier since the last time I saw you? And here I was thinking that you were just glowing with joy after finding yourself a nice man." Ms. Jodie wore a gentle smile and subtly glanced my way.

Um... Is she thinking that Asuna got prettier because she's become a maiden

in love...?

"Okay, let's set that aside for now." Asuna changed the topic, comically waving her hands as if she were actually physically shoving it aside. "Ms. Jodie, do you want to try forming a contract with Liam?"

"Me?"

Asuna nodded at her before turning to me. "Liam, I recommend Ms. Jodie. I think she'd be a huge help in battle if she were to join our party. She's already strong and experienced, and she'd be the absolute best if she got a skill on top of all that."

I looked at Ms. Jodie and finally realized what we were here for. I gave it some thought. *Since Asuna seems dead set on it...*

"Um, Ms. Jodie, that's how it is... What do you say?"

"Would I really be of much help, though?"

"You totally would!" Asuna cheered.

With Ms. Jodie being rather accepting of this whole matter and Asuna being as insistent as ever, we ended this house visit by bringing her straight to the hunter guild, just like that.

After bringing the guild master up to speed, he cast the spell and established the contract for us, just like he did with Asuna yesterday. The magic's light enveloped Ms. Jodie before spreading over the entire guild and lighting the whole place up, forcing everyone to look away.

Everything up till this point played out the same way it did yesterday, but when the light eventually subsided...

"Huh?" The hunters in the guild began murmuring with much greater shock than yesterday.

"Oh? What's the matter, everyone?"

Standing there was a beautiful and prim-looking young lady who looked no older than Asuna. It was clear to anyone that it was Ms. Jodie, who used to be in her forties but had now somehow reverted back into a young teenage girl.

“I-I can’t believe it... Just how much latent mana do you have?” It was all the guild master could wring out his mouth amidst his disbelief, voicing everyone’s thoughts for them.

Through the power of the familiar contract and my mana, Ms. Jodie underwent the extraordinary experience of regaining her youth.

.26

While everyone was abuzz with shock, Jodie herself was oblivious to the changes she had gone through and could only look on in confusion. “Goodness, what’s the matter with you all?”

“Er, well...” Asuna gaped at her in a daze before looking elsewhere. “Master, do you have a mirror?”

“Y-Yeah. Hang on a sec.”

The guild master took out a mirror from behind the counter and held it up for Jodie, letting her look at her own face.

“Oh my...” Her voice was soft but undeniably laced in shock. “I haven’t seen this face in a long while. Could this be an effect of the contract?”

I had to take a moment to recollect myself from the shock of witnessing someone turn young again before I could finally nod. “Seems so...”

“I see... Oh.”

“What now?”

“This is...a skill, isn’t it?” Jodie said with a hand on her cheek, setting off yet another wave of murmurs around the guild.

“Another unique skill? No way.”

“On top of regaining her youth?”

“This is crazy...”

Asuna asked her, “What skill did *you* get, Ms. Jodie?”

“Let me see... Please wait a moment.”

That was all she left us with before she turned and exited the guild.

We were left hanging like that for ten minutes, wondering what she could possibly be up to, until Jodie returned with a neatly sliced triangular sandwich atop a white plate. Before I could even ask what that was for, she started looking around the guild.

“Does anyone here happen to be injured?”

The hunters were all rather flustered when the beautiful and now-young lady looked straight at them and asked them a question, but one of them stepped up and said, “I got a bad gash on my side.”

“Then please have some of this.” Jodie offered him the sandwich.

Despite his confusion, the man accepted it and took a bite. “Tastes great... What’s this got to—huh?” With the sandwich still in his mouth, he suddenly froze up.

The guild grew noisy once more. The man looked down at his own stomach in disbelief as he slowly lifted his shirt up, revealing the blood-soaked bandages wrapped around his torso. However, when he slowly undid those bandages, the spot underneath the bloodstains revealed not even the slightest trace of an injury.

“It’s healed?!” The man’s wide eyes landed on Jodie.

Meanwhile, Jodie grinned and turned to me. “It seems like the food I make can heal wounds,” she declared.

Everyone was rendered speechless. When I looked at the guild master, he was also absolutely stupefied.

“Well now... It’s my first time seeing food that heals...”

When the miracles of two unique skills and Jodie regaining her youth played out before the public’s eyes just one day apart from each other, rumors soon began to spread in town. Naturally, James heard about it.

So here we both were, seated facing each other in his mansion’s parlor, with just one young maid standing quietly in the corner. He called me here after the rumors reached his ears. I wasn’t at all minding having to visit, up until he threw something unexpected at me.

“The first princess wishes to see you.”

“Huh?”

James met my dumbfounded expression with a bright smile. I didn’t quite know what to say after being hit with such a curveball right from the get-go.

“The first princess, as in...?”

“Her Highness Scarlet Sherry Jamille.”

“No, that’s not what I meant... By ‘princess,’ you mean the *literal* princess? Of the royal family?”

“Indeed,” James affirmed with a confident nod.

“Wh-Why?”

“At the tender age of twelve, you’ve successfully completed a string of A-rank commissions for the hunter guild, can cast a maximum of eleven spells at once, and possess mana that can trigger an evolution in your familiars and even restore their youth.” James raised his fingers as he enumerated all my achievements. “Her Highness Scarlet grew interested when she learned of your

extraordinary feats. She will be coming to meet you.”

“D-Do princesses normally mind every little thing the masses do?”

“I reported it to her.”

“Huh?!” I stood up in shock, bumping my knee against the table and knocking my teacup over in the process.

As the maid wordlessly cleaned up the mess, James continued. “I named you a knight myself, so I am required to report on your actions for a time. It’s my duty as the one who recommended you to the position. Did you know? Ninety percent of nobles or those of comparable status cause problems immediately after receiving their title.”

“Immediately after...?”

“They grow arrogant because of their newfound authority.”

“Ah...”

Right, I can see that happening. I’d already seen a lot of those types, in fact, before I became the fifth son of this noble family. They’d suddenly act like completely different people, throwing their weight around and oppressing others.

“With that said, Her Highness is particularly interested in your familiars and their unique skills. You may demonstrate them in her presence.”

I sat back down without saying anything in response.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“May I decline?”

“What?”

James furrowed his eyebrows, while the maid stiffened up as she was cleaning the spilled tea. I couldn’t see her face as she was looking down at the table, but I could imagine her reaction. She was a commoner, after all, just as I used to be; for them, defying a princess’s orders was normally an unthinkable act.

“Decline? But why?”

“They’re my friends, not some pets I taught a few tricks to.” When James remained silent, I went on. “I would obey if we were ordered to go someplace our help were needed, but I can’t accept ‘demonstrating’ them just to satiate someone’s curiosity.”

“That ‘someone,’” James stressed, “is Her Highness the First Princess.”

“Even so.”

Honestly, I didn’t know what might happen because of my refusal here. It’d only been a few months since I became Liam Hamilton, the fifth son of a noble family; I was still very much a commoner at heart. Thus, regardless of the consequences, the commoner in me still found it wrong to treat my party members as objects of entertainment for a royal’s curious eyes.

Not to mention, the contract established between us made them absolutely subservient to any of my orders, so all the more reason I couldn’t tell them to. I could’ve tried asking them first if we were just friends, but with the contract of absolute subservience in effect, I didn’t even want to do that.

“I understand,” James finally said. “I will pass the message on myself. What do you say about showing your own magic to Her Highness instead?”

“Of course, I have no qualms about that.”

He was probably throwing me a lifeline here, so I readily grabbed onto it, staring straight into his eyes as I affirmed my own willingness to cooperate.

After Liam left the room, James stood up and faced the maid who was still crouched over the ground by the table. Then, he *bowed deeply to her*.

“I sincerely apologize for making you do such a task, Your Highness.”

“You need not apologize, for I myself chose to wear this disguise. I was simply doing as a maid should, so no fault lies with you.”

“Understood.”

The maid stood up and removed her headdress, letting her golden hair flow down as it sparkled in the sunlight pouring in through the window.

It was said that the quality of one’s hair reflected the difference between

nobility and commoners. Nobles would have the time and resources to spare on nurturing and caring for their hair, making theirs worlds better than that of commoners. Thus, her resplendent golden hair spoke volumes of her status.

Despite the maid uniform over her skin, First Princess Scarlet Sherry Jamille was exuding an unmistakably noble and dignified aura.

She had attended this meeting while concealing her identity because she wanted to learn more about Liam—and the results were very much satisfactory.

“He is an interesting young man,” she remarked.

“Yes.”

“I can see why you recommended him for knighthood.”

“Thank you very much.”

“He caused no problems after receiving his title, yes?”

“None at all. He continued spending his days practicing magic as he always had.”

The princess hummed. “In that case, I shall grant him the title of baron.”

“Are you certain, Your Highness?”

“Would you not consider this an upfront investment?” she asked back.

James was silent in thought for a brief moment. “If anything, I would take this as a bargain. He is one among very few mages who can cast multiple spells at once and even possesses latent mana that can trigger the evolution of his familiars. His talent is the likes of which we would never again see for another few centuries. Should he raise an achievement...” He paused, emphasizing his conclusion. “I believe we may need to prepare a ducal position for him eventually.”

“Indeed.” Scarlet nodded in agreement. “Then I see no problem.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” James concurred, no longer showing any objection.

This was how Liam earned himself a splendid promotion from fifth son up to an independent noble without even knowing it himself.

.27

Three days later, I was called back to James's mansion. When the messenger told me that Her Highness the First Princess was here to see me, I braced myself and headed over...but nothing could've prepared me for what actually lay in store for me there.

Firstly, the closer we got to the mansion, the more curious onlookers there were loitering by the path. When I arrived, the security was hundreds of times tighter than usual; the path from the front gate to the mansion was secured on either side by countless soldiers, almost as if they were holding some sort of ceremony or ritual.

"I-It's this big of a deal?"

Cold sweat drenched my back, but I couldn't exactly turn back now. When he heard that the princess wanted to meet me, my father even went out of his way to remind me to be careful of my conduct before I left.

Steeling myself, I approached the gatekeeper whom I'd gotten to know from all the times I visited this mansion and was let right through.

I walked forward, flanked on either side by rows of unmoving soldiers, the sound of my shoes scratching against the paved path leading to the mansion ringing clear. The soldiers were just standing, but their numbers alone exuded a heavy pressure that weighed on my shoulders.

Approaching the front door, I could see that the entryway was elevated from the ground by a set of stairs. One woman was looking down on me from that raised platform. The moment I laid eyes on her, just one word formed in the back of my mind: *authority*.

She stood above us all while under the protection of this army of soldiers. She was the very princess of this kingdom.

Before I even realized, I heard the sound of my own nervous gulp.

“My name is Liam Hamilton.”

This whole thing was so sudden that I barely had the time to learn the proper etiquette, but I somehow managed to do as I was taught.

Inside the most lavish room in the mansion, I was meeting—or, perhaps more appropriately, granted an audience—with First Princess Scarlet. She was seated on a very expensive-looking chair that looked very much like a throne. Several soldiers ostentatiously stood on guard around her, while James accompanied her like a prime minister. The scene looked entirely like those royal audiences I saw in plays.

“Raise your head,” she ordered. “Someone give him a seat.”

Once a maid brought over a chair for me to sit on, Scarlet went on to ask me about the carnivorous caterpillars and giant frog I had subjugated. I’d been worried about what she could possibly ask and whether I’d be able to answer her, so I was relieved that they turned out to be such easy questions. I simply recounted the events of my monster subjugations.

After listening quietly till the end, Scarlet finally remarked, “How interesting. This giant frog, in particular. I’ve never heard of it being subjugated without the use of advanced offensive magic. Have you?”

“I am afraid not, Your Highness,” James answered. “It is standard practice to eliminate it with one decisive attack using advanced offensive magic.”

Advanced magic, huh... I wonder what it’s like. I loved magic, so I wanted to someday learn advanced offensive spells and advanced spirit summoning too.

“As for your familiars...”

I flinched. *Here comes the main topic.*

“I’ve heard of them,” Scarlet continued, “and I am quite intrigued. Will you not show them to me?”

I quietly gulped. I could feel the authority she exuded from all the way here, and it was bearing down on me like an unrelenting wave of pressure.

Is she doing that to coerce me into assenting? Then all the more...

“My apologies, Your Highness. I cannot do that. My friends are not things for

me to display," I said, repeating what I had already told James.

"So your actions do not betray your words, I see."

"Huh?"

The princess chuckled. "Truly, you grow more interesting the more I speak to you. I like you."

"Huh? What?"

Scarlet started laughing like she was enjoying herself... *Was there anything amusing about what I just said?*

"Not many have been able to entertain me twice."

"Twice...?" *What does she mean?*

"I must reward you for amusing me so. Sir James."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"As planned, I will make Liam a baron."

"As you wish."

I blinked. "Huh? M-Me, a baron?"

"Indeed."

"But I haven't even done anything, like an achievement or..."

To become a noble, one needed to gain an achievement, which was what my father had been trying so desperately for. However, I hadn't done anything of the sort.

"You've entertained me twice," Scarlet said simply. "That is plenty."

"I-It is?"

"It is much better than playing pimp, I would say."

Playing pimp... Oh, she must be talking about father, I realized. He *was* trying to offer his own daughter to wed the king or prince. *That wording, though... Well, I guess I can't exactly call it an exaggeration either.*

"I shall give you this as well." By slowly raising her hand, Scarlet summoned a

maid over to deliver me a book on a tray.

“This is...?”

“A grimoire. It contains the familiar contract spell, Familia.”

My jaw dropped.

“You should learn it yourself if you are able.”

“Thank you! Oh, thank you so much!” I took the grimoire, bounced up to my feet, and bowed my head over and over.

Scarlet blinked at me for a moment before bursting into laughter. “Ha ha ha! So the grimoire was better than the title of baron, was it? A truly interesting young man you are.”

Having received the grimoire for the familiar contract spell, Familia, I headed straight for the woods behind the manor and hopped right into practice.

Until I mastered this spell, any contract I formed would simply be canceled the moment I let go of the grimoire. Apparently, these were called temporary contracts. Just as with other magic, it was only after mastering the spell that I could sustain its effects even without the grimoire; then, I could form what were known as permanent contracts.

I poured all my efforts into practicing Familia. Needless to say, I didn’t shirk on practicing Another World either, especially since it was only a matter of time before I mastered it.

It was in the middle of that practice marathon that I suddenly heard someone behind me.

“Magic again?”

“Huh? Bruno?” I spun around and saw Bruno, my brother who had married into another family. “What are you doing here?”

“I can at least swing by to hang out, can’t I? Maintaining connections is a must for nobles like pops...and me now,” Bruno answered in a playful tone.

He was right. Bruno was no longer the fourth son of the Hamilton family but

the head of another noble family, which put him on equal footing with father.

"I've been hearing things about you," he continued.

"About what?"

"Seems you became a baron."

"Y-Yeah."

Bruno cackled. "Albrevit must be real salty right about now."

"Huh?"

"Am I wrong? That guy was so obsessed with inheriting the title and all, yet look where he ended up—below you, that's where."

Oh... He's not wrong. One of us is only the son of a noble, while the other's a noble in his own right.

"Hell, you're essentially even further above pops already."

"Huh? But I'm only a baron..."

Though I was a baron now, father was still a count, and counts were higher in rank than barons. It might've only been a few months since I became the fifth son of a noble family, but even I knew that much.

"Dummy," Bruno teased. "Sure, that's how it looks on paper."

"On paper?"

"Think about it: you're the first-generation head of your own house."

I nodded along.

"And pops is the third of his."

"Okay... What about it?"

"Well, in this country, there are two types of nobles: the first generation that achieved something themselves, and then everyone else who just inherited those benefits. The person with an actual achievement to their name is way more impressive, right? Their words are gonna hold more weight when push comes to shove."

"Ah..." *Put that way, I see what he means.*

Bruno beamed, looking like he was having the time of his life. “You one-upped that shitty pops of ours, Liam. Great job.”

It appeared I had, in essence, surpassed our father.

.28

One morning, I was on my way out to the guild when I ran into Albrevit in our manor's hallway. Unlike me, he seemed like he'd just gotten home after pulling an all-nighter, looking terribly gaunt with bags forming under his eyes.

I set my curiosity aside and got ready to nod my head in greeting—until he visibly picked up the pace and brushed right past me.

"Just you wait."

I spun around in surprise, but Albrevit never halted his steps and stormed off without another word.

Bruno was right... Albrevit probably doesn't like how things are going at all...

Fleeing from the walking hornet's nest in our manor, I went to a café in town to meet up with Asuna and Jodie, my two friends who'd become my familiars through the spell called Familia. We were just chatting away together when a few voices reached my ears.

"Hey, over there. What lookers, eh?"

"You said it... Don't think I've seen those two 'round town."

"Go try chatting 'em up."

Everyone around us began whispering and murmuring, their eyes trained on Asuna and Jodie. Some were nudging their pals to talk to them, but my friends' overwhelming beauty must have made them lose their nerves, as nobody actually came by to strike up a conversation.

Amidst all that, Jodie gracefully lowered her head toward me in a light bow. "I look forward to serving you from now on, Master."

"Master?" I tilted my head in confusion.

"We've established a master-servant contract," she said matter-of-factly. "Or could it be that you prefer to be addressed differently?"

“Oh, no need for all that,” I insisted. “Feels kinda awkward. Just call me Liam.”

“May I?”

“I’d like you to.”

Jodie quietly looked at me for a while. Her gaze held firmly onto mine, as if probing for my true thoughts, before she broke the silence again.

“I understand. Liam it is, then.”

This time, she sounded like she was just talking to a kid around the block. Considering she was older than me and had a very motherly demeanor, I found I didn’t mind at all.

“I do get why Ms. Jodie would wanna call you that,” Asuna suddenly piped up.

“You do?”

“Yeah! I mean, you’ve been really cool recently, Liam. It feels like we can always count on you, and you’ve never let us down either. You’re younger than me, but... How do I put this? You just give off this ‘important person’ vibe now.”

“I agree. If I must say...” Jodie paused. “It feels thrilling to be with you.”

“You haven’t even joined us on a hunt yet and you already think that? You better brace yourself for our first job together, Ms. Jodie,” Asuna teased.

“Oh dear, how exciting.”

Because of Asuna and Jodie placing their affection for me on full display, the guys around me were all sending glares my way. *I really appreciate that you two think so highly of me, but we’re outside right now,* I thought helplessly.

I was afraid of provoking the onlookers any further, so I decided to change the topic entirely. “We probably should’ve settled this first, but is it safe for me to assume that we’ll be forming a party?”

“Of course. Right, Ms. Jodie?”

“Yes. I would love to accompany you two.”

“Great. Nice working with you.”

Jodie accepted my outstretched hand and returned the handshake with a

pleasant smile. We really did get the order all messed up, but with this, she was now officially a member of our party.

“So what now?” Asuna asked, looking to me for our next course of action. Jodie was also waiting for my answer as she quietly stared at me.

To that, I simply answered, “We keep hunting as we always do.”

“Are you fine with that? You’re a baron now, you know? Don’t you wanna grab some of the juicier commissions or something?”

“Just because I earned a new title doesn’t mean I’ve become a new person. If I were to bite off more than I can chew only to fail in the end, I’d only be making more problems for others, and I’m not shameless enough to risk that. I just want to do what I can safely manage at the moment.”

“Ohhh...”

“My...”

Having heard of my plans for the near future, Asuna and Jodie gazed at me with eyes shining in agreement and respect.

Our next stop after the café was the hunter guild, where we first took a look at the info we needed for our hunt. Seeing that the wild dog cleanup was still ongoing (and would apparently continue until James left), we decided to help out with it again and headed right out of town.

Along the now-familiar main road, Jodie drew her bowstring to its limit and aimed for the prey we had found. The arrow she fired pierced through the wild dog’s body twenty meters away.

“Asuna,” she called.

“On it!” Asuna readied her two blades and pounced on the dog.

It tried to run, but the arrow hindered its mobility. Asuna closed in on it in a split second and sliced its head right off, the sharpness of her swing perceptible to the eye even from afar. Her physical abilities had clearly bumped up from before her contract with me.

“Wow...” Jodie whispered. As I sent her a curious gaze, she told me, “My eyesight’s gotten much better than before.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“As an archer, my eyes are my life. I wouldn’t be able to aim if I couldn’t see my target.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed with a nod. “Speaking of, how far *can* you see?”

“Let me check...” She then raised her hand and pointed in the distance. “I can just barely make out that boulder over there.”

I narrowed my eyes, staring hard in the direction she pointed at and managed to spot something that might fit the bill about a hundred meters away.
“That’s...a boulder?”

“It is,” Jodie affirmed, her finger still confidently pointed at it.

Yeah, no... I can’t tell. I guess it does look like one, but I can’t say for sure with my vision.

Giving up on the boulder I couldn’t even see, I instead turned to look at what I *could* see: Jodie, who was right beside me. “It helps that you can see far away, right?”

“Yes, it does.”

“The farther the better?”

“There is no such thing as too much sight for an archer.”

“In that case...” I selected one among the hundred-plus spells I’d learned, a beginner enhancement magic spell, and cast it on Jodie. “Buildup!” Along with my chant, the magic’s light wrapped around her body.

She began looking around with a palm on her cheek. “Oh... Oh my. Goodness me.”

Just then, Asuna returned while dragging the dead wild dog by its neck. “What’s up, Ms. Jodie?”

“I can see much farther now.”

“Really? By how much?”

“For example, behind that boulder I pointed out earlier,” Jodie said again, “two rabbits are mating.”

“That’s called seeing *too much*!” Asuna snapped back, though I, for one, wanted to point out that we could barely even see the boulder in the first place. “What is this? What’s going on, Liam?”

“Actually, I cast enhancement magic on her eyes.”

“Enhancement magic?”

“Remember when you asked me if I could raise your attack power with magic?”

“Uh... Oh, right. I did. Something about how raising my attack power would place a strain on my body?”

“Exactly. You don’t have to worry about that if you’re only strengthening your vision, right?”

“Ohhh.” Asuna hummed, more interested now.

Meanwhile, Jodie slowly nocked an arrow, pulled the string back, and fired it off into an arcing trajectory. “Bull’s-eye.” Turning to Asuna, who was now sporting a curious frown, she said, “Sorry for the trouble, Asuna, but could you be a dear and go check for me?”

“Check what?”

“You’ll know if you head straight that way.”

“Okay!” Asuna dashed off like the wind, then came dashing back just as quickly. “That was amazing!”

“What was?” I asked her.

“So that boulder over there? When you get closer, you’ll see it’s actually two boulders stuck reaaally close together, with just enough space for maybe one

fist—and the arrow was lodged in that gap!”

My jaw dropped in shock. “So you can aim for a fist-sized target a hundred meters away?!”

“This is all thanks to you, Liam,” Jodie insisted. “I could never do this before.”

“Right? Me too! I just swung my blade like always, but then the wild dog went *flying*, head and all! We really can’t thank you enough.”

“Thank you, Liam.”

“Thanks a bunch!”

Seeing them both thank me with such huge smiles on their faces, I couldn’t help but feel just a little bit good about myself.

From there, our hunt for wild dogs continued on as we slowly but surely loaded one carcass after the next into my item box. Once we were done, we went back to the guild to give our report and cash it all in... However, we were instead greeted by a rather chaotic sight: people were running all around the place with grim and harried looks on their faces. It was a far cry from how things were when we’d left earlier in the day.

“What’s going on...?” Asuna grabbed a hunter who was about to run past her. “Hey, what happened?”

With panic written all over his face, the man answered, “That young master from the Hamiltons went and did it!”

“Young master? Who?”

“The eldest! That guy undid the seal only to fail big time!”

“The seal... You mean *that* seal?”

“Yeah, *that* seal!”

That was all the hunter said before running off once more. There was only one seal he could’ve been talking about.

“Just you wait.”

I recalled what Albrevit grumbled under his breath when we passed by each

other this morning. In his attempt to compete against me, it seemed like he'd laid his hands on father's past failure...only to make an even bigger mess himself.

.29

An hour south of town was where a dense forest was supposed to be. The three of us rushed to it posthaste, only to find that it had been transformed into a battlefield, with people either fleeing the scene or being carried away on stretchers. I saw the guild master by the forest entrance and approached him. Well, I *tried* to.

“Ah.”

My steps ground to a halt after I spotted a familiar face lying on one of the stretchers on the ground. It belonged to none other than Albrevit, the eldest son of the Hamilton family, as well as the cause of this whole incident.

“Brother...”

“Liam... Ugh.” He was receiving treatment on the stretcher but shakily pushed himself up with a grunt, struggling as he propped his weight on his elbows.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m...not yet—gah!”

However, his efforts were nullified when someone whacked him over the back of his head with a wooden pole. The clean hit knocked him right out, leaving him to collapse over the stretcher with his eyes rolled back.

His assailant, better known as the guild master, simply looked down at Albrevit in exasperation before tossing the pole aside. “Take him back to town. I can’t deal with this foolishly insecure young master any longer.”

At the guild master’s orders, the medic who was treating Albrevit worked with a few others to carry him back to town on his stretcher. After seeing them off, the guild master let out a huge sigh.

“So you came,” he said as he turned to me.

“This is partially my fault, after all.”

“Well, I won’t blame you for it, as long as you let me rant your ears off if we

get through this in one piece.”

His understanding gave me pause, but still, I felt grateful for it. “Sounds good.”

Just then, Asuna joined us and asked the guild master, “Hey, what’s going on? What in the world is in there?” Her expression looked rather stiff, in stark contrast to her usual bubbly demeanor.

“Liam’s ancestor, a great-grandfather, sealed the evil dragon Lardon in this forest,” the guild master explained.

“An evil dragon...?”

The guild master nodded, making Asuna’s face stiffen up even more.

“We know how to seal it, and we’ve got the manpower for it too.” He pointed a bit farther away to a spot where twenty or so people dressed as magi were on standby. “Those guys can reseal it for us, but we can’t even get to work ’cause of some...*complications*.”

“What sort of...?”

“Lardon Juniors,” he said. “The evil dragon’s offspring.”

“Its offspring...”

“This hellscape here’s all their doing. Pretty shocking, eh? It’s this bad not ’cause of the evil dragon but ’cause of its kids.”

My expression turned grim. “So the evil dragon itself must be even stronger.”

“Exactly. Well, it’s been sealed for a long time, so it’ll need about a week or so before it can regain all its strength and start causing mayhem. There’s no problem as long as we can reseal it within that time...” He trailed off. “The thing is...”

The guild master let out another exhausted sigh.

So the problem is the Lardon Juniors, huh?

After entering the forest, we easily found our way to the battlefield by following the sound of the screams. A horrifying scene welcomed our arrival:

hunters strewn about all over the place, some engulfed in flames, some cradling broken bones, some with parts of their bodies bitten off. Not one able combatant remained.

It was a truly horrendous hellscape.

In the thick of this carnage stood three dragons, who seemed to be protecting something enormous behind them. Surprisingly, all three were only about as big as a medium-sized dog.

“Let’s give it a go,” Asuna said, then charged in with her blades in either hand.

One of the Lardon Juniors opened its snout, revealing jet-black flames swirling within its throat. It flared ominously, like a coagulation of all the misfortunes in the world.

“Get away, Asuna!”

Heeding my warning, Asuna drew in a sharp breath, screeched to a halt, and sprang away, but the Lardon Junior followed her change of course as it spewed out its black flame. With a grunt, Asuna poured all her strength into her legs and quickened her pace further, allowing her to successfully get out of harm’s way. The flames instead swallowed up a tree that was behind her just moments ago, scorching it pitch black in no time flat.

Asuna trembled at the sight. “Wh-What is that...?”

“What dreadful flames,” Jodie remarked grimly.

As they were both rendered speechless, I stuck my fist out and fired off seven magic missiles at once, the most I could manage without an aria. However, one of the Lardon Juniors opened its snout and unleashed a roar, and all of the missiles instantly burst apart.

Seven magic missiles, obliterated by just a single roar.

“This won’t work,” Asuna decided when she retreated to our side. “We’re no match for them.”

“Liam, we must retreat,” Jodie urged as well.

They both flipped their stances then and there, now ready to flee at any second. I couldn’t blame them. These Lardon Juniors were way stronger than I

could've ever imagined. To make things worse, there were *three* of them. We stood no chance.

Aaand now all three are charging in at once!

"They're coming!"

"Take Jodie and run!" I ordered.

"Huh... Okay!"

Making good use of her skill, Speed Star, Asuna snatched Jodie up and ran away. She wouldn't lose to these dragons in terms of speed.

Meanwhile, I summoned my item box and took a certain something out while chanting an aria.

"*Amelia Emilia Claudia*... Come out, Another World!"

Thanks to the aria, I somehow managed to activate Another World. A door that led to an alternate space appeared before my eyes, manifesting between me and the Lardon Juniors that were charging toward me—and just like that, they charged right into the door instead.

"Release!"

I tossed the grimoire in my hands back into my item box. Without full mastery of the spell, I was still incapable of casting it without the grimoire. Most important of all, however, was the fact that the contents of Another World would be cleared each time I activated the spell, which was exactly what happened this time.

"Phew... Well, now..." All my sweat came pouring out at once. *I thought I was a goner for a second there.*

"Th-The Lardon Juniors just..." I spun around to find the guild master staring agape, until he finally snapped out of it and barked out, "Now! Seal it now!"

"O-On it!"

The magi on standby outside the forest all rushed in to seal the unmoving evil dragon. While keeping an eye on their work, the guild master approached me and asked, "Did you beat 'em?"

“Somehow.” I managed to make really good use of Another World’s little quirk, but it was still a really close call.

“W-Wow... I never thought anyone could defeat those three Lardon Juniors on their own...”

The guild master looked at me with his eyes full of respect.

.30

“So this is the evil dragon...”

Once the dust had settled, the sealing squad came over and started reconstructing the seal together. In the meantime, I observed the evil dragon. It looked practically identical to the Lardon Juniors aside from how humongous it was. Even though it was sprawled over the ground, it was still easily five meters tall, and would probably reach twice that height if it were to stand up. Its face, again, looked the same as the Lardon Juniors; however, while the juniors *were* strong as heck, they still had somewhat of a cute, puppylike appearance on the surface. This one here was practically oozing with dignity.

“Liam!” Asuna and Jodie both cried as they came running back.

I looked at them both. “Are you two all right?”

“Yeah, we managed,” Asuna answered. “I thought I was done for when they nearly caught up to me even at full speed.”

“I’m sorry, Asuna. You would have been able to run faster if you hadn’t needed to carry me.”

“Bah, no need for that. Actually, that doesn’t even matter,” Asuna dismissed, instead turning to me. “Liam, what the heck was that earlier? Let me guess—magic?”

“Yep.” I nodded.

I hadn’t told them about Another World since I hadn’t mastered it yet, so I took this chance to give them a quick rundown. “I made a separate space using magic,” I explained simply. “Think of it as a plot of land that living beings can enter and exit from anywhere.”

“I don’t really get it, but that sounds awesome.”

“Did you perhaps lock the dragons into that space?” Jodie asked.

I shook my head. “Nope. I haven’t mastered it yet,” I said, taking the grimoire

out and showing them.

“Now that I think about it, you cast the spell while holding that,” Asuna recalled.

“That I did. Since I haven’t mastered it yet, everything I leave inside will disappear each time the spell is released. And here I was thinking I couldn’t even furnish the place...”

“But then you had a eureka moment, huh?”

I gave Asuna a small nod. As she said, the idea struck me in that one moment. None of my offensive spells were working, so I decided on the fly to just use Another World, which erased what was inside whenever I released it.

“Wowie. I never imagined noncombat magic being used like that.”

Seeing her reaction, I started feeling uncertain. If I stopped practicing before fully mastering a spell, the activation time would gradually revert back to how it first was, and I would get further from ever mastering it. Basically, while this regression wouldn’t be an issue *after* I mastered a spell, all my efforts would be in vain if I were ever to stop midway.

Even so, it didn’t stop me from wondering whether I should leave Another World as-is and save it for offensive use.

“Human... O tiny human...”

Just as I was racking my brain over that conundrum, a voice reached my ears and a heavy pressure befell my body. I looked around and saw that Asuna and Jodie were also—no, it wasn’t just them. Even the guild master, the sealing squad, the injured hunters who were still receiving first aid in the area—everyone’s faces tensed up as if they were being subjected to the same pressure.

As I kept searching for the source of that voice, a sharp gasp escaped my lips. The enormous evil dragon was staring right at me.

“O tiny human who houses a big soul.”

“Me...?”

The dragon was definitely looking my way and talking to me. The moment I

realized that, I gulped.

“Are you the one talking to me, evil dragon?”

“Huh?!” Everyone looked between me and the dragon in shock.

“Evil dragon... That is what you humans call me now, I see.”

It responded to my question, so we were definitely conversing. Voices of wonder and curious whispers blended together in the background.

“Are you saying you’re not an evil dragon?” I asked.

“I take no interest in how you humans view me. Come another few hundred years, I will surely be known by a different moniker yet again.”

The evil dragon, Lardon, spoke with a sagely voice. Somehow, I got the feeling that this being in front of me was far more profound than just some evil dragon.

“Why are you speaking to me? Are you gonna ask me to stop the seal?”

“O human with a big soul,” Lardon said again. *“What are you?”*

“Me? I’m just a human—”

“Yet your body and soul seem mismatched.”

My mouth clamped shut. *Does it know that I’m an adult who just took over this body? Then maybe it also knows why?*

“I see now... Unfortunately, I, too, cannot fathom why.”

I froze. *Did it just...read my mind?*

“Hm... It seems yours will be quite the intriguing life, O human with a big soul.”

“Will it?”

“Would you care to take me along? I wish to watch it unfold.”

“Take you along?” I echoed in shock, which was followed by the equally stunned murmurs growing louder around me.

“I shan’t harm you. In fact, I shall lend you my strength.”

“How will you...”

“I will merely be adding onto the foundation you have built through effort... Perhaps it would be simpler to say that your mana output would double.”

I gasped at the incredibly enticing offer. The harder I worked, the more I would grow, and now it would be at double the rate. It all seemed so...*efficient*. So worth it. I looked up at Lardon as I pondered over my decision but ultimately chose to trust my gut.

“All right. Lend me your strength.”

“Oh? You agree?”

“I feel no ill will from you, kind of like my teacher.”

Lardon chuckled. *“Is that so? Then I shall borrow that big soul of yours for a while.”*

The next moment, the dragon’s huge body started glowing.

“Whoa!”

“Wh-What?!”

“Sealing squad, hold your places!”

Everyone fell into a panic. Meanwhile, Lardon kept glowing for a few more seconds before the light eventually subsided. As everyone gradually opened their eyes again, they bore witness to the strange sight of Lardon’s body turning faint and being absorbed into mine. By the end of it, the dragon had completely disappeared, leaving everyone stunned and speechless.

“Liam, your hand! Look!” Asuna called out.

Looking down, I found a dragon-like crest on the back of my right hand. Everyone present began murmuring when they saw it. Among them, the guild master’s eyes were sparkling in wonder.

“Wow... Did he just...*absorb* the evil dragon?”

.31

Slowly but surely, I began to feel the power I absorbed from the evil dragon—no, from Lardon.

I raised my fist overhead. “Magic Missile.”

The moment I uttered the spell, eleven magic missiles shot out and flew up to the sky like fireworks.

Since I managed eleven on my own, I tried chanting an aria to amplify my mana before casting the spell again, which resulted in thirteen—no, *seventeen* missiles this time. All the magic missiles, six more than the last, flew up to the sky once more.

The dragon’s immense power was surging within me, and I could freely control it as if it were my own. Lardon’s voice replayed in my head.

“I will merely be adding on to the foundation you have built through effort... Perhaps it would be simpler to say that your mana output would double.”

I tried to ruminate on the meaning of that statement a bit more. If I understood this correctly, then it probably meant that my own efforts would end up producing double the results...

Well, all in due time. At any rate, practicing magic was way too fun for me to stop anytime soon, so I’d definitely come to know the ins and outs of this soon enough.

And now that all this evil dragon business is settled, it’s about time I head on back to—

“Huh?”

Looking around, I finally noticed that everyone was acting strange. The guild master, the magi of the sealing squad, even the injured hunters—they were all staring at me in fear. Some were able to remain standing albeit with shaking knees, while everyone else’s had buckled under them, their faces as pale as a

sheet as they slowly backed away on the ground. The guild master was no exception; his teeth were chattering uncontrollably.

“What’s wrong?”

“They became like this after you fired off your magic.”

“Asuna, Jodie... Are you two all right?”

The two girls nodded. They were the only ones who looked perfectly fine, and it didn’t look like they were faking it either.

“Rein it in.”

As I was racking my head to figure out what could have come over them all, I heard a voice in my head, one I instantly identified as Lardon’s. “Huh? Is that you, Lardon? What do you mean, ‘Rein it in’?”

However, it was Asuna who reacted to my question. “Oh!”

“What is it?” I asked her.

“Might just be me, but I think the power you’re emitting is growing stronger, Liam.”

Beside her, Jodie took a moment to observe before agreeing. “She’s right. It certainly is growing stronger.”

“The power I’m emitting?” I repeated questioningly.

“Yeah. You feel it too, Ms. Jodie?”

“I do. It feels as if...” She paused, thinking. “As if your mana is leaking out.”

“Is it...?”

Adding their insights into the equation, I thought back to what Lardon said once more. I tried to draw my mana back in by visualizing its presence in the air, floating there aimlessly after I’d used it for the spell. Then, I tried absorbing it all.

“Ah...”

Somebody squeaked. As if on cue, everyone else began placing their hands against their chests in relief one after the other.

“So it was because of Lardon, huh?”

“Looks like it,” Asuna said.

“But why were you two fine?”

“Could it be because we’re your familiars?” Jodie suggested.

“Kinda like the Lardon Juniors, huh?” I surmised, nodding.

The guild master approached me once he calmed down. “That’s an evil dragon’s power for you. Its presence alone was enough to make all our lives flash before our eyes.”

“Was it that bad?”

“It was.” The guild master nodded. “And you’re in complete control of that power. Guess I’d expect no less from you... I really have no words.”

I didn’t actually have complete control over it, but they probably didn’t have to worry about the so-called “evil dragon” anymore from here on out, so I decided to leave this misunderstanding be.

“You eliminated the decades-long threat that the evil dragon had been posing to this area. Thank you.”

“Not at all. In fact, I should apologize for scaring everyone with all that power _”

The moment those words left my mouth, I caught sight of the hunters and the sealing squad, especially those who were injured. All things considered, they were the ones who suffered the biggest fright today, and all because of Albrevit’s mad charge too. I agonized over that fact for a moment.

My mind made up, I summoned my item box, opened it up, and took out ten kilos’ worth of the gold dust that I had stored inside. It formed a golden dust pile over the ground.

“Wh-What’s this?”

“The Hamilton house has caused you all a lot of trouble today. I hope you can accept these ten kilos of gold as compensation.”

“Ah...”

“Can I leave the distribution to you? Of course, since many are wounded, I’m hoping you can prioritize those who’ll be forced to stay out of work for longer.”

The guild master’s mouth fell agape at my request. “Well, I’ll be,” he finally managed to say after a while, his voice tinged with admiration.

“What is it?”

“If you were to become the head of the Hamiltons instead of Albrevit... No, that’s a pretty problematic take. I shouldn’t say it out loud.”

He practically did already, but he held firm that he only *nearly* said it.

“You aren’t to blame for any of this,” he continued, “yet you still thought about the hunters first.”

“Even so, it happened because of me.” I was undoubtedly the cause of Albrevit’s rampage.

“Well, even if you are, that doesn’t mean any of the responsibility should fall on you, yet here you are showing them your concern and handing us this huge sum like it’s nothing.” The guild master looked deeply moved. I could even see a bit of respect filling his gaze. “The dangerous lives that hunters live only get riskier when the one sitting up top is a moron. Seriously... If only you were...”

This time, he really did swallow the rest of his words. However, his expression, as well as those of the other hunters and magi present, still spoke volumes of how that sentence was meant to end.

“If only you were our boss.”

Their eyes seemed to whisper those words beneath the respectful gazes they directed my way.

.32

After coming back home, I sat face-to-face with my father in the living room.

We were here instead of in his study because we were now on equal footing as two individual nobles. Although I was his son, I was also the head of a barony now; he couldn't meet me in his study, as doing so would emphasize a hierarchical relationship between us. The living room was a far more appropriate setting for a family head to entertain his guest.

Father was looking at me with a rather conflicted expression, which wasn't entirely surprising—the whole fiasco with Lardon must be a rather painful memory for him. He had failed and given up in the past, then Albrevit ran wild and made an even bigger mess of things now. To top it all off, I had solved the issue for them despite technically being of a separate household now. There was no way he *wouldn't* feel burdened by all this.

"Well done... No, I give you my thanks."

"Not at all..."

"This land would have been doomed without your help. You have my gratitude...for cleaning up after Albrevit's mess."

His voice grew smaller and smaller toward the end. It seemed to me it pained him to say it at all but did so anyway out of a sense of obligation. I felt like I just caught a glimpse of the difficulties of life as a noble.

"Please don't worry about it. I couldn't simply leave it be, after all."

"I see."

"So... What will happen to him?"

"About that," my father began with a nod. "Albrevit will be on house arrest for a while. Depending on the situation... No, never mind. In any case, that's how things stand for now."

"Okay."

I didn’t press any further. I only asked in the first place because I heard from the guild master and some others who came back to town that he might even be disinherited at worst. Not immediately, from how it sounded, but the possibility was still there. The disinheritance of a noble’s eldest son... I realized once more just how grave a mistake Albrevit had made.

Thanks to the talk about Albrevit serving as an ice breaker of sorts, father’s expression loosened up a bit as he continued our conversation. “Mr. James is still in town, so this news should eventually reach the capital. Someone will probably come to officially commend you soon.”

“Commend me?”

“But of course. You subjugated the evil dragon.”

I suppose that was expected, so I just nodded in acceptance. After all, both my father and Albrevit attempted to subjugate Lardon as a bid for their achievement, so eliminating that threat was no doubt a feat deserving a commendation.

That night, I had a dream.

It was a strange dream, one that I could still remember clearly even after waking in the morning. In that dream, I was practicing a new type of magic using neither a grimoire nor my magicpedia. What I used was my right hand—to be precise, the dragon-patterned crest on the back of my right hand.

Even some time after I woke up, I could still vividly recall it, unlike my other dreams that I would normally forget soon after. I remained in bed for a while, just staring at the crest, before I hesitantly tried “using” it the same way I used my magicpedia.

That instant, information on two magic spells flowed right into my mind the same way as my magicpedia did. Now convinced of the authenticity of that dream, I hopped right off my bed and, skipping changing clothes or having breakfast, ran to my usual spot in the woods where I always practiced magic.

Starting with one of the two spells, I followed the instructions on mana usage as was my routine. The spell didn’t activate, but I knew that I was on the right

track and just needed to go through the whole process of repetition just like I did with Another World. It also felt just as, if not more difficult than, Another World, meaning it would take more time both to activate it the first time and to eventually master it.

Well, it was nothing I wasn't used to. Everything up to now also needed time and repetitive practice.

Along the way, it also came to me that the crest was on the back of my hand, unlike a grimoire or ring that I had to hold or wear. This meant that mastering the spell would only entail the shortening of the activation time.

I shook my head and kept practicing anyway, pushing my thoughts to the back of my mind.

The sun rose overhead, sank beneath the horizon, and rose once more come daybreak. As usual, I got completely immersed in my efforts. Finally, by noontime the next day, I activated the spell. It created a light so sublime it was like nothing I'd ever seen before, and as it subsided, it left behind a small dragon that was around the size of a dog.

This was a summoning spell for a Lardon Junior, a low-rank dragon.

The dragon I had called forth was exactly like the ones I fought in the forest, and it was sitting obediently right in front of me in all its puppylike glory. Recalling how strong it was, I thought it would be a great asset in battle if I were to master the spell.

"Was that...divine magic?"

I swiveled around after suddenly hearing someone's voice. Standing right there, for whatever reason, turned out to be First Princess Scarlet Sherry Jamille.

"Huh? Princess...?"

"Was that truly divine magic?" she asked once more.

"What?"

"That magic you just used."

"Er... Divine magic?" I repeated cluelessly.

I had no idea what she was on about, but Lardon spoke up in my head without warning again and rectified that. *“It seems humans refer to it as such.”*

“Ah, turns out it is,” I told her. “What about it?”

“Unbelievable... A user of divine magic has appeared? And such a young child, at that?”

“Um...?” *Is divine magic that amazing? Princess Scarlet looks like she’s seen a ghost or something.*

This was something I only learned later on: if one in a hundred people had talent for magic in general and one in a thousand had talent for frost magic, then in that same vein, divine magic was such a ridiculously rare talent that *only one person in the whole world* could manifest it.

.33

“Did you subjugate the evil dragon with that divine magic?”

“No, I didn’t...” After struggling over how to answer, I ultimately decided to change the subject. “More importantly, Your Highness, why are you here?”

“Sir Hamilton should have...” She trailed off before chuckling. “Ah. You are also ‘Sir Hamilton’ now, I suppose.”

“Sir” was an honorific that royals used when referring to nobles. Even I, a commoner on the inside, knew that much; I always saw it in plays. Now that I was a baron, I was also “Sir Hamilton” just like my father.

Princess Scarlet continued. “Your father should have passed you my message, no?”

“Oh, yeah. He did tell me you were coming.”

“Good.”

“Um... So, why *are* you here?”

“Firstly, your medal,” she began. “Subjugating a dragon is a truly great feat, yet the elders would not quiet down about tradition and whatnot when faced with the notion of bestowing a title higher than baron on a boy who has yet to even own a territory.”

“I see...” It seemed like there were some pretty complex rules at work.

“With that said, I shall first confer upon you your medal. By my own discretion, I can grant you a Third-Class Order of the Phoenix.”

“A medal...?” I didn’t know the value of one, so I was kinda lost.

“Accept it. In order to put the citizens at ease, the existence of the hero who vanquished the evil dragon must be known.”

“Oh...”

I saw her point. She stirred up memories of a particular incident in my life—

the one before I became the fifth son of a noble—when a monster once appeared near my village. We all lived in fear of that monster for a while until rumors of its extermination started floating around. I couldn't believe it at first, but I recall feeling relieved after hearing that it was the work of a famous hunter I knew of.

Yeah, Princess Scarlet's right. It was best to pair the news of a monster's defeat with the name of the one who defeated it.

"I suppose this is also a noble's duty," I remarked. Putting the common people at ease was a rather important job.

"I quite like that you are capable of thinking that way."

"Um, thanks." *Even that casual remark earned me praise...*

"Next, I wish to hear your account of the evil dragon subjugation." When I frowned in confusion, she further explained, "If need be, it may be woven into an epic."

I nodded to myself; that, too, made sense. The more detailed the story of a monster's extermination was, the more reassured the citizens would feel. Knowing where the princess was going with this, I thus resolved myself to tell her about my encounter with Lardon: how we rushed over to the forest, struggled against the three Lardon Juniors, and how I got the idea of using Another World to eliminate them, all while everyone else lay defeated around me.

Princess Scarlet listened to my recounting with a grave expression and bated breath. However, when I got to the point where Lardon "entered" my body, her expression changed drastically. By the end of it, her face had tensed up for a completely different reason than it did in the start.

"The evil dragon cooperated with a human...? Moreover, it used divine magic?"

"Um, yes."

"But that's preposterous... No, what you just used was undoubtedly divine magic. In which case...our common knowledge was mistaken all along...?" Princess Scarlet seemed to be in complete and utter disbelief. After briefly

falling into deep contemplation, she directed a serious look to me. “Are you in complete control of the evil dragon’s—er, I mean, of that Lardon fellow’s power?”

“Rather than control, it’s kinda just...*there*?”

Lardon sometimes spoke to me when I least expected it but also seemed to plan on staying quietly inside of me at the moment. I also had a gut feeling—albeit a very vague one, with absolutely zero objective basis—that this dragon would remain inside me unless driven out by force.

Having heard my answer, Princess Scarlet silently stared at me for a while once more before she finally said, “I ask that you keep quiet about this for now.”

“About the...?”

“Do not tell anyone.”

“O-Okay.”

I was overwhelmed by the intensity in her expression. It wasn’t as if I ever planned on talking about it in the first place, so despite my confusion, I accepted Princess Scarlet’s order.

The next day, Princess Scarlet’s subordinate came to deliver three large boxes to the entrance hall of our mansion. With their rectangular bodies and dome-shaped lids, they looked sort of like treasure chests.

All of them were opened up at the same time right before my eyes.

“G-Gold coins...”

“So many...”

“There must be hundreds—no, thousands!”

The maids of our manor who received the delivery with me were whispering excitedly. I was also rather flustered on the inside.

“These are...?”

Princess Scarlet’s subordinate, whom I suspected was a knight captain,

answered, “Her Highness has sent these as a reward for subjugating the evil dragon.”

“For the evil dragon?!”

“So that’s why...”

“To think it was worth all these gold coins as a reward...”

Some of the maids nodded in acceptance, while others were shell-shocked.

“Oh.”

Meanwhile, I was sporting both reactions, but for a completely different reason. I’d already been promised my reward—the princess personally told me yesterday that she would confer on me a medal—yet now she was giving me these three thousand gold coins.

Then, it hit me. This was hush money—a follow-up to her order yesterday to not tell anyone about Lardon and the divine magic.

Three thousand gold coins was an amount that could easily fund the construction of a single mansion. This grand value spoke volumes about the weight of the matter...as well as my significance as an individual.

.34

On the afternoon of that same day, James summoned me to his mansion and met me in the very same parlor room we'd been using until now. As I faced the elderly man, he dropped a question on me straightaway.

"Can you really use divine magic now?"

I hesitated. Princess Scarlet had essentially sworn me to silence already. How much could I really explain here?

"It appears Her Highness is still quite inexperienced," James suddenly remarked.

"Huh?"

"By directly handing over such a large amount of money, she is practically inviting scrutiny from others."

"Does subjugating the evil dragon not call for that much of a reward?"

"Not only that, but the responsibility of paying itself does not fall on Her Highness, especially since that dragon subjugation could be used as an achievement to extend noble succession rights."

"Ah..." Now that he mentioned it, father and Albrevit also tried to use this as their achievement.

"In this case, it is standard procedure to report to His Majesty, who will then commend the achievement himself. And yet Her Highness did it herself before even returning to the capital. Those familiar with the workings of nobility will naturally find her actions suspect."

I-I see... We certainly couldn't blame anyone for growing suspicious if such a huge reward reached me without passing through the king first.

Having lost any reason to keep quiet, I answered, "You're correct. I've learned a few divine spells."

"Could you show me?"

“Very well.”

I lifted the crest that was on the back of my hand and used it in place of a grimoire to cast magic. I chanted an aria to amplify my mana, and injected some of Lardon’s in as well. Five minutes later, the beginner divine magic spell called Cure-All finally activated, releasing the same sublime light that summoned a Lardon Junior and shocked Princess Scarlet.

“Oh?” James mumbled in awe when he saw it. “What kind of magic is this?”

“It’s called Cure-All. It dispels all things deemed as a ‘status abnormality’ by medical standards.”

“Status abnormalities... Like petrification and poison, perhaps?”

“Yep.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

James was rendered speechless for a moment. “How frightful. Divine magic truly does live up to its name... It’s like the work of a god,” he muttered, looking more and more astonished with me.

The work of a god? That sounded way too grandiose. Definitely a bit of a stretch, honestly.

“Also...” He looked at me again and hummed, seemingly convinced of something. “Do you, by any chance, happen to know about the Tri-Draconic War?”

“Tri-Draconic War...?” I shook my head.

“Long ago, three dragons, all of whom had the power to upturn the heavens and the earth, fought a war,” he began. “One of the dragons defeated the other two. It is said that the deciding factor was the divine magic that it had used, which was akin to a god’s power.”

“The dragon used divine magic?”

“In time, that dragon came to coexist with humans and eventually passed its divine magic down, eventually leading to the establishment of our kingdom.”

“Right... Okay.” I had a hard time believing all this to be real, thanks to the fair share of such legends and folktales I’d heard throughout my life.

“Does it not sound real?” James asked.

“Um, no, it doesn’t.”

“Well, I suppose not. Three dragons fighting and the victor founding a country with humans... Perfect material for a fairy tale, I would say.”

“True.”

“Tell me,” he added, “what came to mind when I mentioned the dragon coexisting with humans and passing its magic down?”

“Well... Maybe the dragon married a human and had a child?”

“Yes, a very valid assumption. Until yesterday, every person who’s heard of this legend would have thought so as well.”

“Right... Wait, until yesterday?”

I had to wonder what happened yesterday for him to say that when James suddenly pointed to the back of my hand. “That crest of yours,” he said.

I looked at my hand. “This?”

“Are you and the dragon not coexisting now as well, in a sense?”

“Oh...”

Yes, that interpretation worked too. When Lardon entered my body, we kind of...*fused* together? It could be said that our souls were coexisting within my body, resulting in my newfound ability to use divine magic. (Although, I still needed to dedicate anywhere from a few months to a year of practice to it, starting now.)

In other words...

“One could say you have reenacted our nation’s founding story,” James concluded.

“S-So I did...”

“Which would possibly make the one known as the evil dragon one of the

founders of our nation—nay, perhaps even our very ancestor, at the worst.”

“So we sealed our ancestor...as an evil dragon...?”

Seeing James answer with a small nod, I realized that things had escalated way more than I expected them to.

“Hereafter, I have two apprehensions,” he declared. “First would be the collapse of the Hamilton house. I refer to the one your father heads, of course.”

“Yes... Their achievement wasn’t an achievement at all.”

James nodded. “Well, that matters little. The problem is the other.”

“Wh-Which is...?”

“The possibility that the dragon is enraged and will exact vengeance on our nation.”

“Oh, right... The dragon helped our country yet was locked away over a false charge.”

“Exactly.”

James then stared intently at me, and I stared blankly back at him. Seconds passed before it dawned on me that he was hoping to check if Lardon was angry.

I focused on my inner consciousness but heard no response. Still, some emotions were conveyed to me, through which I could sense that Lardon wasn’t mad and didn’t think anything of it at all in the first place.

Recalling what the dragon had told me before, I repeated, “‘I take no interest in how you humans view me. Come another few hundred years, I will surely be known by a different moniker yet again.’”

James gave me a curious look. “Oh?”

“That’s what Lardon, the dragon, told me before,” I explained. “Apparently, watching my life is far more interesting than anything else.”

Lost in his thoughts, James held his gaze on me for a while longer before chuckling in amusement. “So, it would seem you’ve become the kingdom’s savior before anybody even realized it.”

“Huh?” *Is... Is that really what happened here?*

“That achievement is greater than any that has been made until now,” James declared, a smile on his lips yet a terribly serious look in his eyes.

.35

“Achievement...”

“This will be huge,” James finished with a grin.

After leaving James’s mansion, I headed to the guild where I’d planned to meet up with Asuna and Jodie for another day of work.

By the way, I’d actually been working on summoning a Lardon Junior all this while—even as I was speaking with James back in his mansion and now as I walked toward the guild. I’d been going about it pretty straightforwardly before this, just casting the spell whenever the job called for it. Looking back, however, I came to the realization that it was better to prepare any spells with a long activation time beforehand. If I had no need for the spell by the time it activated, then I could just fire it off into empty space, and this even helped me practice magic even while on the move.

I put that new method into practice using the Lardon Junior summoning spell since it had the longest casting time yet, and honestly, nothing topped a dragon when it came to my choices for summons in battle.

As I kept that up on my way to the hunter guild, the door opened with a *clack*, revealing both Asuna and Jodie. “Oh, Liam!” they both called.

“Are the two of you going some—”

“Come here.” Asuna suddenly grabbed my hand and pulled me away.

“Well then, everyone,” Jodie said, momentarily stopping in place. “We will pass the message to him, so please do excuse us.” She then politely bowed her head to the dozens of hunters who came chasing after them before following after me and Asuna.

We’d planned to meet inside the guild, but the next thing I knew, they were dragging me farther away from it.

“What’s going on all of a sudden? Who are those people?”

“Party applicants.”

“Party applicants?”

“They heard of how you subjugated the evil dragon and insisted on working with you from now on,” Jodie explained.

“Huuuh?”

I threw a glance over my shoulder while Asuna continued pulling me by the wrist. Despite having been stopped by Jodie once by the door, a stubborn few looked just about ready to come chasing after us even now. It was only after we shook that crowd off by turning a corner into the business district that Asuna let go of my hand.

“Phew. We should be fine now that we’re this far away.”

Jodie giggled. “You seem to be rather popular, Liam.”

“Here’s the list,” Asuna said, handing me a note that had been folded into four.

Accepting the piece of paper, I opened it up to see that people’s names and combat styles were written down. “What’s this?”

“A list of those people earlier.”

“Oh, them?”

“We had to escape since we could barely hold a proper conversation with them. I mean, you could really see the greed in their eyes...” Asuna shrugged nonchalantly. “Still, you should get to decide these things, Liam.”

“You *are* the head of this party, after all,” Jodie tacked on.

“I see... Thanks, you two.”

They both nodded, readily setting the whole thing aside.

“All righty, onto today’s work!” Asuna cheered.

Jodie also smiled. “Let’s give it our best.”

Meanwhile, I looked down at the note that was handed to me. The list

contained information on nearly twenty hunters, all of whom wanted to be in my party.

This is the first time...I've ever been this popular in my life.

After hunting several dangerous beasts that had been appearing on the main road, I parted ways with the two girls and made my way back to the manor, where I finally got a good look at the note I received from Asuna. I pored over each party applicant's basic profile, wondering whether I should respond, as I stepped into the entrance hall.

"Oh!" Immediately, a maid came rushing to my side. "Welcome home, young master."

"What's got you in such a rush?"

"You've received a flood of letters," she reported.

"What letters?"

"Right this way."

The maid led me to a parlor room, furnished at the very center with a low table that was currently supporting several stacks of said letters.

"Are those...?" I asked.

"The master instructed us to gather them here for now."

"Father did? I mean, that's fine and all, but what in the world...?"

"These are meeting requests from prospective brides."

"Prospective brides?" I blinked, stunned.

I approached the low table and took one of the many files that were piled up on top of it. Flipping it open, I saw that it began with the family's profile followed by the girl's. The one I had open now was from the Sanchez ducal family, and the girl was their second daughter named Aina. I opened another one; this one was also a ducal family, and the girl was their third daughter Erica. I checked file after file, realizing that most of them were requests from families of dukes and marquises.

“Why in the world is all this...”

“Looks like I lagged behind a bit.”

I gasped. “Bruno!”

Hearing a man’s voice behind me, I spun around and found Bruno standing right there. My older brother who married into a different noble family was here again, for whatever reason.

“What’re you doing here?” I asked him.

“Just being a gofer.”

He took out another file that looked just like the ones that were piled up in front of me and handed it over. Then, he went on to sit on the couch and ordered a maid to bring some drinks.

As the maid hurried out of the room, I opened the file. This was also from a ducal house.

Bruno explained, “I got an order from a higher-up of that house. ‘*You’re his brother, so go bring that to him and put in a good word while you’re at it,’* he said.”

“Oh...”

“Just what did you do?”

“Huh?” I flinched. “Um, I just subjugated the evil dragon...”

“No, besides that,” Bruno instantly dismissed. “The higher-up gave me the order but no details.”

“What?”

“He wants to get acquainted with you, but he didn’t tell me why. And to top it off...” Bruno began flipping through the other meeting requests. “From what I’m seeing, most of these are from high-ranking nobles, all of whom are from competent and reputed families. I can only see this as all of them flocking to you ’cause they noticed something.”

I gasped as I recalled what James had said.

“By directly handing over such a large amount of money, she is practically

inviting scrutiny from others... And yet Her Highness did it herself before even returning to the capital. Those familiar with the workings of nobility will naturally find her actions suspect."

Clearly, the competent and reputed nobles that Bruno mentioned were among those.

"Hm? Hey, you dropped something."

I followed Bruno's gaze toward a note that had fallen by my feet. I picked it up. It was the list of party applicants that I got from Asuna. "Oh..."

These people knew nothing and were approaching me just because I had subjugated the evil dragon. The nobles, too, knew very little; they just approached me after having deduced a more accurate image of the truth from Princess Scarlet's actions. Both those who knew the truth and those who didn't were all flocking toward me, trying to join my party or become my bride.

This was the first time in my life I'd ever been this popular.

.36

“Another World.”

Inside the woods, I cast magic and summoned a door that led to a separate dimension. Upon taking a step into that space, I found a single Jamille silver coin there. I picked it up and stared at the inked mark on its surface.

That mark signified it was the very coin that I left in here when I opened Another World about a minute ago, which in turn made it the second time I used the spell and the thing that I left inside had remained.

“I’ve finally mastered it.”

I was *elated*. I’d already tasted this very same sense of achievement nearly a hundred times over these past few months, but it was a taste I’d never get tired of, especially if it came from mastering yet another magic spell.

Staring intently at the silver coin, I pondered the nature of this spell. Before mastery, the contents of Another World would be erased by the time it was cast again, but after achieving mastery, anything within would remain indefinitely. So now that I had mastered this spell, I could finally make better use of this space—and I already had one particular application in mind.

I walked one lap around the twenty-meter-square space. First things first, I needed to get a grasp of how big it really was.

I went into town and visited a carpenter.

As a son of the Hamilton family, I was welcomed as a VIP. Incidentally, the news of my promotion to baron hadn’t entirely spread around town yet. Since I was dealing with an industry I didn’t normally patronize, I was still treated as the fifth son of a noble. Of course, that didn’t pose me any problems whatsoever, so I didn’t bother pointing it out.

In the carpentry shop, I sat down at a small table by the corner and spoke face-to-face with a bearlike man who introduced himself as Daryl.

“What business brings you here, Lord Liam?”

“I’ll get straight to the point. I want a house built.”

“Um, I’ve never built a mansion for a noble before...” Daryl admitted with an apologetic expression. He was implying that the task was too much for a local carpenter like himself.

“Not a mansion. Just an ordinary house.”

“Right... Well, that should be doable.”

“Think of it as a placeholder. I want it to be a square ten meters wide, and I’ll leave the furnishing to you, as long as you can have it ready ASAP.”

I took out the leather pouch I’d prepared in advance, which was filled with five hundred gold coins. I set it down on the table and opened it up for him to see. The gold coins were emitting a dazzling luster.

“Will this do?”

“O-Of course.” Daryl looked incredibly pleased. “Where will we build it?”

“There’s a workspace behind this shop, isn’t there? Should be just about big enough to fit my order.”

“Huh? Oh, well... It would definitely fit, but...”

“Then build it there.”

“Huh?”

“You can’t?”

“I mean, I *can*...but, uh...” Daryl looked troubled, his face scrunching up like he was trying hard to wrap his head around what was going on.

“Don’t worry about the foundation. A tentlike structure that looks like a house—just build something along those lines.”

He was speechless for a moment, but he eventually gave in. “I understand.”

“Thanks. I want it soon, so can you get it done ASAP?”

“If you don’t need a foundation, then three days will do. I’ll go gather those who’re available right now.”

“All right. I’ll leave it to you.”

Three days later, I came by Daryl’s shop once more. After I was let through to the workspace in the back, a brand-new “house” came into view. It was exactly as I had ordered: a small bungalow that was roughly ten meters wide all around.

“What do you think?”

“How’s the interior?”

“Please, go ahead and check.”

I opened the door and went inside. There was a foyer, then a living room past another door. Farther in were several other doors, each of which led to some bedrooms, a kitchen, and so on. A toilet and bath were properly installed as well.

All told, it was an ordinary house.

“Yep. Perfect.”

“What will we do with this?”

With a smirk on my lips, I walked out with Daryl in tow and uttered, “Item Box,” then put the newly constructed house into this wonderful box that could store just about anything.

“HUH?! Wh-What was that just now? Where’d the house go?”

“Magic,” I answered simply. “It’s in here now.”

“Magic?! Wow, that’s... That’s awesome.” Daryl stared in astonishment before letting out a gasp. “Oh, I get it. You told me to make it like a tent so you could carry it around with magic.”

I just grinned in response. He was only half right, although I had no real need to point it out.

Leaving the shop, I slid into a nearby alleyway and summoned Another World. Once I was inside, I summoned another thing, my item box, and took out the

house that had been in the back of Daryl's shop until earlier. It appeared in this alternate space with a loud *boom*.

All thanks to the magic of Item Box, I was able to move the house here in an instant.

Having placed the house down, I left Another World and undid the spell before making my way out of the alleyway, back to the manor, and to my favorite spot in the woods. As soon as I was there, I summoned the door to Another World and stepped in again.

Yep. House is still here. I even confirmed that it was still the same on the inside. Living room, kitchen, bedrooms, toilet, and bathroom: all check.

I filled up the tub with the water I'd stocked up in my item box. It wasn't hooked up to anything, but I could easily carry around water and any other resources I needed to get by.

I stepped out of Another World, then left the manor and the town, until I reached the same main road I'd been hunting wild beasts on recently. This was where I cast Another World for the third time.

When I entered the space and saw that the house was still there, I subtly clenched my fist in victory. "Yes!"

I'd made a completely portable and freely accessible house using this fully mastered spell. And that wasn't all. Since the space in Another World expands according to the caster's mana, I could even try building a mansion later on.

By the end, I'd settled on a new goal.

.37

“Wooow!!!”

Asuna voiced out her awe at the top of her lungs and leaned over to me with sparkling eyes. Jodie, too, was giving me the same stare, albeit more quietly than the girl beside her.

The three of us were currently inside Another World—specifically, in front of the house.

“This is the same house from earlier, isn’t it? So whether we enter from the southern end or northern end of town, we still end up in the same place. Just wow!”

“A portable house...” Jodie mumbled. “This is my first time hearing of such magic.”

They were both quite ecstatic.

I had placed a house inside the now mastered Another World. As my party members, these two would also be using this house from now on, so I invited them into this separate space to let them have a look. But we didn’t linger for the first visit; we stepped out a while later, moved elsewhere, then I cast Another World again for them to reenter. That was when their fascination started ramping up.

“Hey, Liam! Can I look inside the house too?”

“Yeah, of course. We’ll be using this place for our hunts from now on, so you can go ahead and pick out your rooms.”

“Really?!”

“Oh my... So we don’t need to camp out, I see.”

Jodie’s appearance had reverted to that of a beautiful young girl, but she was still a veteran adventurer on the inside. She must have experienced camping outdoors many times.

We all stepped into the living room with Asuna leading the way, followed by Jodie and then me. Jodie just stood in place and let her eyes roam, while Asuna was opening one door after the other and taking peeks inside each room.

“Wow, it’s an actual house on the inside too. Hey, can we really pick any room?”

“Yeah.”

“Ms. Jodie, what about you?”

“I will... Hm...” Jodie looked outside the window with a troubled gaze.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m wondering if the lighting here can be adjusted.”

“Oh, now that you mention it...”

Asuna and I looked out the window, and we both gasped.

Another World had neither a sun nor a moon; it was neither bright nor dark. A bizarrely perfect level of lighting was constantly maintained in this place. It was never too dark, so I was never inconvenienced by it. However, Jodie’s remark made me realize something.

“Right... This’ll be a problem when we sleep at night.”

“Can you not make it dark?” Jodie asked.

“I can’t...” I blinked. “No, hang on. I *can*.”

The moment I held my hand up, the two of them realized I was about to use magic and watched on in anticipation.

“Come forth, Shade!”

I summoned a Shade, a low-rank darkness spirit, which appeared as a small black ball that was now floating before my eyes. If fireflies were tiny beacons in the night, then this was a blip of darkness that appeared amidst the light.

To that blip, I asked, “Can you engulf this space in darkness?”

The little Shade bobbed up and down in response. The next instant, our surroundings turned dark—so dark, in fact, that we couldn’t even see our own

hands in front of us.

“Whoa! I can’t see!” Asuna exclaimed.

“I see you made darkness with a spirit,” Jodie observed.

“I did. Still, this is way too dark... Salamander.”

This time, I summoned a low-rank flame spirit. A light spirit would’ve been fine too, but that would’ve just made this place way too bright again, and then none of what I was doing would make sense anymore. For humans living in the dark, fire was still the best go-to.

With the Salamander out, just the right amount of light filled the house.

“Ah, this is great,” Asuna said, now sounding relaxed.

Jodie nodded. “It’s certainly just right.”

“While we’re at it, we should light up the fireplace too.” I took out some of the firewood I’d stocked up on from my item box, tossed it into the living room’s fireplace, and ordered the Salamander to start the fire.

Our shoulders all started loosening up; fire had an odd calming effect in the dark.

Asuna mused, “This feels really strange.”

“Yes,” Jodie agreed, “but also very calming. If we can spend the night here instead of camping out after our hunts, then we would no longer have to carry our fatigue over to the next day.”

“Absolutely! You know, I *always* get bitten by mosquitoes! And it’s always only me, even when I’m with others! So I really hated camping out.”

“Then you can be at ease here,” I told Asuna. “Only those I allow can enter this place, so no need to worry about mosquitoes.”

“Seriously? Yippee!”

Just then, Jodie asked, “Liam, can you not make it a little bit brighter?”

“Brighter?”

“Yes. I think it would be nice if it were just about as dark as night.”

“Ah, that’s true.”

As Jodie said, it was way too dark right now. The darkness that the Shade made was too perfect. The area around the lit fireplace we were facing now was fine, but every other direction was under such absolute and chilling void.

“Shade, can you adjust the level of darkness?”

The Shade answered negatively. Its message was directly relayed to me, its summoner.

“Seems this one’s not up to the task. Apparently, low-rank spirits can only make it dark. It takes a mid-rank spirit and above to adjust its intensity.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Mid-rank spirits, huh... Darkness spirits aside, I wanna learn to summon a mid-rank water spirit too,” I mused.

I recalled how an Undine told me that it couldn’t directly convert salt water into fresh water before. As expected, mid-rank spirits were capable of many more things. *I wonder, just where can I get a grimoire with that kind of spell?*

“Guess there’s not much you can do,” Asuna said in resignation. “If only spirits could grow like we did, right?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Asuna and I exchanged startled looks.

“Wh-What, Liam? Did I say something weird?”

“Like you guys...” Muttering under my breath, I faced the Shade and raised my hand, casting a different spell on it. “Familia.”

The familiar contract spell Familia established a master-servant relationship between two individuals. Normally, it would be pointless to cast this spell on a spirit that had already been summoned under absolute subservience.

Regardless, the magic’s light enveloped the Shade, just as it had when Asuna and Jodie established their contracts. When it dissipated, an incredibly polite and intelligent voice reached my ears.

“Thank you very much, Master. Through my contract with you, I have evolved into a mid-rank spirit.”

The darkness faded just a smidgen, shifting away from the absolute darkness and toward something much closer to the natural nighttime that Jodie had requested, courtesy of the mid-rank spirit that took to the task as soon as it had evolved.

“Huuuh?! So you made the spirit evolve?”

“How fascinating...”

The two who witnessed the spirit’s evolution before their very eyes were incredibly shocked, to say the least.

.38

The darkness spirit in front of me had grown a little bigger. It was originally just about the size of a firefly, but now, it was big enough for me to barely hold it with both hands. This darkness-colored ball had a distinct pair of eyes on it, its calm gaze shining with clear intelligence and rationality. It was an incredible change, truly befitting to be called an evolution.

“I was expecting it to ‘change’ like you two did, but I never would’ve guessed it would evolve into a mid-rank spirit.”

“This, too, is all thanks to you, Master. I will serve you with wholehearted devotion to repay this goodwill, so please do call me at any time.”

“Ah...” Despite the spirit’s earnest plea, I sheepishly responded, “You’re telling me to call *you*, right? You, a mid-rank spirit?”

“That is indeed what I mean.”

I furrowed my brows and laughed bitterly. “Right... Well, that’s... Yeah...”

Seeing my reaction, Asuna looked at me quizzically. “What’s wrong, Liam? Is there something bad about what it said?”

“No, it’s just... I don’t know how to summon mid-rank spirits,” I admitted with a mumble.

“Huh? You don’t? Why not?”

“I can’t find a grimoire for it, you see.”

“Aren’t you a noble? And you still can’t find it?”

“Nope.”

“A grimoire that teaches mid-rank spirit summoning,” Jodie began with a resigned tone, “is so valuable that even nobles would treasure it as a family heirloom.”

I knew it. A mid-rank spirit summoning grimoire is a really valuable item...

Yeah, there's no way I'll get my hands on one.

Actually, if a mid-rank spirit summoning grimoire were a family heirloom, then wouldn't a grimoire for high-rank spirits easily be at the level of a national treasure? I wanted to learn how to summon high-rank spirits someday, so the fact that it was such a valuable item... It kinda—no, it *really* put me in a tough spot.

As I was drowning in my worries, the spirit calmly asked me, "Pardon me, Master... I see that the ring you are wearing is made with Ancient Memoria."

Hearing its question, I lifted my hand up to my face and looked at the ring I'd been casually wearing all this while. It was the magicpedia I had received from my teacher. "Ancient Memoria?" I repeated. "Well, I don't really know what it's made of..."

"Ah, you misunderstand. 'Ancient Memoria' is the name of an arcane craft of antiquity wherein high mithril silver is used as a medium to store knowledge of multiple types of magic."

"Oh, you were talking about the technique. Yeah, this definitely has a lot of magic in it—around a hundred grimoires, actually." It seemed like this magicpedia I received from my teacher was made with a craft known as Ancient Memoria. "Why bring it up?"

"If it is an item created with Ancient Memoria, then I can store mid-rank summoning magic inside it."

"You can do that?"

"'Tis an easy task, Master," the spirit firmly asserted. "However, I can only store the knowledge of the magic. You will still have to practice it from scratch..."

"Of course I will."

Whether it was the magicpedia I got from my teacher or the crest that housed Lardon, I always had to practice from scratch just as I did with grimoires. Just because that'd also be the case for mid-rank spirit summoning didn't mean I'd be disappointed in any way.

“Go ahead.”

“Very well.”

Shortly after, light enveloped the spirit’s body as a magic circle expanded around it. A string of shining characters I had never seen before started orbiting the spirit like a belt before it was all sucked into the magicpedia on my finger.

“Oh...”

“What happened, Liam?” Asuna asked.

“The magic spell for summoning a mid-rank darkness spirit just got stored into this ring like a grimoire.”

“Wooow! Didn’t Ms. Jodie just say that it’s as precious as a noble family’s heirloom?”

“It certainly is,” Jodie affirmed in a daze. “And now you have it, just like that...”

While Asuna and Jodie each expressed their fascination and shock, I silently stared down at the magicpedia for a while before casting Familia on the Salamander that I had summoned to light a fire and left by the fireplace.

Enveloped by the light of the contract, the Salamander began changing just as all my other familiars had, eventually emerging as a flaming muscular man. With an upper body clad in bulging muscles yet no lower half, the spirit floated in the air and opened its mouth to speak just like a person.

“Yo! Thanks for making me evolve, man!” the flaming muscular man greeted with a gruff yet friendly tone of voice.

“That means you’re also a mid-rank spirit now?”

“That I am! Call me Ifrit!”

“All right, Ifrit,” I said with a nod. “You saw what just happened, right? I want you to place your mid-rank spirit summoning magic into this ring too.”

“Easy!”

Although the way he spoke was just as overbearing as his appearance, Ifrit followed the darkness spirit’s example, triggering the expansion of a magic

circle and a swirl of unique characters, all of which got drawn into the ring yet again.

I stared at it silently again before mumbling, “Good.”

“You learned how to summon an Ifrit too?” Asuna asked.

“It’s in the ring now.”

I hadn’t learned it; I still had to practice it over time from now on. Still, it was a huge boon for me that it went into my magicpedia. Without missing a single beat, I summoned all the low-rank spirits I could summon at present and established contracts with them via Familia. After making them evolve, I then had them add mid-rank spirit summoning magic into my magicpedia.

Fire, water, earth, wind, light, darkness, and ice. All at once, I’d managed to acquire the grimoires for the mid-rank spirit summoning magic of all these elemental spirits.

.39

As I sent all the mid-rank spirits back, I recalled one thing I'd been putting off. I summoned my item box and took out two thousand Jamille golds from inside, then lined them up in front of Asuna and Jodie.

"Whoa, that's a whole lotta gold. What's up with this?"

"Your shares," I answered.

Asuna blinked blankly. "Uh?"

"Our...shares?" Jodie echoed, tilting her head in confusion.

"Right. The thing is, Lardon might not actually be an evil dragon."

"What do you mean?"

I recounted my discussion with Princess Scarlet, telling them about how the magic I got from Lardon was actually known as divine magic and how the princess sent over three thousand gold coins after learning of the fact.

"I'm considering this as hush money to keep Lardon a secret, so I figured I needed to split it with you two as well."

Because of that, I made sure to keep my budget for this house within a thousand coins. After splitting the three thousand coins I was given into thirds, I lined up the remaining two thousand in front of Asuna and Jodie.

"Huuuh..." Asuna drawled. "I wouldn't go blabbing about that. I didn't even know 'bout it in the first place."

"Indeed," Jodie agreed. "Besides, we are contracted to you, Liam."

"Oh, yeah. That too. You could literally just tell us to hush up and we'll hush up."

"But that just feels wrong. Anyway, these are for you two," I insisted, urging them to take the coins once more.

They both hummed and exchanged a glance.

“Fine,” Asuna finally said. “We’ll take it—but *you* hold on to it.” Jodie nodded in agreement beside her.

“Me? But why?”

“We can’t bring these home,” Asuna explained matter-of-factly, “and it’s too dangerous to just keep in the house too.”

“Exactly,” Jodie said. “If I kept these coins in my house, I would undoubtedly be visited by burglars the very next day.”

“Ah...” I nodded in understanding.

“So you hold on to it for us, Liam. Nobody would know that you told us about it in here in the first place, right?” Asuna finished off with a smirk.

She was right, so I conceded. “All right, I’ll hold on to it then. Let me know whenever you wanna use it.”

“Sure, will do!”

“Thank you, Liam.”

The smiles on both their faces were as bright as the sun.

After Asuna and Jodie left, I found myself all alone in the house and practiced summoning the mid-rank spirits and Lardon Juniors. My heart fluttered with excitement at all these new summoning spells. The ones for the mid-rank spirits would probably take time to master, but I was just thrilled at the fact that they were in my magicpedia at all.

“O human with a big soul.”

As I was practicing all by myself, I suddenly heard a dragon’s calm voice. In hindsight, this gentle voice really didn’t sound like it belonged to a villain—not that I ever thought that way to begin with.

“Lardon?”

“You are quite interesting, O human with a big soul.”

“Am I? More importantly, isn’t it a hassle to refer to me that way all the time? My name’s shorter and easier to say.”

Lardon returned a stunned silence, as if my response were utterly unexpected, before chuckling in amusement. *"Very well, then. Liam, that was rather interesting."*

"What was?"

"I never expected you to make a spirit evolve."

"Was it that impressive?"

"You must have been capable of such a feat due to the vastness of your soul."

I paused in thought. *Really now...?*

"Because of that," Lardon continued, *"I have one favor to ask of you."*

"A favor?"

Lardon wanted a favor...from *me*?

The next day, I headed to the forest where I first met Lardon. It was originally a restricted area since the evil dragon was sealed inside, but those restrictions had been lifted now that Lardon was gone. I easily entered the forest and arrived at the spot where the battle had taken place.

"Er... A hundred meters northeast from here, was it?" I mumbled, following the directions that were given to me.

I had spent all of yesterday practicing summoning magic, and I was keeping those efforts up on my way here too. Now, with a raise of my hand and a flood of light, I finally activated the divine magic spell for summoning a Lardon Junior on the spot. At the same time, the landscape before me began to warp; everything in sight distorted eerily before bursting out.

"Wha—?!"

I was *stunned*. In front of me now was a completely different scenery.

"Whoa, a human!"

"A human, a human!"

"Run away!"

Some creatures that spoke in faint and floaty voices started scampering off once they saw me. They looked like tiny people around one size smaller than a human baby. With faintly glowing translucent bodies and sporting a pair of insect wings on their backs, these fairylike creatures were a race known as pixies. Somehow, it felt as if anyone could just swat them like flies, and that would be it for them.

I hurriedly told them, “Wait, I’m not your enemy. Lardon told me to come here.”

“Huh?”

“The divine dragon?”

“Really? Really, really?”

The pixies stopped fleeing and started trickling back one after the other.

“Yeah. See?” I lifted the puppylike Lardon Junior that I had in my arms as proof.

“It’s really real! It’s the divine dragon’s child!”

“How is the divine dragon?”

“Divine dragon is okay? Doing good?”

The moment they learned that I was sent by Lardon, more and more of these floaty-voiced pixies popped up from every nook and cranny, gushing forth like water from a spring.

As they all came flocking around me, I responded, “Um, Lardon told me to protect you guys.”

“Then what should we do?”

Lardon had been watching over this forest of pixies. Apparently, they were so weak that they were bound to be hunted by humans if they were left to their own devices. Their wings, known as pixie feathers, were precious materials used to craft magic items. To prevent their extinction, Lardon put up a barrier around the area and protected them.

And now, I was being tasked with taking over that role.

“First, I’ll cast some magic,” I began while holding my hand up to the pixie closest to me. “Is that fine?”

“Okaaay.”

I could tell how deeply they trusted Lardon from the way they accepted me without a single shred of doubt.

“Name them as well.”

I nodded in response to the voice in my head. “In that case...” As I cast Familia on the pixie, I declared, “You’re Reina.”

The light of the contract enveloped the pixie, and her appearance gradually began to change. Her small body grew bigger until it settled into the size of an average female human. With fair skin and golden hair, Reina the pixie turned into a woman of fantastical beauty.

“I see... So they evolve into elves. How interesting.”

Lardon’s voice was clearly tinged with praise.

.40

“Um... Natasha. And you’re...Nia.”

I wrung out all of my brain juice to name the pixies, using Familia to establish individual contracts all the while. Following the first example, each of them were wrapped in the contract’s light as tiny pixies and emerged as beautiful women. Even now, I couldn’t quite believe my eyes.

“When you said elves,” I inadvertently muttered, “you meant *those* elves, right?”

“What other elves are there?” Lardon quipped in response.

Elves were a race that lived in places far from human civilization, such as forests and the like. Because they not only looked exactly like humans but even spoke like them and followed similar ways of life, they tended to be classified as “demi-humans.”

The decisive difference between elves and humans lay in but one point: their life spans. Within a few years from birth, elves would grow to look like a human in their late teens and would continue to live with that youthful appearance for several hundred years. Though their bodies ultimately deteriorated, they would welcome the end of their life looking just as youthful as ever. Essentially, they maintained that same appearance throughout their entire life.

Moreover, as a special characteristic of their race, each and every single one of them were stunningly gorgeous. Adding to that the way they lived secluded from people, many humans came to admire them as something of a mystical race. I, too, saw them this way, as I’d only ever known about elves from fairy tales and whatnot until now.

“Thank you, kind human!”

“We love you, divine dragon’s emissary!”

Those very elves were now thanking me and expressing their fondness for me one by one. Just being told “I love you” by a girl already made me pretty happy,

and all the more if that girl was an elf.

As I continued helping each of the pixies evolve, I finally thought to ask, “Why do I have to name them anyway?”

“A name is a spell of origin that any human can cast,” Lardon explained.

“That means...?”

“In some manner or another, humans go on to live their lives according to their names, as influenced by the sentiments of those who named them. A simple example would be church-granted baptismal names.”

“Oh... That’s the name given by the church that’s based on a saint’s name and signifies that saint’s protection, right?” I nodded in understanding.

“Therefore, name-giving is an act that naturally carries mana. If you form a contract with magic while naming a nameless being, the mana will resonate and produce greater effects than usual.”

“Huh. Cool.”

“If you are ever to form a contract with a nameless nonhuman being from now on, you would do well to give them a name, although it may consume excess mana.”

“Got it.”

I was, after all, watching pixie after pixie turn into elves right before my very eyes. Even if it would cost some more mana, I found that naming them while I was at it certainly was a good move.

“Um, you’ll be... Hmm... Teresa! If I hadn’t given that name earlier, I mean. So Tessa it is.”

Rather than running out mana, however, the more pressing issue at hand was that I was running out of names to give.

“Thank you very much for your great efforts, Mr. Emissary.”

While I was lying exhausted on the spot after helping all the pixies evolve into elves, one of them came over and thanked me.

“Sure thing, uh...Reina, was it?” I felt a bit bad for being so unsure when I was the one who named her, but I managed to jog my memory since she was the very first one I named.

“Yes, I am Reina.”

“Right.”

“Um, what shall we do from now on?”

“Huh?”

The question caught me a little off guard. When I turned to face her, I realized that all the other elves were staring at me with the same question written all over their faces too.

“You’re asking me?”

“We are your familiars, so please give us your orders.”

“Oh, that’s what you meant.” I gave it a bit of thought, but there wasn’t really anything I wanted them to do since I only came at Lardon’s request. For now, I settled with telling them, “Well, since you’ve all evolved into elves, it’d be great if you could build a village for all of you to live in.”

“Understood.”

“Let’s build some houses!”

“Do we just build them like the humans do?”

The elves all started talking among themselves about the village and houses they were to build, but they were rather chatty, on top of having no sense of cohesion. The chaotic sight got me thinking a bit.

“Reina,” I eventually declared, “you be the village chief.”

“Me?”

“Someone needs to herd the group or they’ll be all over the place. Based on how you came up to talk to me, you must be a representative of sorts, yeah?”

“C-Correct.”

“Then be the village chief.”

“Understood. We will do our best to make a village worthy of your approval!”

As Reina was already their leader back when they were pixies, the elves all smoothly sprung into action and began busying themselves under her leadership. Meanwhile, I just absently watched them do their thing. Having consumed a huge amount of mana for all their names and contracts, I didn’t even feel like lifting a finger.

Then, as I was staring off into space, I suddenly sensed something from deep within the forest: a high concentration of mana. It jumped out at me much more clearly than normal thanks to the empty tank I was currently running on.

After I stood up and headed toward it, I spotted something dangling from one of the trees, almost like a fruit. However, it was clear at a glance that this “something” hadn’t grown from the tree at all; its shape and color were just all wrong. To top it all off, I could even sense a ton of mana from it.

Reina approached me and asked, “What’s the matter, Mr. Emissary?”

“What’s that?”

“That? Oh, that is something we have been gathering.”

“Gathering?”

Reina nodded. “Pixies like to bring back little bits of mana floating in the air. We gather it all in one place and condense it together.”

“Like honeybees do with honey?” I couldn’t stop myself from conjuring up that image because of how pixies looked.

Just then, I suddenly heard Lardon’s voice. *“Consume it.”*

“What? Consume? That thing?”

“Yes.”

“Uh...” I turned to Reina. “Hey, can I eat that?”

“Of course. You may eat as much as you wish, Mr. Emissary. Everything of ours belongs to you as well!”

Permission granted, and very easily to boot. *Were they just gathering as much as they could but had no plans whatsoever on using it? Or maybe they lost*

interest in it after becoming elves?

Whatever the case, I was told that I could eat it, so eat it I did. I walked closer, took it in my hands, and hesitantly took a bite.

“Oh...!”

The moment I swallowed, I could feel my body brimming with mana, and it didn’t stop at just recovering what I’d consumed too. I had so much more mana in me now.

Could it be...?

I amplified my mana with an aria and fired some magic missiles toward the sky. As for the exact amount... I broke past my previous limit, finally reaching the prime number that came after seventeen.

There, up in the sky, was a swarm of *nineteen* magic missiles.

Thanks to this, I had jumped up another level.

.41

Once more, I was back inside Another World.

Just as the maximum number of spells I could cast at once had increased, the size of the space in Another World, too, had grown. As it was now, it could fit all the elves outside—"fit" being the keyword here, of course. It was still far from being a comfortable living space for all of them. Regardless, it brought me great joy to see such visible proof of the increase in my mana.

I stepped out of Another World and returned outside to see the elves building some houses. They were planting logs in the ground to form cone-shaped structures and covered those with bundles of grass. It was far too crude to even be called a house.

I approached the head of this project from behind. "Reina."

"Mr. Emissary!" She snapped her head around immediately.

"Oh, you can stop calling me that. My name's Liam. Just go with that."

"Understood." Reina turned around and raised her voice. "Everyone! He is to be called Lord Liam from now on!"

"Okay!" all the elves responded in unison as they built their houses.

They're all pretty straightforward, aren't they? I mused to myself.

I turned my attention to the house in front of me that looked more or less completed. "So this is how it turned out, huh?"

"My apologies... We aren't familiar with building houses..."

"Hey, no need to apologize. We do leave house-building to professionals for a reason. I should've known it'd end up like this."

I held my chin in thought. *I'd feel horrible if I let them live in these things... Building houses costs money... Hm, what should I—*

"NOOO!!! STOP!!!"

My shoulders jolted at the sudden shriek. The elves all around me froze in place as they turned their fearful gazes to where the voice had come from.

I immediately kicked off the ground.

“Ah! Lord Liam!”

Leaving Reina’s stunned call behind me, I rushed toward the direction of the shriek to find a lone elf caught by several armed men. They looked like adventurers, albeit the more *unsavory* kind.

“He he he. We just came to scrounge up some scraps from that big battle and scored ourselves some real treasure instead!”

“You said it. Just this one elf is already worth as much as anything a hundred hunters could ever leave behind.”

“Hey, lemme have a taste before we sell ’er off.”

The men all guffawed, their vulgar laughs ringing throughout the forest. It seemed like they came to fish for anything that was left behind after the big battle. They were more like hyenas than humans, really.

“Let her go,” I demanded, drawing all their gazes onto me at once.

“What? A kid?”

“Go play pretend hero somewhere else, brat.”

“We’re busy doing some adult work here. Shoo.”

They all started laughing again. From the looks of it, they didn’t have the slightest intention of releasing the poor elf, who looked just about ready to burst into tears.

“Lord Liaaam...”

“It’s okay, Susie. I’ll save you.”

“O-Okay...!”

She seemed to regain some composure after hearing me call her by the name I’d given. On the other hand, the hyenas completely snapped.

“You brat! Are you mocking—”

“Magic Missile!”

Seeing as they weren’t exactly the types to talk things out, I immediately fired off some magic, skipping the aria and sending seventeen magic missiles hurtling into one of the men.

“Argh!”

He was launched into the air, spinning a good few times before crashing down to the ground. His arms and legs were bent in ways they clearly weren’t supposed to, and he was also spasming while foaming at the mouth.

“Why, you!!!”

“Cocky brat!”

The remaining two hyenas shoved Susie aside in favor of drawing their cheap-looking longswords out and pouncing on me.

“Contract Summoning: Liam.”

“Wha—?!”

“Th-There’s two of him?”

My summoned clone and I both fired off seventeen magic missiles together—again, without an aria—and sent the two flying. After being subjected to the overwhelming barrage of magic missiles, the men’s bodies danced in the air before hitting the ground, similarly spasming and foaming.

“Wooow...”

The elves came rushing over once all the hyenas were defeated, staring at the sight and mumbling in awe. Meanwhile, I looked between them and the collapsed men and came to a conclusion. “This place...is dangerous.”

I’d already had an inkling as to how easily elves could be sold, seeing as they always went for full price on the slave market. My original plan was for them to make their village here, but this place was turning out to be far too risky to stay in. I had no choice but to take them with me.

After giving it some thought, I released my clone and cast Another World instead. “Everyone, get in here.”

“Er... May I ask why, Lord Liam?” Reina asked on everyone’s behalf.

“It’s dangerous here. I’ll take you all somewhere safe. Come on.”

“U-Understood.”

I returned to the Hamilton manor and went into the woods as usual, where I opened up Another World and stuck my head inside. The newly expanded space was absolutely flooded with elves.

“We’re here. Out you all go.”

“Where...?”

Reina frowned in confusion but still led the way and stepped out as she was told, yelping in shock the very next moment. She darted her head around and, for some reason, started sniffing the air too.

“I-It’s a completely different place... But how? What happened?”

Following her example, the other elves stepped out of Another World and expressed similar shock toward their sudden change in environment.

“You can tell we’ve moved?”

“Yes... Everything is different.”

“I carried you all with that spell. It’s safer here.”

Here, of course, being within a noble’s estate. At the very least, we wouldn’t need to worry about any hyenas and such in this place.

“You carried us all with a single magic spell...?”

Having witnessed how I made use of Another World to seemingly teleport them, Reina and all the other elves showered me with gazes of shock and admiration.

.42

The stunned elves had gathered around Reina and were whispering among themselves. All these mystical beauties clumped up together into a circle and speaking in hushed voices made for quite the surreal picture.

After a while, they seemed to have reached a conclusion, as they unfurled their formation, faced me all at once, and then...they all dropped to their hands and knees and even lowered their heads. Every single elf prostrated themselves before me.

“Wh-What are you guys doing?!”

“Lord Liam.” Without raising her head, Reina spoke up as their representative. “We beg of you, please be our chief.”

“Chief?”

“Ah, I suppose humans use the word ‘king.’”

“You want me to be your king...?” I’d been bracing myself since it was clear that they had something to say to me, but this went far beyond my expectations.

“Yes. Please become our king and guide us... We beg of you.”

“We beg of you!!!” all the other elves echoed at once, their heads still on the ground.

“We will do anything if you would be our king,” Reina finished.

A strangled groan escaped my throat. I could feel the weight of her declaration and the sincerity behind her words.

As I was thinking, Reina, followed by all the elves, lifted their faces by just a smidgen. They all peeked up at me to gauge my reaction while keeping themselves firmly on the ground.

I was speechless. These girls were serious—but of course they were, especially since one of their own had been attacked and taken captive already.

And because they were asking me so earnestly, I just couldn't find it in me to refuse.

"All right," I relented. "Being a king is definitely out of the question, but I can still be your chief." Even as someone who just became the fifth son of a noble house but was still a commoner on the inside, I knew that it'd be a bad move for a noble to go prancing around as a king.

"Really?!"

"Yeah."

"Thank you very much!" Reina crowed gratefully, a cheer that was echoed by everyone else behind her.

I felt bad leaving them all on the ground like that, so I had them stand as I mulled over my next move.

"I guess we'll need some land," I finally decided. "For everyone to live in, I mean."

For now, I had brought them to these woods, but this place belonged to father and the Hamilton family. While I could let the elves in for the time being, I couldn't have them build a village here, so we needed some land somewhere else.

As I racked my brain for a solution, one popped up from the most unexpected place.

For four days nonstop, I practiced new magic inside the woods. It was an advanced divine magic spell that I received from Lardon, and I was going at it until I could activate it for the first time. As of this four-day mark, that goal had yet to be achieved.

All the while, the elves waited and watched me do my thing. Of course, I'd been supplying their meals using my huge stock of premade instant noodles in my item box.

Four monotonous days passed by in the blink of an eye. I simply poured all my efforts into trying to activate the spell that Lardon had shown me while feeling

the flow of mana in my body.

“You are still as tenacious as ever.”

“Huh?”

“I am saying that I find it quite impressive how you can keep such efforts up.”

“Why?”

“Hm?”

“I’ll learn the spell if I keep at it. What reason do I have to not keep going?”

There was a stunned silence before amused laughter echoed in my mind. *“Truly an interesting human.”*

I didn’t know what Lardon found so amusing about all this, but there was nothing wrong with laughing and enjoying yourself, so I decided to let it be. In any case, I continued working toward the spell’s activation.

“Oh, finally!”

It took me half a day more until I could feel it—the spell was ready now.

“Now you simply need to recall your destination. And your clone?”

“He’s already there.”

I had left my item box open all this time to feed the elves, so I was able to check its contents right away. Inside was the completion report that I always had my clone write whenever I sent him off to do something for me.

“All right.” I turned and called the elf that always stayed by my side these past four days. “Reina.”

“Yes!”

“Gather everyone.”

“Understood,” she responded. “Everyone!”

I might be their chief now, but I still left the task of herding everyone to Reina. At her call, the elves steadily returned from where they were scattered all around the woods. After a head count confirmed that everyone was present, I had them all line up in front of me.

“All right, here I go,” I told them. “Advanced divine magic spell: Teleport.”

For the final step of this spell, I specified the destination in my mind. As soon as I activated it, the scenery before my eyes changed drastically. One second, we were in the woods behind the manor, and the next, we were in the middle of a grassland I’d never seen before.

“So this is...” I trailed off as I looked around.

“This place is known as the sealed land, located a hundred kilometers from where you were before.”

“Oh, wow... You really got here in an instant,” said my clone. He was currently standing a few meters in front of us, the exhaustion from four days of travel evident on his face.

Teleport was an advanced divine magic spell that needed a powerful burst of mana but could send you to any place you’d been to at least once. I had successfully activated it, teleporting me and the elves all together, thanks to my clone having spent four days traveling to this land. This was bona fide teleportation that let me get to where I wanted to be in an instant, a far cry from the quasi-teleportation I’d been using with Another World.

“This magic... I *definitely* want to master it.”

Visiting a new place was neat and all, but my heart fluttered even more at the thought of learning this spell that could let me travel more than a hundred kilometers instantly.

.43

“So we just have to build a village here?”

“Look behind you.”

When I turned around as Lardon instructed, I found that several tens of meters away, on the opposite end of what I believed to be a grassland, was a cliff. It was a steep precipice where the land just suddenly cut off.

“Go closer.”

“Okay.” I nodded and headed for the cliff, the elves trailing behind me. Once I reached the edge, I asked, “What now?”

“Hold your hand up.”

“Like this?”

I raised my hand as I was told, and suddenly, the dragon crest that served as proof of Lardon’s existence within me began to glow. The light grew brighter and brighter until it was utterly blinding.

Then, it snapped.

A crisp sound rang through the air, and at the same time, space *cracked*. Fragments of light fluttered about like shards of a broken mirror. Amidst all that, a piece of land had appeared right on top of the sheer precipice that should have been completely void. I could see plains, a flower field, and even a forest in the distance. Butterflies, dragonflies, and whatever else fluttered about, and a little farther away, a single wild rabbit hopped right out of a rock’s shadow.

It was a stunningly abundant and untouched land.

“Wow, amazing!”

“What was that? Did you do that, Lord Liam?”

“So pretty...”

As the elves expressed their wonderment behind me, I asked Lardon, “What’s all this?”

“One of the lands I sealed.”

“You sealed it? But why?” However, the dragon didn’t answer, or maybe didn’t *want* to answer, so I changed my question. “Um, I’m guessing we can use this place...?”

“Yes, use it as you please. You may even build a country,” Lardon teased, referring to what Reina and the elves told me before.

I just laughed dryly in response before spinning back around. “This is a sealed land that Lardon was...uh, protecting,” I explained to them in simpler terms. “So we’re free to use this place.”

“Wow!”

“Thank you, divine dragon!”

“Thank you, Lord Liam.”

I was expecting them to thank their divine dragon, but I ended up receiving their gratitude too, for some reason. *Oh, well. It’s all good.*

I took the elves and set foot in the sealed land. In order to decide where to build our village, we first needed to find the most important component: a water source. However, searching for a while only earned us a troubled frown on Reina’s face.

“We can’t seem to find one...”

This land was so plentiful. There *had* to be a water source somewhere. It was a bit worrying that we hadn’t found one yet, so I paused to think for a while before nodding to myself.

“Undine.”

It took me but a moment to summon the water spirit, all thanks to my full mastery of all low-rank summoning spells.

“And then, Familia.”

I cast contract magic on it, making the Undine evolve into a Celsius, a mid-

rank water spirit. I hadn't mastered the mid-rank spirit summoning spell itself yet, so I had to use this rather roundabout and more mana-costly method in the meantime.

The spirit that had evolved into a beautiful water maiden knelt before me. "My greatest thanks, Master."

"I want to find a water source we can build a village around. Can you do something?"

Still kneeling, the Celsius lowered her head. "Please leave it to me."

The spirit swiftly stood back up and faced a certain direction. The moment she held her hand up, several dozens of meters ahead, a gigantic pillar of water pierced through and erupted out the ground.

"OOOH!!!" all the elves cheered.

The surging pillar of water gradually lost its momentum until it settled down into something closer to a fountain. As I approached it, I noticed that the water gushing out had traveled along the terrain to form a small river.

"Is this acceptable?"

"It's perfect. Thanks."

"It was my honor to serve you."

I turned my attention away from the Celsius and to the elves instead. "Let's make the village with this area as the base."

"Understood."

"Also," I added, "I guess I'll have to drag in a human who's skilled in construction."

The houses that the elves made back in the forest were horrendous. They were like makeshift shelters used for survival in the wilderness. Now that we had this land for ourselves, I wanted to make a decent village with proper houses.

Three days later, I had Teleport on standby and ready to be activated by

morning. Under the elves' watchful gazes, I first summoned three Lardon Juniors, which was now far easier for me than teleporting since I could cast the spell within just a day.

"I'll be going for a bit. These guys will protect you all while I'm gone."

"Huh? These cute little things will?" Reina looked a little shocked and also somewhat doubtful.

"They may look like this, but they're Lardon's kids. They're strong, you know? Three of them could easily fend off a full-scale attack from the hunter guild."

"Is that so...?"

"Show her," I ordered one Lardon Junior.

The dog-sized dragon raised its two front legs, stood like a human, then slammed them right down into the ground.

KABOOM!!!

That moment, the ground trembled immensely as if an earthquake were ravaging the land. The elves that had gathered around couldn't stay on their feet, and they all toppled over in a chaotic mess. Still, they were able to remain calm since they knew it wasn't an enemy attack.

"That was awesome!"

"Since he can summon such a strong creature, Lord Liam must be even more awesome, right?"

As the chatty elves all began to praise me by proxy, I offered my hand and pulled Reina back up. "Well, there you have it. As long as these guys are here, you're all perfectly safe."

"I understand!"

Any shred of doubt and uncertainty had long since disappeared from her face.

.44

After using my *first* charge of Teleport, I looked around and confirmed that I'd landed myself in the woods behind our manor that I always holed up in. Thanks to this spell, I was able to return to a place that was three days of travel away. I once again felt just how amazing advanced magic was.

I went on to activate the remaining fifteen uses of Teleport in succession. Of course, I couldn't go anywhere I'd never been to, so I just pointlessly teleported from place to place within the woods. The maximum number of spells I could cast with an aria, minus the three spells I used up to summon the Lardon Juniors, was fifteen. After using all the spells up, I started casting Teleport once more through the dragon crest on my right hand, as I hadn't mastered it just yet.

"Oh..."

I let out an awed voice. My ability to read the flow of mana had improved recently, so now, as long as I'd already used the spell once, I was able to read the flow the moment I started casting in order to grasp how long it would take before activation.

In the case of Teleport, it had shortened to one day.

I'd noticed that the condition for mastering magic was found not in the number of *days* spent on practice but in the number of *times* the spell had been activated. For the ordinary mage who couldn't cast multiple spells at once, the two were practically one and the same, as they could only practice and activate one at a time.

However, I had the multicasting technique I learned from my teacher. With an aria, I could now reach the eighth step on the prime number stairway, meaning I could cast nineteen spells at once. That was how I simultaneously charged up fifteen Teleports over three days and activated all of them in succession. What would've normally taken forty-five days, or approximately a month and a half's worth of experience, was compressed into just three.

And now, I could even activate another fifteen in one day, meaning I could gain what was originally three months' worth of experience in just four days. At the rate I was going, in just one month—no, the efficiency would keep increasing, so in just another *week*—I would completely master Teleport.

Wait, would it be faster if I dedicated these fifteen charges to increasing my mana first so that I can level up to casting twenty-three spells at once? They do say that slow and steady wins the race...

I groaned as I weighed my options. This was a tough choice.

Just then, I heard Lardon laughing in my mind. "What's up?" I asked, wondering what had this dragon so pleased this time.

"I was thinking that you are a rather interesting human."

"Why?"

"There is no shortage of powerful humans who flaunt their strengths. However, humans who seek only to cultivate their power into greater power are few and far between."

"Okay..."

"You are an interesting human."

Lardon kept saying the same thing over and over. *I guess it's a compliment...?*

Shrugging it off, I went ahead and chanted an aria to start stocking up on those fifteen Teleports.

In the end, I chose to go slow and steady. I'd thought to finish mastering Teleport before anything else as a start—but I immediately ran into an obstacle.

As anyone would expect of an advanced spell, Teleport consumed quite a bit of mana, and as I was now, I didn't have enough to cast the next batch of fifteen spells till the end. The activation time would definitely shorten once I did, sure, but then I'd want to keep charging up the next batch right away, and it just felt like such a waste of time to wait for my mana to recharge naturally.

Thus, I decided to go all in.

I canceled all fifteen charges of Teleport and instead summoned a lot of Gnomes and Salamanders, then had them gather the dirt around lekukro grass throughout the woods and process it into lekukro crystals. These crystals could instantly replenish any mana I'd consumed, which amounted to far more than the mana I'd put in to process it.

After producing enough crystals to supply a hundred charges of Teleport, I used them to recover my mana and once again worked toward activating the next wave of spells.

I waited for one whole day, up until the morning sun had risen into the sky, before I once again teleported to random spots all over the woods. Then, based on the flow of mana, I roughly calculated the time I needed to activate Teleport.

"Ohhh."

It had shortened so much that I couldn't help the gasp spilling from my lips. With just fifteen casts, what previously took me a whole day would now take just two hours. I used my processed crystals to recover my mana and started charging up for another round, and in a couple of hours, I was aimlessly teleporting again.

A second calculation revealed that those two hours had been further shortened to fifteen minutes. It now took me significantly less time to cast, though there was still much room for improvement. I could definitely use it for travel, but if I ever needed to escape or evacuate someone else in the middle of a battle, then fifteen minutes was far too long. Fatal, even.

That being the case, I replenished my mana with the crystals, charged up spells, waited fifteen minutes, and repeatedly teleported again.

Third calculation... It's down to one minute!

One minute made it just barely usable in battle, although I could see things turning into a *"I'll hold them off! Hurry!"* kind of situation, so I recharged my mana and spells for what was likely the last time. A minute passed by in no time, and I began teleporting right away.

"Yes...!"

At long last, I fully mastered Teleport. Gone were the days of stocking up

fifteen charges. Now, I could teleport the very moment I wanted to. Although I took things slow and even made two detours along the way, I was able to master Teleport in just one day when it would’ve normally taken half a year.

.45

Having fully mastered Teleport before noon, I went out to the carpentry guild in town ahead of schedule. I would've had to push this off till tomorrow had I not mastered the spell so soon, but there turned out to be no need for any delay.

Unlike the hunter guild, which was furnished like a tavern where hunters could gather to relax and drink, the carpentry guild looked more like an ordinary shop. While hunters lived off of their earnings each day, carpenters mostly took on long-term projects that would keep them occupied for a while. They had no culture of gathering together, leading to this style of interior for their guild.

Making my way inside, I found that there wasn't a single soul to be found, save for just one elderly man standing behind the counter. I assumed him to be the guild master and headed right his way.

"Well, well. What business does the young master of Hamilton have with us today?"

"You know me?"

"Why of course. I have had the honor of repairing the Hamilton manor several times now," said the old man as he rubbed his hands together, his lips curling upward in a blatant business smile.

He must've seen me a few times on one of those visits, then. Of course, I had no such recollection. The manor hadn't been repaired ever since I took over this fifth son's body.

"So..." the guild master continued. "As for why you have personally come here..."

I laid out my request to him: I wanted a carpenter's help to build a village from scratch on a certain land. After hearing me out, the guild master looked rather conflicted.

“You can’t?” I asked.

“No,” he grudgingly admitted. “Carpenters do not tend to stray far from their towns, you see.”

“Really now?”

“The carpentry styles vary between regions, but also...”

“Also...?”

“The longer we stay in the same place, the more jobs we get for not only construction but also repairs.”

Oh, right. He did mention that he was in charge of our manor’s repairs. “So our manor,” I started, “you’re also the one who...?”

“Indeed. I had the honor of building it when I was young.”

“I see...” I hesitated for a moment before asking again, “Is there really no way?”

“My deepest apologies...”

“I get it. Sorry for the outlandish request.”

I bade the guild master goodbye and left the carpentry guild. *Now then, what to do... I was hoping to find one in the carpentry guild, but now...*

“Baron Liam.”

“Hm?” I heard someone call out to me, so I spun around to see a man standing politely, his gaze clearly on me. “You’re...”

“I am a messenger sent by Her Highness. She wishes to meet you posthaste.”

“Her Highness...” He must be talking about Princess Scarlet. Now that I thought about it, she just ran off somewhere after learning about Lardon. “Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Lead the way.”

The messenger guided me to James’s mansion, a rather familiar location to

me by now. This time around, the temporary resident himself wasn't present, and only Princess Scarlet was waiting in the room.

"So you've come. Good. You may sit."

"Thank you... Um, why have you called me so suddenly?"

"I wish to ask you something. Has the evil—I mean, the *dragon* told you of a 'promised land' before?"

She corrected herself when she was about to call Lardon an evil dragon. *Has her impression changed? Well, before that...*

"A promised land?"

"Indeed."

"Er... Well, I've heard of a *sealed* land. Maybe that's it?" Thinking back to recent events related to Lardon, I thought that the sealed land might just be what Princess Scarlet was talking about.

"A sealed land?" she repeated.

"Yeah. Would you like to see it?"

"Do you know its location?"

"I do," I said with a nod. "Teleport!"

There and then, I cast my now-mastered teleportation spell and brought Princess Scarlet to the sealed land.

"Wh-What in the world?!" she exclaimed, greatly flustered upon being suddenly transported into the middle of a vast grassland.

"Teleport," I explained. "It's an advanced divine magic spell that can instantly bring the targets to any place the caster has been to."

"Is that true?! I've heard of the name but...I never quite imagined it to be real..."

Oh? So she knew that Teleport was a divine magic spell.

"That over there is the sealed land," I added, pointing toward the abundant expanse behind her.

Princess Scarlet spun around and trailed her gaze over it for a silent moment before she gasped. “W-Wait! The shape of that mountain in the distance and the sun’s position... Is this not where Gallar Valley should be?”

Was that the name of that cliff? “Well, turns out that was a facade, while this new land here is real. Apparently, Lardon sealed this land and just made it look like a cliff.”

Princess Scarlet looked too stunned for words. “A-As I thought,” she mumbled eventually, “this *is* the promised land...”

First, the “evil dragon” was the “divine dragon” to the pixies, and then the dragon’s “sealed land” was what our kingdom had been calling the “promised land.” Things weren’t what they seemed—I was starting to realize that now.

“Actually, I want to develop this land,” I said after a while, piquing the princess’s interest. “I’m going to start with a village. It’ll be for the elves that Lardon left in my care.”

“Elves?! Goodness...”

“Unfortunately, I can’t find a carpenter.”

Princess Scarlet said nothing as she stared at the promised land with a grim expression. After a while, she turned to face me. “Can you not manage something using magic?”

“I haven’t learned any construction-related magic... Hm?”

“What is it?”

“Magic...”

That gave me pause. Most carpenters wouldn’t want to stray too far from where they had established their roots, and I didn’t want to force anyone either. However, I did have one spell that might just do the trick.

Slowly, I took a breath and asked, “Your Highness, do you know any skilled carpenters? Please introduce me to one, even if they’re likely to refuse my request. All that matters is that they are skilled.”

“A skilled carpenter, hm?”

Princess Scarlet gave it some thought. As soon as the topic shifted away from Lardon's sealed land, she regained her composure and observed me with a calculating gaze.

"Very well," she eventually said, agreeing to my request.

The next day, I entered the usual room in James's mansion and saw Princess Scarlet with a man. He was incredibly short, had a wild beard, and housed sharpness behind his gaze. The boulder-like man seemed to be brimming with strength.

"Let me introduce you," the princess began. "This is Gorak, our court engineer. As you can see, he is a dwarf."

"A dwarf?!" I exclaimed in shock. I'd only ever heard about them. I never thought I'd meet one in real life.

"I came 'cause Her Highness kept insisting," he grumbled. "Whatcha want from me, lad? I'm a busy man, so hurry and spit it out."

"You're busy?"

"I'm building His Majesty's new villa."

"I see."

"Just as you requested, I brought someone who is skilled but may not accept your request..." Princess Scarlet trailed off, the question, *"But what now?"* going unspoken but all over her face.

Gorak warned, "Mind you, I ain't becoming your familiar."

"Then you don't need to worry. Let me begin." I raised my hand with my palm facing the dwarf, making him tense up. Regardless, I went ahead and chanted, "Contract Summoning: Form Contract."

The magic's light enveloped Gorak's figure before dissipating.

"Contract Summoning: Gorak." Eager to test it out, I summoned Gorak's clone in front of the original, leaving him sputtering in shock. "I will borrow this one."

"I see you've thought this through," Princess Scarlet mused, both her voice

and gaze tinged with praise.

Now that I could summon the clone of a dwarf who worked as a court engineer, I could move ahead with my plans.

Looks like we'll be able to build that village after all.

.46

I teleported back to the sealed land and immediately summoned Gorak's clone, who got right to making a town with the elves. He looked like a dwarf at best and a grimy old man at worst, but since I did summon him right in front of them, the elves all readily obeyed his orders. From a distance, I could see how the elves were now moving more cohesively and with purpose, a huge improvement from how they worked by themselves at the start.

They hammered stakes into the ground and went around collecting materials. Even through the eyes of an amateur, I could tell they were working well. Relieved, I decided to leave them to it and turned to the princess I had teleported back with me.

She was looking around restlessly. She always behaved so pompously whenever we were in the mansion but started acting weird whenever we came here.

"Are you okay, Your Highness?"

The princess didn't respond and instead stared hard at me. Just as I was wondering what the problem was, she nervously spoke up like a maiden about to confess her love. "I wish to ask the dragon, Lord Lardon, a question."

"Huh?" I shrunk back at the intensity of her gaze, but I calmed down after realizing that she wasn't addressing me. "Oh... Okay."

"Is this place truly the promised land?"

"I made no such promise with any human."

Princess Scarlet couldn't hear Lardon's voice, so I passed the message on to her. Her face fell in disappointment. "I...see."

"I believe there's no reason for you to feel disappointed," I told her, which she returned with a curious look. "I've pretty much figured out how this dragon here talks from the time we've spent together. Just because Lardon didn't make any promise doesn't mean this isn't the right place."

Princess Scarlet paused, then gasped.

I nodded at her realization. “Until now, every little thing involving Lardon has been named and labeled in many different ways. This might be a place that humans have just one-sidedly declared as the promised land.”

“Indeed...” The light returned to Princess Scarlet’s eyes, washing away her previous disappointment.

An amused chuckle resounded in my mind. I suppose Lardon somehow found the whole series of events entertaining, even my conversation with Princess Scarlet just now.

Ignoring that, I asked the princess, “What will you do if this place *is* the promised land?”

She hesitated for a moment before seemingly resolving herself. “According to the legends,” she began, “when the end days come, humanity shall be saved from destruction and led to a new paradise known as the promised land.”

“The end days? Destruction? What an ominous legend...”

“That is all we know, as the details have not been passed down. For better or for worse, it is considered a legend—nothing more, nothing less.”

“Well, I can see why.” Nobody would believe such a story.

“However,” Princess Scarlet continued, “the dragon turned out to be real, and this land, too, appeared at such a time. So that legend... It may very well be true.”

I looked inward for an answer. “Is it, Lardon?”

The only response I got was an ambiguous chuckle.

“Your Highness, is there anything more to that legend?”

Princess Scarlet took a deep breath before nodding firmly. “There is,” she admitted, then took one ring out of her pocket.

“What’s this?”

“It is called the Key of Fate.”

“That’s a bit too on the nose,” I deadpanned. It was enough to convince me

the ring was certainly connected to all this.

“As for how they are related...” Princess Scarlet went on. “I do not know.”

“May I see that?”

With her permission, I received the ring, giving it a good look and feeling it between my fingers—but suddenly, my hand started glowing!

“Wh-What?!”

“This is...” I mumbled in shock. “My crest is reacting—no, *resonating* with it?”

Without warning, the dragon crest on the back of my hand as well as the ring began emitting a blinding light. All around us, the ground trembled with a loud, rumbling sound.

“An earthquake?”

“No, look there!”

I pointed in the distance, to where the expansive grassland began sloping down past a certain point. I ran off in a flurry with Princess Scarlet hurrying after me, taking a peek down past the boundary.

“The land, it’s...floating?”

“That is Gallar Valley...” Princess Scarlet mumbled in a daze as my jaw dropped. “The land that was slotted into the valley is rising up?”

The words of disbelief I had at the tip of my tongue withered and died. It sounded so nonsensical, so absurd, yet the scene before our very eyes was exactly as she had described. The sealed land that had been perfectly slotted into the valley below was now hovering in the air.

The gigantic island peaked at about twenty meters above the surface. At that point, it slowly sank back down and, with a thunderous rumbling, perfectly slotted back into the gap it had emerged from.

“This truly is the promised land.”

“Seems like it,” was all I could say after a while.

This land here turned out to be pretty amazing. I looked at the ring. *So...this is something like a grimoire. No, I guess it’s closer to a magicpedia.* I infused it

with some of my mana and tried to make the land float again, but...

“Oh.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t have enough mana. I can make it float, but with my mana as it is now, it’ll take me a year to make it happen.”

I could clearly tell now that I was better at reading the flow of mana: this island was able to float thanks to magic, and what made it float just now was the power that Lardon had left behind in the ring. With my power alone, it would take me a year.

Also, this thing couldn’t float without Lardon’s power specifically. I quickly realized I *could* make this island float since Lardon was inside me—though that would take me a year—while an ordinary human and their mana wouldn’t do the trick no matter how much they tried.

“Is that true?!”

Princess Scarlet rounded on me, but then, out of nowhere, she knelt and bowed her head.

“Wh-What’s the matter, Your Highness?”

“O master of the promised land.”

“Er...” *Is that what I am now...?*

Princess Scarlet thought that this was the promised land, and since I was the one who undid its seal and made it float, I guess that did in a way make me the master of this place.

“Please establish a country here.”

“Huh?”

“A country that will become paradise...” Princess Scarlet stayed on the ground but raised her head, her resolute gaze meeting mine. “I humbly implore you.”

“Oh. Sure.” Damned by my natural inability to say no, I found myself nodding in no time.

“O master of the promised land... I pledge my loyalty to you.” Princess Scarlet,

who had once again dipped her head, was now speaking respectfully to me.

In the distance, I could see the elves panicking. Things had somehow escalated beyond my expectations, but I guess I was going to make my own country right here in this land.

If He Were a King...

“Ms. Jodie! Have you seen Liam?!”

“What’s wrong, Asuna? You look terribly frazzled.”

Jodie was enjoying a nice and relaxing cup of tea in the living room of her own home when Asuna slammed the door open so hard, it seemed like it would smash into pieces against the wall. Despite the threat looming over her poor door’s life, the homeowner herself didn’t so much as flinch.

As she leisurely repeated her question for the girl, Jodie began preparing tea for her as well. “Here you are. Have a drink, dear. It should calm your nerves.”

“Oh, thanks... Wait, no!” For a moment, Asuna nearly let herself be pulled into Jodie’s languid atmosphere before dragging herself back out. “More importantly, have you seen Liam?”

“Liam? No. We haven’t met up recently... Is anything the matter?”

A frustrated groan came out of Asuna’s throat. “How can I contact him?”

“Perhaps you could visit his home—”

“I already did!”

“Oh dear.”

She was so agitated that she interrupted Jodie midsentence. Even Jodie found herself troubled as she placed a hand on her cheek and tilted her head. “What in the world is the problem?”

Asuna responded with a strangled grumble. “Fine, then! Ms. Jodie! Do you have some money?”

“Asuna.”

Jodie looked Asuna straight in the eye. She spoke as softly as ever, but there was now an unmistakable weight to her tone. That finally got Asuna to flinch back with a squeak.

“Explain properly,” Jodie chided.

“S-Sorry... Then come with me, Ms. Jodie. It’ll be faster if you see it in person.”

Jodie silently looked at her before nodding. “Okay, I understand,” she said magnanimously as she stood right up.

The place that Asuna brought her to was a shop in town that handled curios and antiques. The moment they stepped in, the unique scent of aged trinkets assaulted their nostrils.

Asuna made a beeline for the other end of the shop and faced the shopkeeper who was sitting beyond the counter. The bespectacled man in his fifties lazily glanced at Asuna.

“Mister! Show me that thing again!”

“And your money?”

“Show it to her—to Ms. Jodie. She won’t take her money out until she knows it’s real.”

In the end, the shopkeeper relented. “Wait here,” he said, looking very much like he was forced out of his seat as he disappeared into the back of the shop. He soon came back out with a book in hand.

“Ms. Jodie, look!” Asuna exclaimed.

“This is...a grimoire?”

“Right! The one and only ownerless grimoire in this town that we can buy with money! I wanna buy this and give it to Liam!”

“So that’s what this is about...” Jodie smiled fondly. She finally understood the reason behind Asuna’s fervor.

“Just so you know, this ain’t cheap,” said the shopkeeper.

Jodie asked, “How much is it?”

“A thousand Jamille golds.”

“Then we can pay for it.”

“Right?!” Asuna piped in, more passionate than ever now that Jodie was on her side.

“Could we trouble you to reserve it for us?”

“That again? I’ll have you know that folks who want grimoires are a dime a dozen. If you want it, then bring me some cold hard cash right—”

“Used a pacifier until six.”

“Uh?” Asuna blinked, while the shopkeeper tilted his head in confusion—then he jerked back, aghast.

“Wha—?!”

“Wore diapers until ten,” she went on.

“H-Hang on—”

“Wet the bed until twelve—”

“F-Fine, I get it! I’ll reserve it for you! I swear!”

“Thank you, Gole. That’s very sweet of you.”

“You... Who the hell...”

Eyes trembling in fear, the shopkeeper tried to probe Jodie for answers, but she simply kept the bright smile on her lips and offered none. After confirming one more time that he would reserve the grimoire for them, Jodie left the shop with Asuna and journeyed through the streets, walking side by side.

“What did I just witness?”

“We’re acquainted,” Jodie explained. “He didn’t recognize me with how I look now, it seems.”

“I get it! So that’s why you have blackmail material.” Asuna hummed as she finally understood. “Now all I have to do is find Liam and retrieve the money he’s holding on to for me!”

Jodie tittered. “You really do like Liam, don’t you, Asuna?”

“HUH?! Th-Th-Tha-That’s—”

“A tad too much stuttering, that’s what. You’ve practically admitted to it

already.”

Asuna groaned weakly. “S-Since when did you notice?”

“From the start.”

“HUUUH?!”

“It’s fine, dear. Liam hasn’t noticed, nor will I tell him. Just go at your own pace.”

“Ugh... Th-Thank...you?”

“You are very welcome.”

As Asuna and Jodie chatted and went by, the sight of them, who had turned into exquisite beauties from the effects of their familiar contracts, walking together was enough to draw the gazes of the passing men. The ladies themselves remained impervious to the attention and simply strolled down the streets as casually as ever.

“Still, I wonder where Liam is and what he’s up to.”

“He may be busy with some form of work.”

“Another huge monster hunt, maybe?”

“Or perhaps treasure hunting while investigating some ancient ruins?”

“Ooh, I can see it.”

Their conversation blossomed around the topic of Liam. They had both accompanied him on several commissions for the hunter guild, so they were well-acquainted with his strength and highly respected him. Thus, the scale of their ideas, too, gradually grew larger and larger.

“Or maybe he’s out there building a country somewhere!”

“Now that’s a bit much,” Jodie mused.

“Yeah, he wouldn’t go that far,” Asuna agreed.

Laughter filled the air between them.

“Say, Ms. Jodie.”

“What is it, dear?”

“Do you also like Liam?”

There was a pause before she smiled. “Hee hee,” was all she said without giving a clear response.

“I think it’s fine,” Asuna replied anyway. “See, my family was part of the nobility up until ten generations ago, so I know that the men can have a few wives for themselves.”

“That may be true, but Liam is the fifth son of his family, so *he* can’t.”

“Ah... Right, he’s the fifth...” Asuna clicked her tongue as if the fact had offended her. “It’d be a different story if he ever made his own country and became the king, though. Not that it’ll ever happen.”

“Indeed, a harem would be a given for a king. But it would never happen, true.”

That was how those two brought an end to that topic.

However, the two girls didn’t know—in a distant land, Liam was, in fact, being implored to be king.

And when they found out, they...

Afterword

Hello, everyone! Nice to meet you, or maybe it's "long time no see" for some? I'm Nazuna Miki, a Taiwanese light novel author. I sincerely thank you for picking up a copy of *I'm a Noble on the Brink of Ruin, So I Might as Well Try Mastering Magic Volume 1*.

There was a time in my childhood when I really wanted the ESP Training Box from Doraemon's secret gadgets. If you practiced with this gadget, you could gain a psychic ability but would need around three years to fully master it. It takes ten minutes to activate it on the first try, a time that shortens as you keep practicing. However, if you quit halfway, the psychic ability disappears.

As a child, I simply loved how this gadget worked and wanted it so badly. Now, I rekindled that childhood spirit within me and poured it all into this work. Thus, the method for learning magic in this work is practically the same as with the ESP Training Box: one needs to diligently practice using a grimoire in order to master the spells.

The story itself, meanwhile, starts with this premise: the protagonist reincarnates into the fifth son of a noble family, has talent for magic, uses his wealth as a noble to gather one valuable grimoire after the other, and learns a whole lot of magic. Following that, it's a matter of learning, casting, and succeeding in magic. The story will continue developing with this as the focal concept, so I would be delighted if you could continue watching over Liam from here on out.

Now, a word of thanks:

To Kabotya, the illustrator, thank you very much!

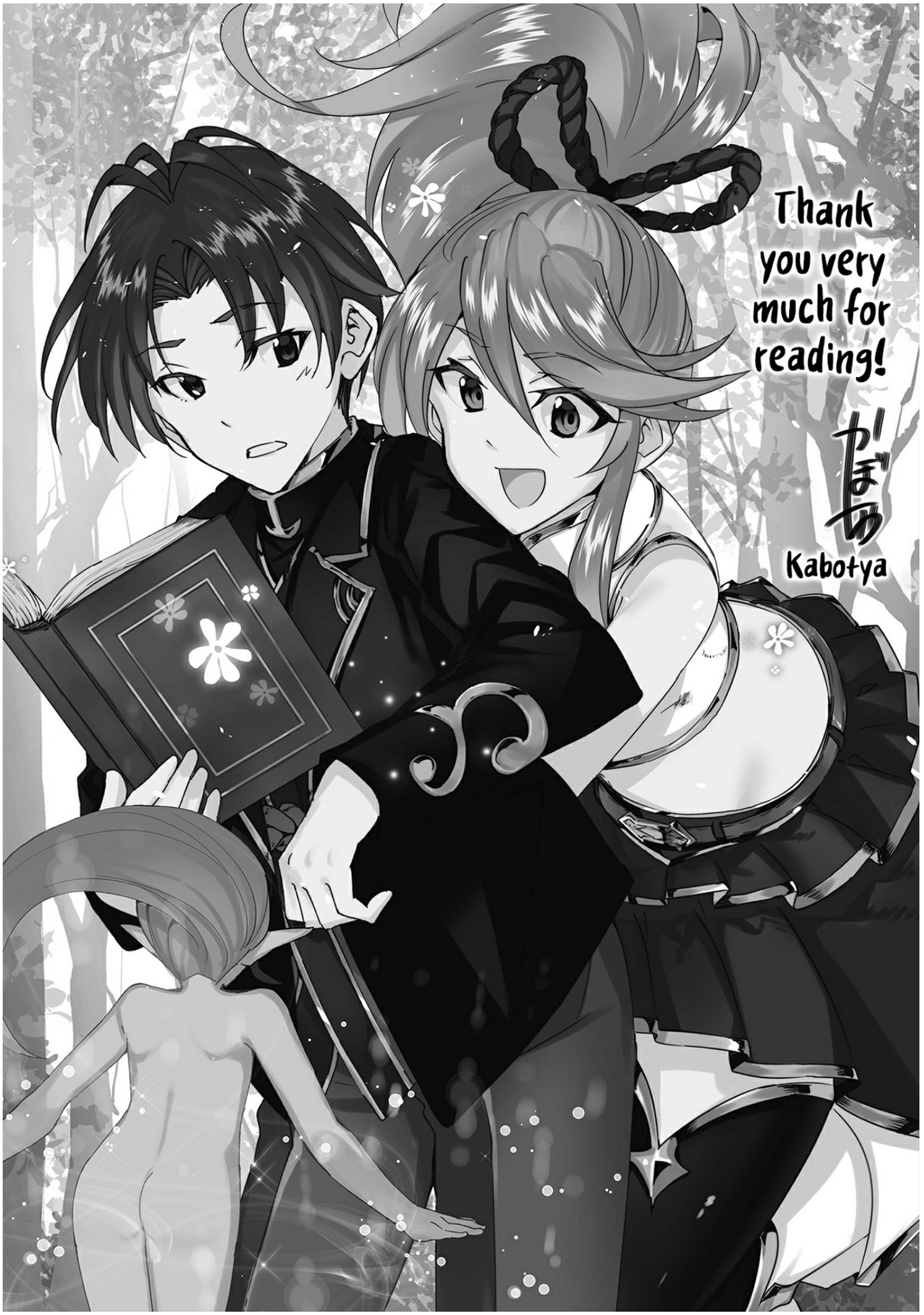
To Takakura and TO Books for giving me this opportunity once again, and to the readers for picking up a copy and reading this book, I give you all my heartfelt gratitude.

I will now set my pen down while praying that I can deliver the next volume to

everyone.

Sincerely,

Nazuna, December 2019

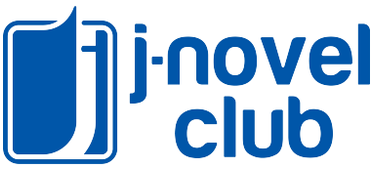

Thank you very much for reading!
かぼや
Kabotya

Liam Hamilton

Normal Mode
Focus Mode /
Casting Magic Mode

Asuna

Jodie



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

I’m a Noble on the Brink of Ruin, So I Might as Well Try Mastering Magic: Volume 1

by Nazuna Miki

Translated by Joey Antonio Edited by Christian Jay Aniz

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Nazuna Miki Illustrations by Kabotya

Cover illustration by Kabotya

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by TO Books, Inc., Tokyo.

This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Inc., Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author’s intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: April 2024