

Nekomata Nuko

illustration ▶ Cut

# FROM Desk Job TO DEATH BEAM

1.

In Another World  
with My Almighty Lasers



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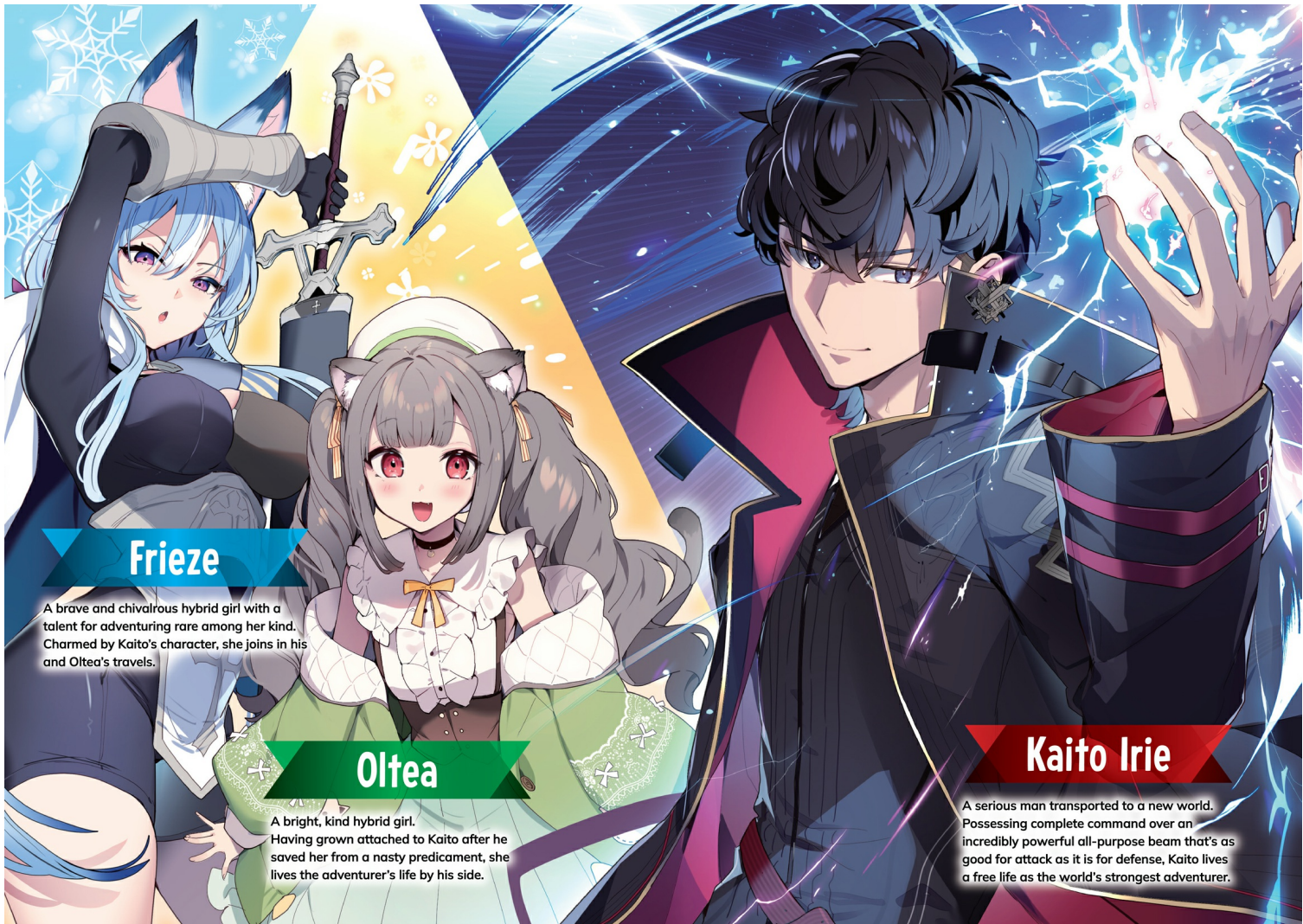




The moment the sound left my mouth,  
a thin blue-and-white beam shot from  
my palms.

The **massive laser** completely engulfed the wood golem.





Frieze

A brave and chivalrous hybrid girl with a talent for adventuring rare among her kind. Charmed by Kaito's character, she joins in his and Oltea's travels.

Oltea

A bright, kind hybrid girl. Having grown attached to Kaito after he saved her from a nasty predicament, she lives the adventurer's life by his side.

Kaito Irie

A serious man transported to a new world. Possessing complete command over an incredibly powerful all-purpose beam that's as good for attack as it is for defense, Kaito lives a free life as the world's strongest adventurer.



"You get better at this every day,  
don't you..."

"But..."

Do you only want to touch my ears?

Do you maybe want to touch, like...

my tail?"





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## Prologue: Three Words

“Mr. Kaito Irie, please remain calm and listen. You’ve just been in an accident and, unfortunately, have passed away,” a blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman told me in a comforting voice. She narrowed her eyes in an expression of pity.

I was in a pure-white room so vast that it had no discernible end. It was completely empty except for the two of us. Though the space was barren, a divine aura radiated from the woman and caused the sense of emptiness to fall away. Resplendent golden hair hung almost to her feet and her soft skin was loosely wrapped in a robe. Wings like those of an angel grew from her back. She had an air of mystery about her.

“Who...are you?”

“I am a goddess. And this place is what humans refer to as the afterlife.”

“I see. I really must be dead, then.”

“You’re hardly fazed, are you?” she said, a little taken aback.

The goddess seemed to think I was unusual in that regard. Certainly distress would have been the normal reaction to suddenly learning you were dead, but I had already accepted the situation. My only real concern was whether I was in Heaven or Hell. It didn’t really look like Hell, but neither did it match my image of Heaven exactly. Then again, Heaven and Hell were both just products of the human imagination—perhaps all people, both good and bad, came to this place in the end.

“No, both Heaven and Hell do exist,” said the goddess, answering my question though it had not yet left my mouth.

“Can you read my mind?” I asked.

“Yes. I am a goddess, after all,” she said with a self-satisfied smile. The fact that she’d demonstrated supernatural powers meant it must be true. “Under normal circumstances, when you die, you are sent to a place where souls congregate, and your ultimate destination, be it Heaven or Hell, is decided



based upon your actions during your mortal life. But in your case...you were specially summoned to my domain.”

Her “domain” was so vacant that even a minimalist would have found it a bit extreme.

Except for its massive size, this wasn’t so different from my own room, but at least I had a full set of furniture. It was difficult, anyhow, to imagine a goddess soundly sleeping on a bed like a regular person.

“No, gods, too, sleep on beds,” she said. *Oh, all right, so she does sleep in a bed like a regular person.* “For the time being, I have used my divine power to render my bed invisible. That’s the only reason you can’t see it. I thought it would be only right to clean up the room after sending for a new guest.”

“Boy, that’s a pretty convenient power,” I said.

The goddess flashed another smug smile in reply. She cleared her throat with a small “*Ahem*,” then resumed a meek, reserved countenance.

“Mr. Kaito Irie... I must confess I’ve made an error and done something rather inexcusable to you.”

“But I don’t remember anything inexcusable being done to me,” I said.

“It’s no wonder you don’t recall. You see, it happened in just an instant.”

“It did?”

“Yes... Are you able to recollect the cause of your death?”

“No, I was here before I knew it,” I said. “The last thing I remember before coming here is my vision going completely white.” It felt like it had happened only moments ago. Just like always, I had woken up to my 6 a.m. alarm, downed a light breakfast while absentmindedly watching the morning news, and left for work in the rain when I was suddenly enveloped in light. There had been roaring thunder, so given those conditions, it might have been natural to think I’d been struck by lightning, but...

“That’s right. You were struck by lightning, at which point your life came to an end.”

“That’s...a pretty unusual way to die, isn’t it?” I’d once heard somewhere that



dying by lightning strike was even rarer than winning the lottery, but I guess I'd drawn the winning ticket. A poor use of my luck. It didn't quite feel real, and I found myself talking about it as if it had happened to someone else.

The goddess, on the contrary, frowned as though the misfortune were her own and said with evident distress, "To be honest, you were not supposed to die yet."

"I was supposed to be miraculously spared at the last minute? Is that what you're saying?"

"No, it was an instantaneous death—there wouldn't have been time for a miracle."

"So I was hit by a bolt of lightning powerful enough to kill me instantly, but there aren't any wounds on my body." I was in a suit with a stylish, crisp jacket and slim-fitting slacks. Even though the black fabric kept dirt from showing, it couldn't have hidden the mark left by a lightning strike. Despite that, there was no evidence of any such thing—even the watch on my wrist was still quietly ticking.

"That is because you now exist only as a soul. Souls cannot be wounded. Additionally, your soul mirrors your appearance in the moment just prior to death."

"I see. Back to what you were saying a moment ago, that I was 'not supposed to die yet'... What do you mean?"

"Well," the goddess said, faltering, "it was my own mistake."

"Your mistake?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes. My intention was to make a rain of blessings fall, but I inadvertently called down lightning instead... I am truly sorry," she said, bowing her head deeply.

"There's no need to apologize. What's done is done. Besides, everyone makes mistakes."

"I appreciate you saying so, but..." she began, then paused. "Your death was due to my own negligence. It wouldn't be right not to take charge of your



aftercare.”

“Meaning?”

The goddess’s face became serious, as if to indicate that she was now going to get right to her reason for bringing me here. “Normally, you would go on to Heaven or Hell, but the circumstances being what they are, a different set of two choices has been prepared for you. You are to select between Heaven and reincarnation.”

While I wasn’t guilty of any particularly horrible sins, I hadn’t done many good deeds either, and going to Hell hadn’t seemed out of the question. With Hell having been removed from the pool of options, I was really off the hook.

“I should also mention that due to the risk of you spreading the word about the afterlife among mortals, you cannot live another life in your own world. In the event that you choose reincarnation, you shall begin life on a planet other than Earth. Another world, as they say!”

The goddess then began to enumerate the charms of this other world. She explained that, just like Earth, it was quite populous. Rather than science, magic had developed. It was a peaceful world where humans fought no wars among themselves. It was full of fresh, delicious food.

“A peaceful world sounds great.”

“Doesn’t it? Also, just between us, Heaven isn’t all that fun anyways. Naturally, deceased elders make up the majority of the population; there isn’t much in the way of amusement; the sun is always up, so it’s difficult to get good sleep; and everyone there is a good, virtuous person, so there’s hardly any excitement,” she said. For some reason, as she bad-mouthed Heaven, she was staring right at me with her piercing blue eyes. “So, what will you do? Will you live a thrilling, fun life in another world, or would you rather while away the days feigning interest in the long-winded stories of the old geezers in Heaven? I believe the choice is clear.”

“I’d like to go to Heaven, please.”

“Understood—reincarnation it is!”

“No, I said Heaven.”



“Reincarnation?”

“Heaven.”

“Re...incarnation?”

“Are there really two choices or are you just pretending?”

“No, no. A goddess like myself would never force you into anything. You are free to choose between Heaven and reincarnation.”

“Well, in that case, I choose Heaven.”

“So...reincarnation is all right, then?” she asked.

*So there really was only one choice!*

It was like when the boss says you can go home at the appointed time but then, the moment you get up to do so, makes a sarcastic comment so you end up staying late anyways! This situation was the same: there was an illusion of choice but only one real option existed.

“Why won’t you let me go to Heaven?” I asked.

The goddess awkwardly turned her eyes away. “Well, to be honest, it’s because that would bring the mistake I made to light. If my superior finds out, it could affect my assessment,” she said.

“So even goddesses have workplace assessments, huh?”

“We do. I’m completely off course for a promotion. And beyond that, the boss is my father, so I get scolded even in private,” she said, on the verge of tears. I couldn’t help but feel kind of sorry for her. Even so, Heaven’s lack of appeal didn’t exactly make me want to reincarnate instead. “Why do you hate the idea of reincarnation so much?” she asked.

“I guess it’s just that,” I said, searching for the words, “I don’t enjoy being alive anyways.”

In twenty-nine years of life, I had not even once found joy in living. I’d come from an apathetic father and a mother overly concerned with my education. As far back as I could remember, my mom had told me that if I studied hard and got into a good company, happiness would come of its own accord. I had



received a so-called “gifted” education and had gone to cram school after my regular classes. I had no free time, wasn’t allowed to make friends, and wasn’t let anywhere near entertainment of any sort. I wasted my days doing nothing but studying. When it came time to pick a career, there wasn’t anything in particular that I wanted to do, so I chose something based on salary alone. I had harbored a faint hope that the happiness mom spoke of would come, but, in the end, nothing of the sort had appeared.

Back and forth between home and work—day after day had passed with nothing else to speak of. I’d tried to find hobbies, but nothing had caught my interest. On my days off, unable to think of anything else, I had done nothing but vacantly putter around the house. Not knowing what to do with the money I earned, I had just set it aside and let it accumulate.

Even if I could start life over from the beginning, as long as I retained the same memories and personality, I’d end up recreating the same dull succession of days. The prospect of reincarnating with an entirely new personality was somewhat promising, but that would be no different from death. Given a choice between death and Heaven, I had to pick the latter. I could accept an unexpected death, but a death of my own volition?

“In the next world, you could find something you enjoy and live a pleasurable life. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“It’s easy to say that, but I don’t think I *could* find something I enjoy. I’m the kind of person who simply isn’t interested in anything.”

“That’s only what you think. If you could look deep inside your heart, you could find what you truly love—something you just don’t know about yet,” the goddess said. She clapped her hands and smiled brightly. “Let’s conduct a psychological test, shall we? That way we can discover what passions lie deep within your unconscious mind!”

“But if I’m reincarnated from scratch, won’t all that be washed away anyways?”

“Don’t worry! You have my guarantee that your next life will be a happy and fulfilling one. That being said, if you genuinely don’t want to reincarnate, then how about transmigration?”

“What’s the difference?”

“With reincarnation, you’d start as a baby and do your whole life over again. With transmigration, you’d retain your original body and start a new life. That is to say, you’d have fewer years remaining. So, reincarnation or transmigration? Which would you prefer?”

Suddenly, Heaven had disappeared from the list of choices! I’d have to go with transmigration... When I told her, the goddess smiled sweetly.

“Well then, with that taken care of, let’s begin the psychological test!” Her voice was bubbly and cheerful, as if psychological tests genuinely excited her. The next moment, a pure-white presentation board appeared in the goddess’s hand. “In a moment, numerous letters will appear on this whiteboard. From those, the first three words that you see will become the things that are indispensable to your life—your passions,” she said.

So, for example, if the first thing I saw was “hot springs,” then that would mean that hot springs would become my new interest. Even if I didn’t particularly like hot springs, I could tell myself that I did, take a tour of several of them, and perhaps the day would come when the interest became genuine. I had been unable to find anything I cared about on my own. To be forcefully informed, “Actually, you like *this!*” might be just what I needed.

I still wanted to go to Heaven, but given the circumstances, transmigration was also viable. Thinking with uncharacteristic positivity, I watched the letters appear on the whiteboard. I stared intently and searched for words.

...

*Collection.*

The first word I found was “collection.”

I hadn’t been allowed to do anything fun as a child and had no hobbies or interests, so collection was a distant, unfamiliar concept. There wasn’t much I had ever wanted. I had just saved money and let the bland days pass me by. I’d seen television programs about people who gathered things like records, shoes, and figures—collectors, they were called. Unlike me, they always seemed to be leading fun lives. If “collection” was my word, then perhaps, by buying things at



random, I could find out what I wanted and begin to lead a meaningful life as a collector.

...

*Animal ears.*

The next phrase I found was “animal ears.” Did that mean that I should get a pet? I wouldn’t exactly have called myself an animal lover, but I didn’t hate them either. I had never given it much thought before, but having a pet could both make a big difference in your lifestyle and facilitate new relationships. It was the kind of thing that could truly change your life.

*Laser beam.*

The final phrase I found was “laser beam.” I didn’t understand that one at all.



ANIMAL  
EARS

COLLECTION

LASER  
BEAMS



“And we’re done!” Just when I’d found the third phrase, the whiteboard vanished into thin air. “According to the results of our psychological test, we are able to determine that the three things most vital to your life are collection, animal ears, and laser beams!”

“One of those things is not like the others!”

“Hmm? Which one?”

“Laser beams, obviously! *Laser beams!*”

“Ah, of course. Humans can’t shoot laser beams, can they? There’s no need to worry, though! By the power vested in me as a goddess, I’ll reconstruct your body so that you’ll be able to fire laser beams to your heart’s content!”

“It has nothing to do with needing a new body—I don’t want to shoot laser beams!”

“Really, you needn’t worry! My divine powers are just as capable of solving that issue. I’ll make sure that your new form also lets you be more honest about what you *really* want to do.”

“Wait, isn’t that just brainwashing?” I asked. Was this really where the study of the subconscious led?

“All right, then let’s begin the process of reconstructing your body!”

“Wait! Before that,” I interjected, “I have one request.”

“Yes?”

“I wouldn’t have any idea what to do with just a regular laser beam. Can I get a practical beam, one that I can use for purposes other than just shooting stuff?” To stave off boredom after joining the workforce, I had escaped into novels, movies, and other kinds of stories whenever I got the chance. Most of the laser beams I’d encountered in fiction were used for special moves in combat. If I suddenly gained a power like that, I’d have absolutely nothing to use it for. Then again, maybe I could at least find *some* way to apply it to my own circumstances. Just as the technology underlying the military radar had eventually contributed to the invention of the microwave, my laser beam might prove helpful if I could find a way to use it for peaceful ends.

“Of course! That’s no problem. You’d get bored real quick if all you could do was fire the same old beam. Having all kinds of different ones at your disposal will be a lot more fun. There’ll be enough variety for even you to enjoy the laser beam life! All right, let’s get to it!”

The goddess clapped her hands.

My whole body began to glow as the heat of passion surged up from deep within me. As the rush of energy subsided like rippling water returning to stillness, the goddess smiled gently at me. “And with that,” she said, “your eyes have been opened to your three powers. The power to collect with real enthusiasm, the power to deeply love animal ears, and the power to fire laser beams.”

“To be honest, I still don’t feel any different...”

“When you arrive in your new world, you’ll feel the difference immediately. You’ll have no trouble adapting to your new home. I’ve even given you proficiency in the language! Everything is taken care of, so make sure you enjoy yourself, okay?”

The next instant, a geometric pattern emerged around my feet.

“Mr. Kaito Irie, I wish you all the best in your new life,” said the goddess. I was once again enveloped in a dazzling light, and the curtain lifted on my second life.



## Act 1: Beam Man

When my vision cleared, I found myself standing beneath a blue sky punctuated by clusters of gently drifting clouds. A dry wind blew, kicking up puffs of dust. A forest was visible in the distance, but my immediate surroundings were barren. A desolate mountain loomed nearby, and boulders were scattered across the ground. Back in Japan, this kind of place would have had a sign up to warn people about falling rocks.

“Is this some kind of abandoned mine?” I wondered aloud. The entrance to a mine shaft was visible on the face of the mountain. Judging by the rust on the mine carts and the decayed state of the wooden structures around the entrance, it must have been some years since the site fell into disuse. All around the area were timber huts where, perhaps, workers had once rested. The number of buildings suggested that quite a few people had worked on the excavation. Despite the worksite having long since gone dark, there could be a town nearby where the miners had gathered.

Even if there were only a few residents, I could get someone to point me toward a larger city. People in a small village would probably keep a conspicuous stranger like me at arm’s length—they might not even let me in. A proper metropolis, on the other hand? Even a drifter wouldn’t have any trouble slipping in and finding work.

I didn’t have any concrete plans for my life in this new world yet, but I knew that if I didn’t find some work and a base of operations, I’d just end up dead in a ditch somewhere.

“Well then,” I sighed. “I suppose—”

With a thump, a pebble landed at my feet. When I traced its likely trajectory, my eyes fell on one of the huts about twenty meters away. A hand extended from within; the body to which it was attached was obscured behind the half-open door. After a moment of confusion, I recognized its subtle motion: the hand was beckoning me. Whoever was inside seemed to have business with

me, but I knew that I couldn't approach just like that. This was, after all, an abandoned mine. It wouldn't be the first cave system to double as a bandit stronghold.

*Then again, brigands usually act in groups*, I reflected. It was possible I was up against a lone wolf, but if that were the case, I couldn't see why they would make themselves known to me. Surely, in a one-on-one ambush, the element of surprise was better preserved.

The way they were moving their hand to get my attention was frantic, almost desperate. They didn't seem like a mugger, and one way or another, I had to talk to someone to find my way to civilization. I remained cautious but decided to approach.

"Hurry, hurry!" urged a small, girlish voice as I drew nearer to the shack. The immaturity of the voice made me wonder if the person I'd worried might be a bandit was in fact a child.

"Hello? Do you have some business with me?"

"Just get in here!" she said, firmly gripping my arm and pulling me inside.

I tried to get a look at my surroundings, but as soon as the door closed, it was too dark to get my bearings. Even though beams of light shone through the numerous holes in the rotting building, the girl's face remained shrouded in shadow. From the faint silhouette I could make out, she seemed to stand about a head shorter than me—she couldn't have been more than 155 centimeters. As I'd expected based on hearing her voice before I entered: a child.

"Good, I wasn't sure you'd notice me," she said. She peered out one of the holes in the wall to check our surroundings before breathing a sigh of relief.

"Is this your house?" I asked.

"Huh? No, of course not," she said.

*She understood me!* I thought with satisfaction. By the power vested in me by the goddess, I had already mastered this world's language, so it shouldn't be too difficult to befriend the girl and ask for the directions I needed to be on my way.



“My name is Kaito. Irie Kaito.”

“Name’s Oltea. So what’re you doing in a place like this, Kaito?”

“It’s a long story, but I guess if I had to put it succinctly, I’d say I’ve been dispossessed. I’m wandering.”

“So, like, some kind of traveler?”

“You could say so.”

“Are you traveling alone?”

“Yeah, well...”

“So you’re pretty strong, then?” she said, her voice livelier than before.

Even without being able to see her face in the darkness, I could sense her countenance brighten. If the idea that I was capable in a fight was such a relief to her, perhaps there really were bandits in these mountains. That would explain her caution—and the fact that she’d been hiding—earlier.

“I wouldn’t say I’m all that strong,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, disappointed. “But if you’re on the road all by yourself, then you’ve gotta have a magic item or two, right? If you could just fly me to a safe place...”

This was the first I had heard of magic items, but more significantly, I was struck by the revelation that flight was possible here. The goddess had told me that magic had developed in this world rather than science, but it seemed that special items were required to make use of it.

“I’m sorry to let you down, but I don’t have any on me,” I said.

“Sure, I guess you wouldn’t,” she said. “Well, you wouldn’t wanna get found out here after the sun sets. If it came to that, we’d have no choice but to book it to the royal capital.”

*The royal capital!* That sounded like just the kind of big city I needed. I’d have no trouble finding a job there.

“Is the royal capital far from here?”

“Not really. Maybe a hundred kilometers?”

“And you can really run a hundred kilometers, Oltea?” I asked.

“What? No! I get huffy and puffy after less than one.”

With a sample size of a single person, it was too early to draw conclusions, but the inhabitants of this new world seemed about as physically capable as humans from my own world. That being the case, I’d have to work as hard as anyone else to get by here.

“Sounds like we move at about the same pace, Oltea. Would you accompany me to the capital?”

“That wouldn’t be a problem, but...” She hesitated. “If I leave this spot, I’m worried I might get killed.”

“Is there something dangerous here?”

“Well...” She paused. “There’s the wood golem.”

Oltea explained that she had been attacked by a wood golem in the nearby forest earlier. In desperation, she had fled in search of somewhere to hide. For the past three hours, she had been holed up in this old hut. Even after all that time, the wood golem had persisted in its efforts to track her. Around fifteen minutes ago, she had peeked out of the hole and seen what she thought to be her pursuer stomping around the area. She was clearly glad I had shown up when I had. The area around the abandoned mine seemed to be exceedingly dangerous.

“All that is to say thanks. I’d probably be dead if you hadn’t shown up.”

“Oh, you needn’t thank me. I haven’t really done anything,” I said. The situation she had found herself in certainly sounded perilous, but I didn’t even know what a wood golem was. “By the way...what is a wood golem, anyhow?” I asked.

“A monster, and one that could devour you without even having to chew! Imagine a giant tree stump that’s sprouted arms and legs and that’s pretty much what a wood golem looks like,” she said.

“I see,” I said hesitantly. The goddess hadn’t said a single word about there being monsters to put up with in this world! It was starting to feel like she’d



wanted me to choose transmigration so badly that she'd hidden all of this world's negatives from me. Giving her the benefit of the doubt, maybe she'd just thought the monsters in this world wouldn't pose enough of a threat to be worth mentioning.

But although Oltea was certainly scared, even Earth had animals that could scare kids. And after all, the existence of towns in this world meant the monsters weren't powerful enough to destroy every person they came across.

"Do we have a chance of winning if we challenge it as a pair?"

"No way! If we fight a wood golem unarmed, we'll be dead in seconds!"

*In seconds?!* "Our best option is probably running, then, yeah?"

"If it comes to that, then sure, but wouldn't it be safer to just stay here for now?"

Earlier, she had been talking about sprinting to the royal capital, but she didn't actually seem mentally prepared to do so.

"If we hunker down here forever, we'll die of starvation. It would be better to make a break for it while we still have the energy. At least that way we'll have a chance of surviving," I said. It felt strange to find myself so attached to living just minutes after resigning myself to going to Heaven, but I really didn't want to get eaten alive by a monster. Moreover, I couldn't just let Oltea die without helping.

"Yeah... I guess that's true," said Oltea.

"Then it's decided. Let's use one of these breaks in the wall to check our surroundings first," I said.

Having come up with a plan, Oltea and I each stepped toward a different hole to get a look.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!" screamed Oltea, suddenly jumping backward and slamming into me.

"What, what is it?!" I shouted.

"The wall! We have to break it down and run!" she yelled, kicking the wall frantically between words. I had barely registered what Oltea was saying when

the wall around the door shattered, splinters of wood flying like shrapnel from where it had once stood. I whirled around to see tree branches where there had been none before. A hunk of wood as thick as a utility pole was flailing wildly left and right, smashing the surrounding walls with terrifying speed.

Through the wreckage and dust, I could see it: a massive monster in the shape of a tree stump, just like Oltea had described. From its fraying, splintered trunk sprouted limb-like branches where a beast would have had arms and legs. The center of its trunk bore a gash-like horizontal opening that must have been a mouth.

*So this is a wood golem!* I thought.

“No! No, I—” Oltea cried, cowering in the corner of the room. “This is it, it’s over!” she said between sobs.

All the while, the wood golem continued its advance, destroying everything that stood in its way. At least three meters tall, it towered above us. To get inside, it’d had to destroy not just the walls but the roof of the building. At this rate, it would only be a matter of time before it was satiating its hunger with our corpses.

But I had no intention of meekly submitting to that end.

The only question was whether to run or stand and fight. Oltea was in no condition to run, but if I tried to carry her on my back, I wouldn’t be able to move fast enough to escape. Abandoning her to flee alone was out of the question.

Battle was the only option.

It was still hard to believe that the powers the goddess had granted me were real, but I *had* just mastered this world’s language without so much as glancing at a dictionary. If I could do that, then maybe I really could fire a beam!

“It’s all right, Oltea—I can handle this kind of monster! Just take cover!”

“B-B-But y-y-you said you d-didn’t have any m-magic items?!”

“That’s right, but I can do something else kinda like magic!” I yelled back.

The wood golem towered above us, standing tall amid the wreckage. I locked

my gaze on it and prepared to fire.

Unfortunately, I didn't know how to. Though the goddess had informed me of the modifications made to my body to allow the channeling of laser beams, she'd never explained how to take advantage of them.

Thinking back on it, I remembered looking up over the extra cram school homework I'd been stuck with in elementary school as my classmates spent recess pretending to fire beams at each other. One time, one of them had grabbed my arm and demanded that I come play with them. Because I'd never played with other kids like that before, I could still remember the fresh, invigorating feeling it had given me all these years later. In the end, my mom had shouted at me for not finishing my cram school homework, so I'd never gotten another chance to shoot beams with them. Maybe if I recreated that same playground motion, I could fire the beam I'd been denied the chance to back then.

I extended both fists toward the wood golem, connected my wrists, and opened my hands.

"HYAAA!" I shouted like a martial artist firing a chi attack. The moment the sound left my mouth, a thin blue-and-white beam shot from my palms. Barely a moment later, there was a flash of dazzling light that coincided with the beam exploding in size and power until the bit that emerged from my hand gave way to a laser thick enough to wholly engulf the wood golem.

The monster was obliterated; nothing but a sizzling sound and the wispy trails of vapor left by its sudden evaporation marked the site of its defeat. Even so, the beam did not relent. As if searching for some unseen target, the overwhelmingly powerful laser continued along its bullet-straight path, carving a deep gash into the ground as it went. Everything in its way, whether the wooden remains of the building or the fallen rocks—even the distant trees—was annihilated.

So unbending was its trajectory that, left to go on indefinitely, it would probably have circled the earth and scored a direct hit on my back. *That's enough*, I thought to myself, and the laser abruptly disappeared.

Not a trace of the wood golem remained. The scenery, too, had been



rendered unrecognizable. *Did she really mean to give me this much power?!* I wondered. Surely it hadn't been proper to just carelessly grant this kind of strength to a nobody like me. Why, I wondered, had she not at least said something like "make sure to use it wisely"?!

*The power to utterly demolish everything in sight, concentrated right into my own hands...* To be honest, I wanted an excuse to fire the beam again as soon as possible.

An appetite for destruction had been awakened inside me. Firing my laser was genuine, uncomplicated fun. As my cheeks loosened and my lips curled into an involuntary grin, I realized that I had never felt this way before. It was exactly as the goddess had said: my passion for laser beams had been roused. My eagerness to shoot something again despite the lack of targets was evidence enough of that.

"W-Wow! That's... A-Amazing!!! You killed the wood golem! In just one strike!" shouted Oltea in a voice full of astonishment. I turned to face her, unprepared for what I would see. My breath caught in my throat.

The destruction of battle had cleared the path for a ray of sun. Oltea, before just a silhouette, had become visible in the light. As I had surmised from her voice earlier, she looked to be about fifteen or sixteen years old. The irises of her eyes, a rich chestnut crimson in color, retained a sparkle of youth that was further enhanced by the graceful features of her face. Gray hair done up in twintails complemented her clear, pale skin and hung over the kind of outfit one would expect to see in a fairy tale.

She had a tail at her waist and, atop her head, ears like a cat's. The moment that I saw them, a burning desire began to well up in my chest. All I wanted to do was touch them—pat them, rub them, pet them—to my heart's content.

*This irresistible longing... Why do I want so badly to reach out and—*



Abruptly, I put the pieces together in my head. “Are those...animal ears?” I asked.

“Yeah, of course! I’m a hybrid!” Oltea replied.

I could not believe how much the goddess had left out. There were human-animal hybrids in this world too?! And even so, I’d been made to seek out “animal ears”?! Out of the three newfound passions I’d been told about, “animal ears” was the one that had seemed the most straightforward. Animal ears on *people* were an entirely different story.

From now on, I would have to live my whole life suppressing this stupid, perverted impulse. If I couldn’t hold back, I’d end up spending my new life in prison. In all honesty, the urge to fondle her ears was almost powerful enough to override my self-control, but I told myself it wasn’t okay to just grab someone’s ears to satisfy a craving, and my better angels won out.

After all, for better or worse, I had not one but *three* desires. When my lust for animal ears made its presence known, I could just override it by indulging in more laser beams.

“While you check if it’s safe now, I need to go shoot a beam.”

“Is ‘beam’ that amazing magic you just used?”

“Have you never seen one of those before?”

“Nothing like that, no. How can you do that even though you don’t have any magic items?”

“I know it’s hard to believe, but that’s just something my body can do.”

“Wow...” Oltea said. Her reaction betrayed no hint of suspicion or shock. She seemed to have skipped all those steps and landed immediately on admiration for my ability. Trust so easily earned could only come from a genuinely pure and honest heart.

It was, however, hard to focus on the conversation I was having with her. The urge to fire my beam was fast becoming more of a need than a want. I felt like a nicotine addict fixing to light up as soon as possible.

Thanks to the goddess’s gifts, I’d been able to escape an early grave and even



save Oltea from harm. I couldn't complain about that... But, even so, I foresaw some difficulties with this arrangement. If I ever felt like firing my beam while inside the city, it would be a catastrophe. I had to get it out of my system now, while there was still space to do so. Additionally, with some practice, I could work on getting the beam under control and, potentially, put its practical use potential to the test.

"Hey, can I come too? It's...kind of scary here alone," said Oltea.

"Of course you can. I don't mind," I said, though I knew that having her with me would exacerbate the problem. With those ears next to me, I'd badly need to let loose a laser, but the ears would still be there afterward and—*I might go crazy!*

We stepped out of the half-destroyed building.

"This is an abandoned mine, right?" I asked Oltea.

"Right. Apparently they used to dig up gold here. My grandpa was a miner, and from what I've heard, it was pretty busy in his day. It's been out of use for something like thirty years now, though."

"What brought you here, then, Oltea?"

"Oh, you know... I guess I came to dig something up."

"But it's an abandoned mine, right? What's left?"

"That's true, but," she began, then hesitated. "I thought there could have been something they forgot to take." I couldn't help but feel that she was hiding something. I would have been lying if I'd said I wasn't curious, but I didn't want to pry if the matter was sensitive.

"Does this mountain hold any memories for you—anything to do with your grandfather?"

"No, none."

"I see. Well then. *HYAAAAAA!!!*"

I put my hands together just like before and called forth the beam. A high-pitched, blaring noise accompanied the sudden appearance of its bluish-white glow. It struck the side of the mountain, and, in the same instant, the booming

sound of an explosion rang out. I moved my hands to one side and the beam followed suit, changing its trajectory. While slicing through the mountain, I imagined a thinner ray, and, on cue, the laser sharpened. I realized then that the opposite—enlarging the beam with my mind—must also be possible, but the prospect of such a thing was so dangerous I dropped the thought.

“That’s...” Oltea began, stunned. “That’s a terrifying amount of power.”

She was right. Even making the laser beam as precise as the tip of a pencil did nothing to reduce its piercing power. If I didn’t exercise caution, sooner or later someone was going to get hurt.

I wished that I could summon the laser a little more easily. Come to think of it, when I’d had a habit of watching anime and movies, I’d seen lots of characters wield beams in the shape of blades and fight with them the same way you would with a sword. If I was able to form mine into the shape of a sword, it would make satisfying my appetite for lasers much simpler.

I assumed the stance of a swordsman clutching a bamboo blade and concentrated on my hands. Seconds later, a sword of pure light extended from my grip. *A beam!*

I swung it back and forth, taking care not to hit Oltea. As I did, the sword made a pleasant swishing, buzzing noise. I turned to a nearby boulder and cut through it like a block of tofu. Its cross section bore the scars of scorching flame.

“Wow! That’s so sharp! What kind of magic is that?”

“It’s my beam!”

“Huh? But the beam you just fired earlier was completely different!”

“That’s... Yeah, you’re right. Well, a beam is a beam, but I suppose you could call this a ‘Sword Beam,’” I said, christening the ability.

Because of the staggering destructive power of the rays I’d fired earlier, I decided to call that variant “Death Beam.”

Everything I had tried so far was great for offense, but I wanted to see if I could use my ability for defense as well. I stuck out my hands and conjured in my mind the image of a powerful shield. As I did, a semitransparent shield

materialized in my grasp. It was a tall, rectangular one like a policeman might use.

I adjusted the image in my head and the shield morphed into a cylinder encircling my body. I was even able to transform it into a dome. The defensive potential of my beam was certain, but I wanted to test my proficiency before having to use it in a real combat situation.

“Hey Oltea, would you please throw a couple of rocks at me?” I said. Oltea, who’d been watching with a dumbfounded expression as I demonstrated mastery over the various forms of beam, was shaken from her stupor by my voice. She responded, late, with a nod.

She picked up a small rock and threw it at me from a short distance. On contact, the rock briefly made a sound similar to that of meat hitting a hot grill and then evaporated completely. The shield had the same destructive power as the Death and Sword Beams. Handling it poorly could get me seriously injured. The thought struck me that perhaps it was only so dangerous because I had specifically imagined a *powerful* shield. I wondered if it was possible to visualize a new shield but this time with an amendment that would keep its lethality in check.

Of course it was, I realized. I had constructed the Sword Beam from my hands, but it hadn’t left a single mark on me. Without being conscious of it, I had thought of creating a hilt that it wouldn’t hurt to hold. The image I had in my mind of holding the sword had, alone, made it wieldable. I tried to imagine a shield that, though still powerful, was not destructive.

“Could you throw another?” I asked.

With a nod, Oltea picked up and threw another stone. It bounced off of the surface of the shield with a slight electrical crackle. *Exactly as I pictured it!* If I could shape the beam into anything I envisioned, then its practical potential was off the charts!

*For example...*

“Whoa! You’re flying this time!” Oltea shouted. I’d thought of jet engines and, just like that, found myself floating about a meter off the ground as the beam fired from my feet. Jets of energy surged from the soles of my feet before



stopping short fifteen centimeters or so from their origin, like a gas burner. I strengthened the beams and gained some elevation. It was hard to control my posture—almost like balancing atop a ball—but somehow, I was able to stay upright. By keeping my left foot still while tilting my right one, I was able to move forward. Tilting my wrists even let me reorient myself and turn. I decided I would call this one “Jet Beam”! With this, I could fly right to the city. Having thoroughly satisfied my laser beam impulse for now, I swooped back down to earth.

“Kaito, you’re incredible! You’ve got all kinds of magic!” Oltea said, looking at me with starry eyes. It was true: my beam powers were phenomenally versatile. When I became a “beam man,” so to speak, I hadn’t known what to expect, but it looked like my powers were going to be indispensable to me in this new world.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting. We should be on our way to this royal capital. Would you be so kind as to lead the way, Oltea?”

“Of course, but...Kaito, aren’t you tired from using all that magic?”

From her words, I gathered that using too much magic at once wiped the people of this world out, but I wasn’t tired at all. When the goddess had said, “I’ll reconstruct your body so that you’ll be able to fire laser beams to your heart’s content!” she’d really meant that last bit.

“I’m all right! Actually, I was thinking I’d fly to the city. Of course, I’d need to carry you on my back...” I said. Holding her in my arms was an option as well, but if her cat ears were even in my peripheral vision, they would be all I could think about. I wasn’t accustomed to flying yet; I needed to be able to focus. Naturally, I expected her to refuse regardless of which way I offered to do it. Pressing your body up against a strange man whom you’d just met wasn’t something most would go for.

Or so I thought.

“Really? Can I? Thank you!” Oltea said, smiling ear to ear. She seemed to trust me completely after I’d saved her. I knelt down to let her onto my back. She wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed her soft body against mine.

Taking care not to go too fast and make Oltea bite her tongue, I ascended

until we were about fifty meters above the ground. Putting the abandoned mine behind us, I turned until my field of vision was unobstructed by the remains of the mountain. Grassy plains extended beyond the boundary of the lush forest.

“Oltea, which direction do I go to reach the royal capital?”

“Over there! And come on, no more formal speech with me, okay? ‘Which way,’ woulda done the trick! You’ll tire yourself out talking all uptight!”

I thought being addressed a little too casually by a strange adult would scare her, but since Oltea had asked me to, I figured it was all right to let myself be a little more comfortable.

“Understood! Okay, we’re gonna fly to the city now. Hold on tight so you don’t fall!” With that, I set my eyes on our destination and began to soar.

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We were flying along at the gentle pace I’d assumed so as not to scare Oltea when a structure of some sort came into view on the far side of the grassland.

“Is that the city?”

“Yep! Thanks to you, we got there in the blink of an eye!” It didn’t feel quite that fast to me, but it had been quick. On the way, we’d passed over a mountain. Walking over the mountains from the city would probably have taken three days or so. Which meant...

“By the way, Oltea, don’t you have any luggage?” I asked. She wasn’t carrying any food, let alone tools for mining. Even if she had anticipated finding a pickaxe on-site, traveling without provisions was too reckless.

“I dropped my rucksack when the wood golem attacked. I wanted to shed some weight, and throwing my pack also distracted the golem long enough for me to run into that house.”

“I see. Should we circle back and grab it?”

“It’s okay! There wasn’t really anything important in there anyways.”

If Oltea was fine, then there was no reason to turn around. We continued our flight, soon reaching the skies over the royal capital.

The capital was a large castle town encircled by a low wall. A palace, nestled in its heart, towered over the rest of the city and was itself surrounded by a dense thicket of trees. Outside the palace grounds, the area was crowded with buildings. It had seemed compact at first, but the scale of the place was considerable. There were other walls inside the city that might once have formed the outer boundary, a telltale sign that the area had sprawled in proportion to a growing populace. Build a bunch of houses, surround them with a wall. Build more houses, surround those with another wall, etc., etc. By repeating that process, the city had come to be structured around three concentric walls.

The inner part of the metropolis was shaped by a steeply sloping mountain from which a river descended, bisecting the downtown area. At its base spread a number of fields which shone the color of wheat in the sun.

“Do we need ID papers to enter?”

“Nope, no need!”

If one could enter so freely, then the impressive walls must have been meant to protect the populace from monsters, not suspicious persons. After all, in a world where anyone with the right magic item could take to the skies, even a high wall couldn’t stop a determined villain from getting in.

“Oltea, is there anywhere in particular you’d like to be dropped off?”

“Since you’re offering, somewhere close to my house would be nice, if you could?”

“Sure. Where’s that?”

“Over there. Section Two, Western Ward.”

“Section Two?”

“Look, see how there are three big walls? Inside the first wall is Section One, and then from there it counts up to Section Two and Section Three,” she explained. As we flew toward Section Two, she continued to explain the city, and I nodded along and interjected here and there.

I landed in an alleyway with no foot traffic.



“Thanks for bringing me all this way. It’s much appreciated! You really saved me today.”

“Don’t mention it. By the way, are you still free? I’ve got a lot of things I’d like to ask you.” Even if I found a job before the end of the day, there’d be no guarantee of daily payment. If I’d be getting a monthly salary, I needed to know how many days were in a month in this world, what the average pay was, what prices to expect, etc., *etc.*

If my ignorance of this world’s ways came to light out there, I might end up getting ripped off. It wasn’t that I wanted to be suspicious of everyone I encountered, but right now, Oltea was the only person I felt I could fully trust. I wanted her to teach me all the basics of daily life in this world before we parted ways.

Oltea seemed to waver, unsure. I wondered if she had some plan I was getting in the way of, but she didn’t pause too long before saying, “Sure. Does my place work?”

“Thank you. I really owe you one,” I said. We walked out of the alley together. Though the cobblestone road was damaged here and there, the streets were otherwise clean: no trash littered their surface, no unpleasant smells marred their air. It was, as the goddess had said, a hygienic world. I wouldn’t have to worry about contracting some strange disease from the environment.

Exiting the alley, we came to an avenue lined with white-walled, orange-roofed buildings. Ropes, colorfully adorned with laundry, were strung between the buildings and hung from their windows. A residential district, evidently. An older woman across the street frowned disapprovingly at me as she passed.

Of course, I realized, someone wearing a suit must be a strange sight in this world. I didn’t have any money on me, but it would probably be best to get some new clothes as soon as possible so I could fit in here.

“We’re here!” announced Oltea, stopping in front of a three-floor apartment building that had seen better days. She led me to her room on the second floor. “This is it!”

She opened the door and entered right away. This world must not have the custom of taking off one’s shoes before coming inside, I thought. I said my

thanks and followed her in. The room was cramped—about eight tatami mats in area, although the floor was wood. There was a kitchen, but I couldn't see any toilet or bath. Perhaps those features were communal in this building. The only recognizable furniture was a bed, at the foot of which lay a basket full of clothing. Four apples sat atop the stack of clothes.

Given that the space was too small for a family and only contained one bed, it was safe to assume that Oltea lived alone.

“Would you like an apple?”

“Sure, thanks.”

Oltea picked up two apples and handed one to me. I bit into the fruit with a satisfying crunch. It was a little sour and dry but was definitely an apple.

“So. You had things you wanted to ask me?”

“Well, for one, I'm curious about the cost of living here. How much for one of these apples?”

“It depends on the shop, but that apple cost me one coin,” she said. In that case, I could assume that one coin here was roughly equal to one hundred Japanese yen.

“If I wanted to eat out, how much would one meal cost?”

“I'm only familiar with cheaper spots, but...you could probably *just* get by with one copper,” she said. “Oh, but it'll be a little more if you're drinking!”

So a copper was about one thousand yen, then?

“How about the rent you pay for this spot?”

“I pay four silver a month.”

It sounded like a silver coin was equal to about ten thousand yen. Up to this point, the denominations had increased by multiples of ten. If a gold coin followed the silver one, then it was probably worth one hundred thousand yen.

“I see. So if you had a gold coin, you could afford two and a half months' lodging?” I asked, just to be sure.

Oltea nodded. “Though, to be honest, I've never even held a gold coin. I

would really prefer to live somewhere nicer than this, but with my earnings, this is about the best I can manage.”

“What do you do?”

“Well, I *was* a waitress at a tavern, but I got fired last week...”

“You got fired?”

“I shouted at some drunkard for grabbing my tail. When the owner saw it, he told me not to come back the next day.”

“Wow... Even though you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I tried to tell the boss that, but he just went off on me about how he didn’t need any ‘feisty, troublemaking hybrids’ around and there were tons of people lined up who would happily replace me and other mean stuff like that...”

“That’s awful... I know you probably don’t want to talk about that bar, but...how much did they pay?”

“A noon-to-night shift was just five coppers. On top of that, I didn’t even get days off!”

“That’s terrible... So how much did you bring in a month?”

“A hundred fifty copper coins!”

So there were thirty days in a month here and a waitress’s monthly income was 150 thousand yen. If I earned about as much as Oltea, I could expect to live at roughly the same standard. That being said, as I looked around, I had to wonder where the money was going. There was no trace of cash spent in the barren room. It was possible the extra money she made went mostly to food, but that didn’t seem right. She had said she wanted to live in a nicer place, so maybe she was just saving up for that, I thought.

“Thank you. I think that’s all I needed to know,” I said, letting the question go.

“No problem. So what will you do from here, Kaito?” she asked.

“Well, I guess I’ll start by job hunting. It’d be nice to find work.”

“Finding work is nothing! With your power, there’s only one option: adventurer!” Oltea shouted. She said it as though it was a waste *not* to become

an adventurer.

In my mind, an adventurer was an explorer. Work like that was far beyond my scope. At any rate, exploring was for people who had an insatiable curiosity for the unknown. The way Oltea had said I had to become an adventurer because of my power, however, made me wonder if my image of adventurers was incorrect.

“An adventurer?”

“Yeah, a person whose job is exterminating monsters! It’s super dangerous, so taking down even one nets you a whole gold coin. You could earn that much by accepting a wood golem suppression request for sure.”

“Do you mean that if I went and reported that kill now, I would receive the reward?”

“No, not quite. You have to accept a request at the guild beforehand. If it’s a monster suppression job, you’ve gotta hand over a devil stone to complete the contract.”

“What’s a devil stone?”

“It’s the heart of a monster.”

“I have to...hand over the monster’s heart? That’s grotesque.”

“Not at all! When you strike the fatal blow, monsters decompose instantly. Sure, that part is kinda gross, but the stones they leave behind are clean,” Oltea said. I worried that my slaying of the wood golem had been a waste, but she added, “You can’t get the guild reward, but a wood golem’s devil stone still sells for five silver coins.”

“So the item itself has worth too?”

“It does. Devil stones can be used to reproduce the magic contained within the source monster. They are vital to the creation of magic items!”

“Wow, you really know your stuff. You talk like you’ve seen a monster decompose like that yourself—do you moonlight as an adventurer or something?”

“Well, I carried bags for one, at least. I’m a hybrid, so...” Oltea said, her voice



brought down by a self-deprecating sadness.

“Is there something about being a hybrid that makes that harder or something?”

“Well yeah... We don’t have any capacity for the supernatural, so I can’t use magic items,” she said in a perplexed voice. I had let my ignorance show too clearly: from her reaction, I could tell that this was common knowledge.

Even so, I was still confused. In this world, magic was the predominant force rather than science. If hybrids were unable to use magic... Well, that would be like not being able to use electronics at all back on earth. It would be impossible to make do.

“You really can’t use magic at all?”

“Really. Here, look.” Oltea extended her hand toward the kitchen sink. “Look,” she repeated.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“You try! Put your hand out.”

“Like this?”

“Yeah. Now picture water coming out.”

I did as Oltea instructed and water began to pour vigorously from the tap. Shocked, I withdrew my hand, causing the flow to halt seconds later. It was kind of like a hands-free device, though of course, this world hadn’t developed the technology for that. The faucet must have been a magic item that either created water wholesale or used its power to pump it from elsewhere. All of this meant that, unlike Oltea, I *did* have the capacity for magic. The beam I fired was different: it didn’t require any magic items and therefore was not magic. The goddess had not said anything about me receiving magical abilities in addition to my beams. Even so, I was able to use the faucet without trouble. Perhaps humans back home all had the capacity for magic and just lacked the opportunity to use it.

It was a welcome surprise, but I couldn’t let it show on my face without blowing my cover in front of Oltea.

“Hey, can you do that again?”

“Sure,” I said, and called forth the water once more. Oltea filled up a glass of water and gulped it down greedily.

“What do you usually do when you want water?”

“I go down and draw it from the river.”

“Wow, that’s tough.”

“It’s normal for me. I’m used to it. You, on the other hand—you’ve got amazing power. You’ll be rich!” she shouted. Her tone contained no hint of jealousy or insecurity. She really was a nice girl. She had helped me a lot, and I wanted to return the favor before I went on my way.

“If I become an adventurer, I’ll support you until you can find work.”

“Huh? Wha— Really? That’s too much, Kaito!”

“Don’t worry about it! It’s the least I can do after you let me into your home, showed me the way to the city, and answered all my questions.”

“But that’s all little stuff! Look, if you really wanna become an adventurer, I’ll show you the way to the guild, but I really don’t need anything in return,” she said.

If she really meant that, then why had she been so kind to me? She had sat through all those tedious, stupid questions just out of the goodness of her own heart? Oltea was clearly the kind of person who couldn’t let someone in need go unhelpt. I was lucky that she was the first person I’d encountered in this new, unfamiliar world.

That said, even if she was being modest, she probably still did want the reward. In order to give it to her, I had to start earning some money.

“That would be a huge help. Is the guild nearby?”

“It’s in Section One, so we should probably fly!”

“Let’s! I’ll of course fly you home later too!”

“Thank you! That sounds great.”

With our talk concluded, we each drank one more glass of water and stepped

outside, leaving Oltea's room behind.

The guildhall, which occupied prime real estate along the city's main thoroughfare, had the air of history in its sturdy, stone-built walls. As I entered with Oltea, a myriad of delicious smells aroused my appetite. The interior was clean and orderly, nothing like a mess hall, but I could hear the lively sounds of a well-enjoyed meal among comrades somewhere within.

"First off, you'll wanna head to the front counter and get registered. From there, you can pick up requests at that window. Think you can handle all that yourself?" Oltea asked.

I must have made my ignorance a little too obvious earlier: she was looking at me like a mother giving a child their "first solo errand." As I'd always been too busy with my studies for *my* mom to send me on errands, it was an expression I only knew from TV.

"Of course I can."

"Good! Okay, here you are, then," she said and pressed a copper coin into my palm.

"What's this for?"

"That covers the handling fee for your registration. No offense, but you seem broke."

"Are...are you sure this is okay with you?" I said, looking at the coin.

"Don't worry about it. You saved my life. It's the least I can do."

"Thank you," I said sincerely. "I really appreciate it."

Taking Oltea's gift, I made my way to the counter. As I drew near, I was greeted by a young, intelligent-looking receptionist in glasses.

"Hello, I'm here to become an adventurer."

"Yes, of course, sir. I'll just need the registration fee of one copper in order to issue your license," she said. After I handed over the money, the woman placed a small pin made of wood on the counter. An image of crossed swords was etched into its surface. "This badge certifies your status as an adventurer. Please make sure to wear it somewhere visible when you accept contracts. In

the event that you misplace it, you may request a replacement for the price of one silver.”

A penalty ten times as great as the up-front payment. I’d need to take great care not to misplace the little crest. Attaching it to the lapel of my suit made me feel kind of like a lawyer or a member of parliament donning his emblem for the first time. I could almost feel my back straighten with new confidence.

“So I’m an adventurer now? Just like that?”

“That’s correct, sir. When you have met the requirements for advancement to D rank, we can exchange your wood badge for a stone badge. Rank promotions do not incur an additional registration fee, so there’s no need to worry about setting aside funds for that eventuality.”

“D rank?”

“Adventurers are divided into five ranks: E, D, C, B, and A. Satisfying the prerequisites for promotion allows one to advance to the next grade and begin accepting more dangerous requests.”

“I see. And what are the prerequisites for promotion?”

“Advancing from E to D rank requires the successful completion of one monster suppression request,” she said.

So to be an adventurer was to be a hired sword taking out monsters for a living. If I killed enough of them, I could advance from D to C rank, from C to B, and so on.

“Thanks for the information. If I have any more questions, I’ll bring them your way.”

“Of course, sir. Please feel free to contact us if there is anything you need,” said the receptionist.

I had barely exchanged bows with her and turned around when I was stopped by the sound of a loud, boorish voice.

“Well, if it ain’t Oltea!” boomed the owner of the voice, a large, middle-aged man who had just finished eating in the nearby mess hall. Oltea seemed to shrink into herself as he sauntered over. He was evidently an acquaintance, but



not one she looked too fond of. “Yer just who I was hopin’ to see. I’m still hungry as a horse but all outta coin. Why dontcha hand over the money you’ve got on ye and help me out?”

“You know this guy, Oltea?” I asked, cutting in. My interruption earned me a piercing glare from the brute. I might have shrunk from his gaze if it weren’t for the fact that I had just faced the wood golem. His attempt at intimidation didn’t scare me.

“Hey, I’m the one talkin’ right now! Keep yer mouth shut and don’t interrupt!” he snarled.

“I was just confirming that you two are acquainted,” I said. “I don’t mean to be rude, but just now, it sounded like you were attempting to extort her.”

“Extort her? Don’t you dare accuse me of such a disgraceful thing! This brat owes me ten gold. The price of one meal is a drop in the bucket against that balance!”

Ten gold were worth one thousand copper: a fortune for someone with Oltea’s income of just 150 copper each month. How had she come to be so deeply indebted?

“It used to be just three gold...” Oltea said in a small, trembling voice.

“You’ve got some real nerve sayin’ that at this stage. I told ye right from the start that if ye couldn’t pay me back by the end a’ the month, it’d be one more gold coin every thirty days!”

“I already tried to pay you back, but you weren’t in the shop when I came...” Oltea said sheepishly.

“Don’t you go lecturing me, girl. I already told ye that I go out sometimes, so you can’t expect I’ll always be around. Besides, yer the one at fault here for always waitin’ until the very last minute to pay!”

“But...! But if I have to work until the end of the month to save up one gold, it’s the only time that I *can* pay! Besides, the vase I broke sells for just five copper...”

“Not this sob story again. I already told you: those are cheap knockoffs—

fakes. All the vases sold in *my* shop are worth three gold apiece!” he laughed, acting much too cavalier about someone breaking a vase apparently worth three hundred thousand yen. I wondered if he was just taking advantage of Oltea’s guilt to burden her with undue debt. He followed up his mocking chuckle with a sharp scowl. “Ye *did* set aside my ten gold, right?”

“I, uh—”

“Huh?! Don’t tell me ye don’t have it!” he barked. “Three days! I’ll give ye three days. If you don’t pay me back by then, we’ll have to fall back on our *other* arrangement. Ye’ll pay with yer body.”

Oltea’s eyes welled up with tears at the man’s threat. It almost seemed like the guy had no intention of being paid back at all.

I understood now why Oltea’s apartment had been so empty of belongings: most of her earnings were being sucked up by debt. Now, after demanding one gold a month for so long, her creditor was suddenly setting a deadline for full repayment.

And I could see why Oltea was scrounging for leftover ore at the gold mine. With the looming cutoff date, she had started to look for any way out—even resorting to digging for gold where she knew for a fact there was none to be found.

I couldn’t just let Oltea—to whom I owed so much—fend for herself.

“I’ll pay you by the end of the day,” I said.

“Huh?!” Oltea said, turning to me. “What are you— Don’t say that!”

“She’s right! Don’t make promises ye can’t keep.”

“It’s no empty promise. I can pay. In fact, if you wipe out the interest and accept the original payment of three coins, I’ll give you this.” I rolled back my sleeve and showed him my wristwatch. He furrowed his brows in confusion.

“Now what the hell is that?” he asked. Either he had never seen a wristwatch before or this world didn’t have any clocks. It was possible that they measured the days by the movement of the sun alone. I couldn’t help but think that it would be frustrating to arrange a meeting under those circumstances!

“This is an ornamental piece I acquired for ten gold,” I said.

“This is worth ten gold?” he asked after a pause.

“Sure is. It was quite the splurge for me,” I said. In my second year as a salaryman, I had bought the watch for one million yen. I had been wearing a cheaper one up until my boss, seeing my inexpensive piece, had said, “A luxury watch will change your life.” Having never known joy in my life, I went out and bought one hoping to experience the rush. Of course, wearing an expensive piece of jewelry did nothing to alleviate the tedium: I was still living the same empty life.

But even if it couldn’t change my life, maybe it could change Oltea’s.

“Look, this needle moves automatically. You don’t even have to use magic,” I said. My tactic would fail if he knew anything about gears, but magic was the only motive power in this world.

Since spring-powered motion had not been invented here, he rejected my explanation out of hand and snorted as if I’d said something idiotic. “Let’s not tell stories now! Nothin’ moves like that without usin’ magic!”

“Here, I’ll prove it,” I said. I removed my watch and handed it to Oltea. Even though hybrids couldn’t channel magic, the second hand continued to smoothly tick along.

“What the—! What the hell is that thing?” he said, taking the bait.

“Shocking, I know, but it’s real. This ornament is one of a kind too: there isn’t a single piece like it anywhere else. If your wealthier patrons laid eyes on this treasure, you can be sure they’d make their interest clear. Honestly, it’s probably worth a lot more than just ten gold,” I added, turning on my salesman charm. The brute was staring longingly at the watch while I gave my spiel. I delivered the coup de grâce. “Come to think of it, I should just sell it myself. I could pay her debt with the profit and even—”

“Wait!!! Let’s not be hasty here,” he shouted, cutting me off. “Ye...ye said ye could pay me by the end of the day, did ye not?”

“Yeah. That’s what I said.”

“In that case, I’ll accept the original three gold, just like ye said. But with conditions!”

“Conditions, huh?”

“If ye can’t wrangle up the cash by tonight, then the debt goes back to bein’ ten gold! *And* ye hand over that ‘ornament’ as a bonus,” he said.

The important thing to me was setting Oltea free from her debt. The amount of debt to be paid and the fate of my watch were of little concern compared to that.

“If you promise to waive Oltea’s debt and hold me accountable in her place,” I started, “and furthermore give your word that you won’t leave this spot for the rest of the day... If you promise those things, then I will abide by your conditions.”

“What? No! That debt is my responsibility!”

“Shut yer mouth, girl! We’re still negotiating,” he said. He sized me up and grumbled to himself as if thinking it over. “What’s yer name, anyway?”

“Kaito.”

“All right, Kaito. If ye can’t pay, ye won’t run off with Oltea, will ye? If ye skip town like that, I won’t hold back on her family.”

“If you do anything to them, I’ll kill you!” Oltea shouted.

“Sure, sure. I’d be scared if there was a chance a filthy beastling like yerself could beat a human, but, well...” he said, meeting her rage with a dismissive, scornful laugh. He waltzed over to a sofa in the corner of the room and plopped himself down.

“Oltea, is this guy holding your family hostage?”

“Not exactly hostage, but...” She trailed off. “When I first came to this city, I worked at his store serving drinks. It was a gloomy little spot, but I still thought it was stylish. I guess that... To me, coming from the country, it was...”

“You were taken by that big city charm. Is that what you mean?”

She nodded in confirmation. “Yeah. I was still fifteen years old, you know? He

asked me to tell him where my family was in case something happened, so I did. The next day, I broke a vase and got fired. I really didn't think I had bumped it, though..."

In reality, the vase had probably been knocked over by some kind of magic and Oltea had been made to think it was her fault. She had been forced to give her family's address to prevent her from skipping town and evading the debt.

That would all end today.

"You don't need to worry anymore. I'll pay today, no matter what."

"But why would you take on my debt, Kaito? You only just met me."

"It's true we haven't known each other long, but you've been nothing but kind to me. I'm just returning the favor."

"I'll never be able to repay you for this..." she said. I didn't need her to make it up to me, but she was obviously racked with guilt over the prospect of receiving my aid.

I could tell that even if I asked for nothing in return, she wouldn't be able to rid her conscience of a sense of obligation. To let her feel we were even, I would need to accept some kind of compensation.

"Well, actually there is one thing I would ask of you. It's a little strange, but...hear me out?"

"Of course. Anything that I can do, I will."

"If this is too strange, please feel free to say no, but," I said, then, after a brief pause, continued, "I would really love it if you'd let me touch your ears."

Oltea stared at me with a vacant, flabbergasted face. Of course—what other reaction could I expect? The question was how she would feel once she actually processed what I'd said. This was the kind of dialogue choice from which routes diverged: Would she be angry? Creeped out?

"Oh. That's it? That's all you're asking for?" she said.

I couldn't tell if she was completely unaware of her appeal or if she was just being reserved. But I couldn't wipe away her guilt if she didn't understand what a big deal this was to me: I had to convince her that letting me touch her ears



would be an appropriate form of recompense.

“Look, you don’t have to be so modest. From the moment I laid eyes on you, I was overcome with the urge to touch your ears. I’ve really never felt this way before, I have never seen such lovely ears, I really can’t overstate how cute they are, and—”

“Okay! Okay, I get it! I get it, all right? I’ll let you touch them!” she yelled. My sudden confession had made her blush. Her bashfulness was proof that my emotional outburst had moved her. My feelings were reaching her.

“Thank you. I’m excited to touch them. Your ears are really, really wonderful.”

“You...you really don’t have to keep complimenting them. Anyways, you should hurry and pick up a request! The guildhall closes at sundown,” she said. That was the first I had heard of closing.

Based on the sun’s position, I estimated there to be about three hours of daylight left. Then again, I only knew how fast the sun moved on Earth. This world’s rate of rotation could be entirely different. I decided to adopt Oltea’s sense of urgency: if I was too slow, it would be no laughing matter.

“I’ll go take a request immediately,” I assured her, then headed straight for the reception window. “Excuse me, I am an E rank adventurer. I need a contract that pays three gold all at once. Do you have one?”

“Well...I do have some requests that pay about that much, but they’d be pretty difficult for an E rank adventurer. I wouldn’t recommend taking one on alone,” the receptionist said with a worried expression.

Oltea had told me that slaying the wood golem was worth one gold. Doing the simple math, that meant that a monster worth three gold would be three times as powerful. It might be the right call to recruit some help as per the receptionist’s recommendation, but I didn’t exactly have time to ask around. Overestimating my own power would be dangerous, but I also felt confident that my Death Beam would make short work of most foes, even if they were three times as strong as my first.

“It’s all right. I can handle myself. Just give me whatever request worth three gold is closest to here,” I said. I waited a moment as the receptionist receded

from the window a bit to rummage through a cabinet full of papers before returning to show me the one she had picked out: a wanted poster with the image of a monster.

The drawing depicted a vaguely humanoid beast made up of stones of various sizes glommed together. Captions beneath the artistic depiction read “ROCK GOLEM — Danger Level: E — Reward: Three Gold Coins,” and “Habitat: Ward Mountain Region, Lakeside Area.”

It appeared that the goddess had also made me proficient in the writing system of this world.

“Perfect, I’ll take it. Can I have the poster too?”

“Of course, sir. And your name, sir?”

“Kaito Irie,” I said. The receptionist pulled out a massive book and leafed through its pages until she came to my name, whereupon she wrote the details of the request in a space next to it.

“When you have completed the request, please return to this window and present the devil stone in order to collect your reward,” she said.

I nodded to signal my agreement and then returned to Oltea.

“Sounds like I’m fighting a rock golem. You know where the Ward Mountain region is?”

“Definitely. I’ll show you the way.”

“You don’t have to take me there—just tell me what direction and how far.”

“Nonsense! I don’t want you getting lost on the way there,” said Oltea.

I would rather have her stay here where it was safe, but she would probably feel nervous waiting around on her own. If she came with me, I could take care of things without making her feel uneasy in the process.

“All right. Well, lead the way!”

We left the guildhall to go find our mark.

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The Ward Mountains were about 150 kilometers north of the city. The

distance was not ideal, but it was the closest contract worth three gold, so it would have to work. It wasn't surprising that there were no particularly tough monsters in the vicinity of the royal capital, but I hadn't thought we'd have to go *quite* so far.

I had been able to watch the movement of the sun long enough now to judge that there were indeed about three more hours of daylight. Considering the time required to search for and fight the rock golem, I would need to clear the one-way distance in an hour. Even so, if I rocketed along at 150 kilometers an hour, sustaining that kind of wind pressure could be bad for both my body and Oltea's. If I went unconscious from the g-forces, the beam would disappear with me and we'd both plummet to an early grave.

To ensure safe travel, I first conjured a beam in the shape of a stick (which I dubbed "Stick Beam!"). A little over two meters in length, it weighed nothing and, unlike the Sword Beam, had no power to kill or wound. We straddled it like a witch's broom and, propelled by Jet Beam firing from my feet, flew in a straight line toward our destination.

I had left our rear unobstructed in order to accommodate Jet Beam, but to our front and at our flanks I used my Shield Beam like a windshield to protect us. Though we were going much faster, it felt like we were only flying about one hundred kilometers per hour.

After we'd been flying like that for just under an hour, a small mountain came into view ahead. At its base, a lake twinkled in the low sun. *Ward Mountain Region, Lakeside Area.*

I lowered our speed and began a gentle descent until we were circling the lake about fifty meters above the ground. Grassy plains surrounded the water. Unless the rock golem was green, it would stand out like a sore thumb against the scenery. Even so, I wasn't seeing anything.

"How big is a rock golem, usually?"

"Depends on the individual! The only one that I've seen was two meters around."

"You've seen one before, then, Oltea?"

“Sure, back when I was a pack mule for some adventurers. It’s no trouble being with you, Kaito, but that job... I swore I’d never do it again. It was awful carrying everyone’s bags for a week just to get five copper coins in return!”

“Yeesh, talk about stingy,” I said. “How’d you carry the bags anyways?” Oltea didn’t have the power to fly on her own; she had to be carried through the sky on someone else’s magic. Whether her employer had loaded her onto their own back or given her some kind of mount while traveling, if they had to use magic to carry her anyways, then what was the point of hiring her as a porter?

“On foot. The kind of adventurers who hire a porter don’t have the cash to rent a horse-drawn carriage, let alone buy magic items for flight,” said Oltea. She explained that the magic items needed to take to the skies were exorbitantly expensive and, consequently, few people owned them. It was no great wonder, then, that the skies above the capital were so calm.

“For five copper a week you may as well just work a regular job, right?”

“Yeah. Meals were taken care of, so it was fine in that sense as long as I didn’t get killed by a monster, but I still absolutely prefer regular work. That being said, it’s pretty hard to find honest employment too... A lot of us hybrids end up working ourselves to the bone doing all kinds of odd jobs.” The sound of her depressed sigh mingled with the rushing wind. Even freed from debt, Oltea couldn’t escape the hardships of life.

“So what do you say, then? Will you join my party?”

“It doesn’t really seem like you need someone to carry your luggage, but—”

“That’s not what I mean. I don’t know anything about these lands. I could use a guide.”

“If it’s a map you need, you could just buy one or even ask for directions at the reception window. Besides, just because I know where the Ward Mountain region is, it’s not like I’m some kind of expert on geography!”

“That’s fine! I guess if I’m being honest, asking you to be my guide was a little too formal. What I really mean is that...I like having you by my side.”

“Wh-Why?”

“Because I’m drawn to you, Oltea!” I said. I could satisfy my urge to fire beams at any time, but my obsession with animal ears wasn’t so easily addressed. Having Oltea by my side didn’t mean that I could pet her ears whenever I wanted, but it still felt different than not having her around at all. With Oltea near, at least I wouldn’t have to worry that I’d succumb to my desires and rub the ears of some hybrid I’d never met before.

“T-To me? What is there to like about me?”

“You don’t have to put yourself down like that! You’re incredibly kind and you’ve got fantastic ears! Have you really never had them complimented?”

“N-No! Praising someone’s ears like that... For us hybrids, it’s the highest praise there is. It’s the kind of thing you hear in a confession of love. There are even people who propose with that kind of talk...” she said bashfully.

Complimenting a hybrid’s ears, it seemed, was like complimenting a human’s face or body. Having just met Oltea today, I figured it would go without saying that I didn’t mean to propose to her. I knew she would take the compliment as a genuine one.

She seemed truly delighted by my remark, and I was glad, but...if hybrids held their ears in such high regard, then I might not be allowed to touch them so easily.

“Kaito... Do you really like my ears that much?”

“I *love* your ears. They’re the best ones I’ve ever seen.”

“Tha— That’s... That’s really,” she said, stumbling over her words. “If that’s true, then I’ll stay by your side, Kaito!”

“Thank you! I’m so happy to hear it!” I said. I just had to keep this up and do my best to build the kind of relationship in which Oltea would let me touch them!

We continued to talk as we flew smoothly around the lake, eyes on the grasslands in search of our target. After we took another half a lap around the water, it finally appeared.

The rock golem, a cluster of stones in the barely discernible shape of a person,

crossed the weeds in large, long strides. Its enormous size was evident even from fifty meters up.

“All that’s left is to kill the thing, then! Shouldn’t have any trouble making it back before sunset at this rate.”

“That’s, uh...pretty big, though. That thing is at least twice the size of the one I saw!” Oltea said uneasily.

Although she was nervous, a larger target was better in this situation. All the easier to hit from a distance. That being said, there would be no money to collect if I destroyed the devil stone. From this high up, I’d have no trouble defeating the monster, but my reduced accuracy could smash the only evidence of my victory and defeat the whole purpose of this exercise.

“When your group battled that rock golem, how did they pinpoint its stone?”

“Pinpoint it? The devil stone is a monster’s heart. It’s right in the chest where you’d expect. Basically—”

“If I smash its head, will I be able to retrieve the stone?” I asked. Oltea had said before that the instant a monster sustained a fatal wound, it crumbled to dust. If accidentally penetrating its heart was a no-go, then aiming for the head seemed like the best option.

“You will. The problem is the hardness. Rock golems are incredibly tough, so any insufficiently strong magic just bounces right off of them.”

“How did you guys take it down?”

“We levitated rocks, clumped them together with magic, and dropped them on the golem’s head. By doing that over and over, we eventually defeated it. We found the golem in the morning, but by the time it died, it was already evening.”

“That must have taken a lot of patience!” I said. We didn’t have that kind of time. At any rate, as long as I could take off the rock golem’s head, I could defeat it. And I had that kind of power.

Flying low so as not to be noticed, I produced the Sword Beam in my right hand. I imagined it lengthening and, on cue, it grew until it was fifty meters



long. It was just like that little monkey-tailed martial artist boy's "power pole"!

Unlike an actual staff, the Sword Beam was weightless. Upon contact with the rock golem's left shoulder, it slid clean through to the right one with nothing but a swishing noise. The beast's head disconnected from its torso and, while still falling to the ground, began to disintegrate. The golem's entire body disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving something shiny behind on the ground where it had vanished.

"You destroyed a rock golem," Oltea began, stunned, "in...just one hit."

Her astonishment had yet to fade when we touched down on the grass. Up close, I could make out the shiny object: a palm-sized crystal ball. The devil stone was larger than I had expected; I'd had the image of a marble in my head.

"This thing probably makes a pretty big magic item, yeah?"

"I'm not too familiar with the mechanics of it all myself, but I don't think one magic item uses the entire devil stone. The bigger the stone, the more of the monster's magic can be reproduced, but if the magic power is insufficient, then the item can't be activated." Oltea explained further that, while there were cases in which one stone was kept intact and used by multiple people, it was more common for them to be broken into pieces and distributed between multiple magical items.

"Well," I said, task complete. "Shall we head on back?"

We hopped aboard Stick Beam and flew back in the direction of the royal capital just as fast as we had come.

The evening's progress was marked by crimson in the sky as we returned to the guildhall. Inside, the air hung with stillness. A waitress lazily wiped the tables in the mess hall as the giant loan shark snored away on the couch. Deciding to complete the exchange before waking him up, I left Oltea waiting by the entrance and headed to the same reception window as before.

The attendant could barely mask her surprise at the sight of my return. She regarded me with a bewildered expression.

"You...already completed the request?"

“I did. Here: the devil stone,” I said, setting the stone down on the counter between us. The evidence only seemed to increase her shock. The receptionists at the neighboring counters were watching me with similarly amazed faces.

“I-I’ll check the stone now,” the receptionist said, stuttering with disbelief. She took the stone from the counter and inserted it into a box that looked kind of like a microwave. She then lifted her hand to the contraption. I didn’t understand the workings of the device, but apparently it was used to identify the source monster of a devil stone.

“Well, this is definitely the stone of a rock golem,” she said with a puzzled pause. “Wasn’t that a little too quick to defeat a monster like that?”

“I wanted to bring it down before sunset, so I did my best.”

“I overheard some of your earlier conversation with the man sleeping over there now. I understand the basics of the situation, but...to be honest, I still didn’t think you’d be able to do it. It actually had me a little anxious!” she said.

Several of the other receptionists chimed in to agree.

“We were going to close soon and really needed to wake that guy up, but we decided to let him sleep for a little bit,” one of them said.

“Actually, I think the waitress must have overheard you too. That’s why she’s been cleaning so slowly: if she doesn’t finish working, we can’t close the guildhall!” said another.

I looked over at the mess hall in time to see the waitress laugh and crack a smile before starting to wipe up faster. It seemed that everyone had been secretly working to tip the scales in our favor. I couldn’t believe how kind they’d been to the two of us.

“Thank you, everyone. Really, thank you so much.”

“No need to thank us. After all, you made it back before dark anyways!”

“We were really surprised at how fast you were. Verrick and Vlad are quite smooth operators, but you were even more efficient than they are!”

Judging by the employees’ excitement, my speed must have been record setting. The attendant I had first approached suddenly seemed to remember

something and said with an “Oh!” of recognition, “This is a formality, but just in case: can you please state your name for confirmation purposes?”

“Kaito Irie,” I said. She pulled out the registry, found my name, and struck it through. Next, she placed the gold coins and a stone badge on the counter.

“Here is your reward of three gold coins. In addition, a stone badge.”

“Thank you,” I said, returning the wooden badge and affixing the new one to my collar. With that, I had been promoted to Rank D Adventurer. I clutched the reward money tight in my hand and made my way back to the entrance, where Oltea was waiting. Together, we headed over to the couch.

“Excuse me,” I said, shaking the man’s shoulder lightly. With an irritated grumble, he began to open his eyes.

“Eh?” he said, groggy and slow. “Ah, it’s ye two again. That was pretty damn fast. Did ye crawl back to tell me that ye gave up already?”

“No, we got your money.”

“Already?” he said after a startled pause. “Now don’t ye go lying to me!”

“It’s the truth.” I showed him the coins and his eyes widened with shock.

“I’ll be damned... Well, if ye’ve got the power to scrape up cash that fast, why don’t ye just give me all ten right now?”

“Because I just became an adventurer today. What does it matter—I kept my promise, right?”

“That so, eh? Well, I guess the debt’s settled. I won’t hassle Oltea or her family no more. But as for ye: didn’t forget yer guarantee, did ye?” he asked. I remembered my promise, of course. I removed my watch and handed it over along with the gold coins. “Ooohhh wow. That’s a beaut right there. Damn thing really does have the nerve to move on its own, eh? This thing’ll fetch a pretty penny, no doubt about it!”

He smiled ear to ear while putting on his new watch.

“You seem like an obstinate guy, but promise me you won’t get involved with Oltea or her family again, okay? If you don’t hold up your end of the deal, I assure you that I will respond appropriately,” I said. I didn’t like to threaten

people, but I had to protect my new friend, to whom I was indebted.

His face turned pale at my uncharacteristically stern tone. I had never been able to intimidate anyone like that before, but the fact that I had been able to crush my target in record time to return before the deadline had granted my words the extra impact they needed.

“U-Understood. I got it! Won’t do nothin’ to pick a fight with ye, I promise,” he said in a frightened voice before rushing out of the guildhall.

“Perfect. Oltea, you’re free,” I said.

“Wow, thank you, Kaito!”

“No worries. Actually, I should be the one thanking you, since now I get to touch your ears! I can touch them now, right?”

“Y-Yeah. Of course, as much as you like,” Oltea said, trailing off. She leaned forward slightly to make it easier for me to pet her while keeping her eyes upturned to me.

“Okay,” I said awkwardly. “Right to it, then.” I gently grabbed the pointed edge of one of her ears between my fingers and caressed it. The closer I got to the base of her ears, the stiffer they felt, though in quite a different way than the cartilage of a human’s. Stroking them with my palm from base to tip quickly made them fold over. Their malleability made it almost feel like touching hair.

A euphoric feeling rose up in my chest as I rubbed and petted her ears every which way. I was grinning like a schoolboy. It was *incredible*. I had waited so long that finally getting to feel them was like a weight being lifted from my shoulders. I had satisfied my urge for now, but they were so appealing I almost wanted to keep touching them forever.

Oltea, however, was starting to look a little embarrassed. Each time I touched her ears, she shyly trembled, and when our eyes met, she went bright red in the face. I had no qualms about indulging in my cravings, but I understood that having another person fondle a delicate part of your body was the kind of thing that naturally provoked some shame. I didn’t want to pull my hand away, but I knew that I should stop soon...



“Thank you. That was wonderful. It didn’t hurt for you, did it?”

Oltea lightly shook her head, her ears and twin-tails slightly swaying. Seeing their gentle motion made me want to start all over again.

“Excuse me! We’ll be closing the guildhall shortlyyy!” called one of the receptionists. We shouted back that we understood and made our way out of the guildhall.

“So, Kaito, where are you headed from here?” asked Oltea in a timid voice once we were outside.

“Well, I don’t have any more money,” I said, thinking. “I guess I’ll sleep outside for the night.”

“I-In that case...if it’s okay with you...would you like to stay at my place instead?”

“I’d love that, but are you sure that would be all right?” I asked. We had built up some trust by now, but there was no getting around the fact that I was a man and she a girl. I was nearly twice Oltea’s age, so I thought of her more as a kid than a member of the opposite sex. I had no issues with the arrangement, but would Oltea really be fine with a man sleeping in her apartment?

“It’s the least I could do, Kaito. I owe you so much... Besides, if you stick around, then I’ll let you touch my ears whenever you want,” she said.

*Whenever I want?!*

“R-Really? Whenever I want?”

“Yeah, really! You rubbing them... I didn’t hate it. Anyways, you’ll always be welcome at my place. So what do you say?”

“Of course I want to feel them again! I agree, let’s stay together from now on!” I said. Perfect: now I could easily satisfy my laser-firing and ear-rubbing urges alike. There was one other desire the goddess had opened my eyes to: “collection.” I didn’t feel the need to collect much of anything at the moment. Of the three powers I had been given, I had quickly embraced the power to fire beams and the power to love animal ears. But in this world of loan sharks and debt, being true to my desire to collect could end up causing real damage. I’d be



lying if I said I wasn't a little worried.

Even so, when I fired my beams and touched Oltea's ears, I felt genuine joy. I had never once felt *genuine* joy in my previous life. I was uneasy at the prospect of finding out where the drive to "collect" might lead me, but as I thought of the happiness I'd just experienced, that unease began to fade.

In any case, I was broke. It was better that I not dwell too much on the question: the urge to collect with an empty wallet would be nothing but trouble.

Still, I had the feeling that fun days were ahead of me.

## Act 2: The Promotion Exam

Two weeks had passed since I began my life in this new world. It was the morning of my fourteenth day. A ray of sunlight passed through the small window to my side and fell on my eyes, rousing me. As I came to, I saw Oltea's face staring at my own from point-blank range. When she noticed that I was awake, her eyes widened with surprise.

"Uh—there was a mosquito on you!" she shouted. Her face flushed deep red as she hurriedly stood up.

"Again, huh?" I said. It had been an ongoing problem these past two weeks. The mosquitoes must have been absolutely ubiquitous in this room. It was lucky that in all this time I hadn't once seen one. Or heard one buzzing. Or felt the itch from one biting.

"You're an early riser, aren't you, Oltea?"

"Back when I lived in the countryside, I always woke up with the sun. Waking up at the crack of dawn is in my blood," she said.

Oltea was always the first to fall asleep and the first to wake. I never had to worry about her changing because she was always out of her pajamas and dressed up in her fairy-tale garb before I even woke. This morning, she was looking at me expectantly.

"Hey, so... Do you think you'll wanna touch my ears again soon?" she asked in a tone almost like begging, looking up at me with upturned eyes as her tail swayed back and forth.

"I was actually just thinking I'd ask you if I could."

"In that case, pet them as much as you'd like," she said. I immediately took her up on the offer, feeling the same happiness that doing so always gave me.

"Well, do they feel good? Is it nice?"

"Absolutely, they feel fantastic! Your ears are the best, Oltea."

“Of course they are. Enjoy them!” she said in a singsong voice. At first, ear touches had always made Oltea red-faced and nervous, but lately, she’d gotten quite used to our arrangement and taken to grinning each time I rubbed her ears. I was able to get my fill anytime without worrying about troubling her anymore.

“Thanks, Oltea, I’m good now.”

“No problem. Let me know if you need another touch, yeah? Anytime.”

“I will, definitely,” I said. I left Oltea, clearly in a good mood today, on the bed and made my way to the kitchen. Antique-looking goblets and a matryoshka-like arrangement of white porcelain jugs, all full of water, lined the shelves. I poured some water into one of the goblets, which prompted a “Me too, please!” from Oltea. Once our glasses were filled, the two of us drank side by side.

“Ahhh, delicious! I’m glad that I can have water whenever I like now, thanks to you.”

“It gives me a chance to get used to my powers.”

“Really, I cannot thank you enough, Kaito. If you’d told me two weeks ago that I would be living like this, I wouldn’t have believed you.”

“If Oltea from two weeks ago could have seen this room, she’d be pretty shocked, I bet!” I said. We kicked back to enjoy our water and surveyed the apartment. The first thing that drew the eye was the mattress laid out next to the bed. That was where I slept. Oltea had let me share her bed on the first night, but her embarrassment had been clear as day. I’d taken her up on the offer because there were no other options and space was tight, but on my second day in this world, I’d decided to go out and buy a mat for myself.

First, I slew a monster. Then, I received one gold coin. From there, it was just a matter of going to the store.

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The third desire conferred upon me at the hand of the goddess had finally been activated.

Colorful clothes of all types adorned the hanger rack, next to which sat a wooden box full of various perfumes, tableware, and cosmetics. The flower vase beside them held a short dagger and countless other knickknacks: a mask, a hand mirror, a pair of scales. Everything had been shoved haphazardly in its place, the way a child puts playthings into their toy box. Bronze and wooden statues were lined up in the corner of the room and paintings and tapestries hung on all of the walls. This was the result of two weeks of indulging in my drive to collect.

“Sorry, Oltea, I’ve taken over the whole room with my stuff.”

“No, I don’t mind! It’s fun. It feels like I’m in a general store,” Oltea said.

She really was too kind. I couldn’t let myself take advantage of her agreeable nature, though: if I kept splurging like this, soon enough there would be nowhere left to walk and I’d have to worry about Oltea tripping. Even so, I couldn’t really *not* collect things. The goddess had made me like this. For that reason, there was only one way forward.

“Should we move soon?”

“You mean you’d bring me with you?”

“Of course I would. If you don’t have any objections to coming with me, that is.”

“No, none! I’d love to!” she said, looking happy. I remembered her saying she’d like to move somewhere better someday when I first came to this apartment. She might have been waiting for me to broach the topic.

“In that case, we’ll have to raise some moving money, won’t we?” Together, the two of us had already brought in more than fifty gold coins in two weeks, which I had proceeded to squander. I’d heard jokes about city slickers who couldn’t keep a single yen overnight, and that was the kind of life I had come to lead. “Sorry I’m always spending so much.”

I had planned to split all the rewards in half with Oltea, but she had turned me down. Even further, she had said that holding large amounts of money on her person scared her and entrusted me with her wallet. I didn’t want to say it, but I figured she ought to be more scared of my extravagant spending habits.

That being said, Oltea wasn't the type to be bothered.

"No need to be sorry. It's you who earned it all in the first place. Besides, I like seeing you have fun when you shop! Your eyes light up. It makes you look cute, like a kid," she said. I didn't quite know how to feel about being told I looked "like a kid" by a girl nearly half my age, but it nonetheless made me smile.

After all, it was just like Oltea said: I was having a blast being true to this new collecting lifestyle. In my previous life, I hadn't known what to do with my money and had only purchased the bare minimum I needed to live. As a consequence, I'd had not only an empty room but a vacant heart. Now, however, I felt fulfilled. Every time I bought something new, I was thrilled with wonder as I contemplated the ways my life might change. A goblet, for example: I drank water every single day, but just switching from a glass to a goblet gave the act a whole new feeling. Buying a vase made me want to go to the flower shop. Buying new tableware made me want to try cooking more for myself. Giving in to my desire for new things made the room smaller but the world wider.

Before, the world I'd lived in was no larger than my commute to and from work, although even then, I'd known the fun of going out and shopping. When you enter the right store, you always know you can find what you're looking for, and buying it can help you smile, even if just a little.

For now, I was usually satisfied with what I was able to acquire, which made me worry that I was wasting my money. If I kept this lifestyle up, I might someday come across something I really wanted and become a truly maniacal collector. All the same, the collectors I had seen on TV seemed to lead truly happy lives. The record collectors, the shoe collectors—all of them brimmed with vitality when they talked about their obsessions. I hoped that one day I would find something I could immerse myself in like that.

In any case, I knew that I had to move if I wanted to gather any more things than I already had. If I didn't, it was going to become difficult to pack anything more into this space.

"Oltea, is there anywhere in particular that you wanna live?" I asked.

"Is it really okay for me to decide?"

“I’m fine with any place as long as I have space for my stuff. Money’s no object either, so if there’s a spot you’ve had in mind, just let me know.”

“Well, if you really mean that, Section One would be pretty great. I’ve always wanted a room with a view of the castle!” she said, reminding me of people back home longing for a room with a view of the Tokyo Tower. It was very characteristic of Oltea, who had been raised in the countryside before transitioning to urban life.

“Section One, huh? That would be pretty nice! It’d be close to the guildhall too,” I said. Flying already got us to the guild in a flash, but the return trips had been unexpectedly difficult. Since most of the roofs in this town were tinted orange, it was hard to differentiate them from the sky. The day that I first came to the city with Oltea, we had ended up walking a bit after landing since even she could only pinpoint the general area from above. Besides, with my thirties fast approaching, I had started gaining a bit of weight; finding a place within walking distance of the guild could spur me to get some good exercise in.

“That being said...” —Oltea sighed, her suddenly sullen countenance contrasting my forward-looking cheer—“rent isn’t cheap in Section One.”

Section Two and onward had seen scores of apartment buildings and tenements go up in anticipation of an ever-increasing population, but Section One was still mostly single-family homes. There were instances in which the more rundown units had been demolished and replaced with apartment complexes, but at the same time, there was no shortage of people like Oltea who longed to live in the city center, which kept the demand—and thus the rent—correspondingly high.

“How much, roughly?”

“The cheaper ones right alongside the wall go for one gold, but they get terrible sunlight and you can’t see much of the castle way out on the edge like that,” she said. So prices were higher the closer you got to the center.

“And how are the room layouts there?”

“I only ever got a glance while setting luggage down, but I’d say they’re a *little* smaller than this room,” she said. One hundred thousand yen for the equivalent of a modest six-tatami-mat room was definitely spendy, but at the same time,



when I compared it to an accommodation of similar scale in the best neighborhood in Tokyo, it felt about right.

“You did home delivery work too?”

“I guess so. Got one copper for each house delivered to. It was kind of tough to remember all the streets, but it was probably the most worthwhile job I’ve had.”

“So why’d you quit?”

“I shouted at someone who grabbed my tail, they filed a claim, and I got fired,” Oltea said. Seemed like something that happened a lot to her.

“Well, you can rest easy with me. I won’t grab your tail.”

“Yeah, ’cause you’re too into my ears,” she said, giggling. “On the other hand, if we went to Hybrid Town in Section Three, we could get a place three times the size for one gold!”

“There’s a *Hybrid Town*?!” The name was music to my ears: with the newly awakened yet boundless love for animal ears burning in my chest, the mere image was akin to that of paradise. Even the phrase “animal ears” could only gesture nonspecifically at the countless varieties it implied. There were short-furred ears, long-furred ears, ears whose triangular shapes were equilateral or isosceles, ones that were instead rounded, oblong ones, and on and on and on. In just two weeks here, I had only been able to *touch* Oltea’s ears (short-furred, equilateral!), but I had seen countless others. If I formed a good relationship with neighbors in Hybrid Town, I might get the chance to touch some of their ears too.

“It’s a cheap neighborhood—we wouldn’t be able to live there.”

“Because you can’t see the castle?”

“No, because it’s the kind of place where poor hybrids help each other scrape by. Wouldn’t living extravagantly in a place like that look a little bit like you’re rubbing it in their faces?” she asked.

Through Oltea, I had observed the harsh conditions hybrids were subject to, but from the way she talked, she must have been one of the lucky ones. If her

meager existence had been an *escape*, one could only assume life was truly miserable in Hybrid Town. Living in a place like that with cash to flaunt would make our neighbors feel awful.

“And also: there’re a ton of people and not a lot of space. If we came in throwing money around and got a place, somebody else could get evicted to make room. For that reason, there’s an unspoken understanding that hybrids who land honest jobs go and live elsewhere.”

“I see. Sounds like Section One it is, then, yeah?”

“I’m really happy about the idea, but...is it really okay? Shouldn’t we move somewhere that you choose?”

“I’ve got no objections. All I care about is being able to do all the shopping I want!” I said. “I don’t really care about the room itself as long as it’s a place to live. I’d rather make *your* wishes come true in that regard.”

“Thank you, Kaito... I’m so happy to hear that. Seeing the castle from my window has always been a dream of mine. It always sounded like such a fabulous, romantic life,” Oltea said, spellbound by the thought of it. Her daydreams gave way to brass-tacks planning with surprising speed as she came back down to earth. “We’ll have to start saving money. If we rent a room in the center of Section One, it’ll be five gold a month. I’d like to set aside six months of rent if we’re really moving. Oh, and of course we’d have to factor in living expenses!”

I did the math in my head: our target was forty gold pieces. I turned in requests at the guild every day. I had already completed ten D rank requests, the prerequisite for becoming a C rank adventurer, and received my bronze badge. With it, I was able to take on more dangerous contracts and earn greater recompense. Already, I was taking home around six gold pieces a day. As long as I went a while without letting my addiction to buying things guide my purse, I could reach our goal in just one week.

“Sounds like we better get right to work, then,” I said. With that settled, I ate an apple and made my way to the hanger rack to grab my coat: a long, black piece with crimson lining. I had gathered an assortment of clothing, but the fabrics used in this world did not agree with my skin, prickly and itchy as they

were by my standards. I couldn't let my old dress shirt go. It was cut slender but remained flexible and easy to move in, just like the pants I always paired it with, which I had also kept.

Even so, wearing an unmodified suit would have made me stand out like a sore thumb, so I had swapped the jacket out for my new coat and ditched the leather boots in favor of a pair of work shoes. Under my new wardrobe, though, the same dress shirt persisted. Articles like that were prone to showing stains and dirt clearly, but neither it nor my slacks had a single blotch to speak of. It didn't even smell. I had been conjuring the image of "a beam that removes stains" in my mind, and lo and behold, both visual and olfactory evidence of my daily sweat were easily erased. I had even been using the beam on my own body, with the result that my skin was more radiant and my hair more richly full than when fresh out of the bath. I called that one "Clean Beam."

Oltea, who had previously been unable to draw her own fresh tap water and instead had to make do with the often-dirty leftover water at the communal bath to wash herself, was especially delighted by Clean Beam. It was a win-win: Oltea was able to easily stay clean and I was able to easily satisfy my urge to bring out the lasers.

As I drew down my coat, my mind bounced between these connections until even thinking about the beams gave me the itch to shoot one off.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's go."

Oltea bundled up in her casual clothes and we left the apartment. Outside, the sky was a clear, bright blue. I immediately attended to my desire and took to the skies.

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We landed on the main street just in front of the guildhall. It was still early in the morning and foot traffic was sparse. Come midday, these roads would be bustling with activity and I, like a moth to a flame, would be aimlessly wandering between whatever shops caught my eye with their wares. Usually, that is. Starting today, I had to be patient. I'd exercise self-control and save up enough money to finance our move!

Having made that resolution, I made to enter the guildhall when something

stopped me in my tracks. By the corner of the guild's outer wall, looking diffident, a hybrid girl of about eight stood by herself. I had seen ears like hers before—long and bunnylike—but never ones that hung straight down. I absolutely had to know what they felt like. I was staring at her lop ears when she met my gaze. She had been looking all around when she caught me staring and, seeming to make up her mind about something then, ran up to me.

“Hey! Um, do you...need any flowers?” she asked in a shrill voice, showing us a basket full of them. Not the kind of elegant plants that would line the windows of a florist's shop but small, sad things that had probably been picked from some marginal corner of a nearby park. She could have picked them from the cracks between cobblestones. Nonetheless, she seemed to be walking the avenue looking to sell them.

“I'll take them all,” I said. The snap decision had nothing to do with my collection urge; I just genuinely wanted to appreciate animal ears. I figured that by becoming a regular of hers, I could one day earn enough goodwill that she'd allow me to touch them.

“A-All of them?!”

“Is that an inconvenience?” I asked.

She shook her head no, her face beaming. “No, no inconvenience! I want to sell them!”

“Good. How much for all of them, then?”

“Uh, well, five of them are one cent, so, uh...” The whole bunch was worth only about one copper, but as she counted the flowers one by one, she had the glowing smile of someone who thought they were about to earn a lot of money.

“Buying them is fine, but how are you for money?” Oltea asked, tugging at my coat.

“Ah, right...” I said, trailing off. I had spent so extravagantly the day before that I had completely exhausted our coffers, but I had still said I would buy all the flowers without thinking.

“Do you not have money?” the girl asked, looking up at me with the dejected eyes of someone whose dreams had just been shattered. Apologizing and

walking away would have been the easiest thing to do, but I just couldn't say no to a little kid making that face. I had given her hope and now I had to take responsibility.

"I don't, but I am actually about to go earn some! Will you be out here for long?"

"Until I make enough to buy bread for my whole family!" she said.

I knew that hybrids had it hard, but I could barely believe that a child not yet ten years old was already out working to feed her family. Living outside of the city in a village with arable land could at least ensure a steady supply of food, but there were monsters to contend with. In the event of an attack, the people would be defenseless. Inside the city, hybrids could at least live without the threat of an incursion, but that was no guarantee of safety. For a hybrid, the choice was between facing monsters and facing hunger. The latter, carrying at least the possibility of survival, seemed to win out more often.

Even so, I couldn't imagine that most would just resign themselves to their fate without a fight.

"Would you stay here until I return this afternoon? If that's too boring, you could even go pick more flowers and come back. I'll buy them all."

"R-Really?! You mean it?!" she said, her face bright with joy.

"Really!" I said, smiling back at her. I waved as she took off to go pick more flowers. "I'm sorry... Right when we started saving money to move too."

"Don't be. I think that's a wonderful way to use money. Let's complete a request right away, for her!"

"Okay!" I said. We entered the guildhall. I immediately approached the same reception window I always did, the attendant having become a familiar face over these past couple of weeks.

She smiled warmly as I approached. "Welcome back, Mr. Kaito. I have an important announcement to relay this morning."

"An important announcement?"

"Yes, it concerns the B Rank Promotional Examination," she said. I hadn't

been given the rundown, but I knew about the rank system, of course. While eating in the guild's mess hall, I'd overheard conversations between adventurers about another system of classification: just as adventurers were assigned a rank from E to A, jobs were given a "danger level" from E to A. In other words, if I passed the examination, I would be allowed to take on jobs labeled "Danger Level: B."

"Wow, Kaito! Already Rank B!" said Oltea.

"It really is impressive!" the receptionist chimed in. "The prerequisite for taking the B Rank Promotional Examination is the seamless completion of five consecutive C Rank requests. If you fail one of the requests, or even complete one with too close a struggle, your count will be reset. In my ten years or so of working this counter, this is the first time I have ever seen someone advance nearly to B Rank within two weeks! Mr. Verrick did it in six months, and even Mr. Vlad took an entire month."

Oltea and the attendant were talking excitedly about my accomplishment, but, in all honesty, I didn't feel that I had done much of note. I had simply satisfied my urges.

"Are we paid for the exam jobs?"

"Of course remuneration will be provided. Despite the designation of 'examination,' you will be taking real Danger Level B contracts. Naturally, your recompense will increase to match," she said. In that case, I'd have no trouble keeping my promise to the flower girl.

While I felt relieved, Oltea sounded increasingly nervous. "Rank...B requests?"

"One moment, please," said the receptionist before receding into the room behind the window to withdraw something from a drawer. "Here we are," she said, placing a bulletin on the counter.

The monster, which resembled a king cobra, was labeled "Ophidian," Danger Level B. The associated reward was thirty gold coins. According to the poster, it resided in the swamps of the Numeille Wetlands.

"Wow, that payout is in a whole different league."

"Those monsters are just that much stronger... Based on simple math, it

would be thirty times stronger than the wood golem,” said Oltea, her face turning pale.

The receptionist regarded me with a serious countenance. “It’s as your companion said: the ophidian is a remarkably formidable foe. It is large enough to swallow a water buffalo whole yet keen and agile. Its poisonous fangs have the power to kill by just grazing their target, and its scales are not only hard as iron but also constantly secrete venom. Even just touching one would leave you dead after a few hours.”

The serpent’s treacherousness was a given, but the Wetlands could be rife with danger in their own right. Just one look at the place made clear the possibility of poison lurking in the land itself.

“Wh-What do we do, Kaito? I think it’d be fine to just keep doing level C requests like before,” Oltea said nervously. Compared to rank B, rank C jobs were, true, lower risk—but also lower return. One completed request could net around six gold coins. For Oltea, I suppose that *was* a high return. I could understand not wanting to up the ante.

That being said, I did want to try my hand at the Promotional Exam. I wasn’t the ambitious type, but the wild difference in pay was undeniably appealing. Not only would we reach our savings goal faster, but I’d be able to more easily support my collecting habit. Safety came first, of course, so if my beam didn’t do the trick, I would stick to C Rank jobs in the future.

I explained that to Oltea, and she nodded as though to convey *If you say so, Kaito*.

“Just to confirm, are you two a party?” the receptionist asked.

“Yes, we are!”

“In that case, you are short one member. It will be necessary for you to find one more comrade before I can register you.”

“We can’t sign up with fewer than three?”

“No. I’m terribly sorry, but that is the policy,” she said. She went on to apologetically explain the situation: rank C monsters were at the upper limit of one person’s ability to kill. Beyond that point, magic cast by an individual was



insufficient, and for safety's sake, groups of three or more were required for rank B enemies and groups of five or more for rank A.

Earlier, Oltea had said that there were magic items designed for use by multiple people at once. They must have been created to defeat enemies level B and up.

Splitting thirty gold coins with another adventurer would eat into our earnings, but even with that caveat, it would still be faster than continuing to take only rank C requests.

"In that case, we'll come back with another."

"Excellent. You may want to check the notice board over there for potential recruits," the receptionist said, pointing to the display. We took her advice and walked over to it.

An employee, busy hammering bulletins onto the surface, took notice of our approach.

"Lemme know what you're looking for and I'll check," they said offhandedly.

"If available, we'd prefer a woman," Oltea said. "That way, if we get around like usual, she can hold on to your back," she added in my direction. Having heard our conditions, the employee scanned the board.

Each poster included name, rank, and qualifications preferred in prospective adventuring partners, but none of them specified the poster's gender. It would have been easy to tell apart names like "Hanako" from ones ending in "Tarou," but I couldn't determine anything from names like "Colonel" and "Restoss."

Perhaps a native would have an easier time. I looked at Oltea, hoping she would know. She was staring transfixed at one bill in particular.

"Did you find someone?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, but something about this one..." she said, pointing to the ad in question. It advertised the services of an adventurer by the name of Frieze, rank D, sex unspecified. It was the preferred partner qualifications that had drawn Oltea's interest: "Seeking to adventure with a hybrid of dauntless courage and an unbreakable will to bring the fight to the monsters!" read the passionately

penned message.

Hybrids were unable to use magic, but this Frieze had specified a preference for their company.

“This Frieze person,” said Oltea as I thought over what I had read. “They must be a hybrid too.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“I can’t think of any other reason why you would specify like that. I could understand if they were looking for a pack mule, but they want a hybrid with *combat* ability,” Oltea said.

Joining another hybrid to adventure rather than settling for assistant work certainly came with higher risks, but the appeal was clear. Considering the dramatically higher return, it was no wonder there would also be hybrids who tried their hand at fighting.

“Shall we try our luck with Frieze?” I asked. I didn’t meet Frieze’s requirements, but Oltea did. With another hybrid in the party already, they were likely to at least hear us out.

“Sure, why not? Looks like they want to meet, uh...here,” Oltea said, looking closely at the poster. Beneath Frieze’s info were the words “Royal Capital Adventurer’s Guildhall, Mess (morning).” Even so, there didn’t appear to be any hybrids at the tables. I was beginning to think that the offer had already been taken and Frieze had simply forgotten to take down the poster, but we decided to wait a while in front of the bulletin board anyway.

Then she entered: at sixteen or seventeen years old, she already carried herself with refined dignity. Bluish hair hung down to her waist and framed her body, clad in skintight clothing and a mantle cape beneath which her thighs peeked out. A heavy-looking longsword hung at her waist, from which a tail also grew. On her head, two animal ears, isosceles in shape and long of fur.

*I wanted to pet them so bad!*



As I felt an aching urge to touch these new ears, my feet almost seemed to move on their own.

“Excuse me, are you Frieze?” I asked. As I did, she stopped walking toward the mess, halted by my approach.

“Why do you know my name?”

“I was just checking the bulletin board. I was very much hoping you would join my party, Frieze,” I said.

She glanced in my direction, looking me over with suspicious eyes. “If you plan to put me to work doing your chores, you should know I’m not so weak as to take orders from humans for a pittance. I’ve got a track record of putting an end to ogres, in fact!”

“That’s amazing. With that sword?” I asked.

“Uh-huh,” she said, nodding proudly and tapping the weapon’s hilt. “I won it in a bet with some drunken fool. We arm wrestled on the condition that he give up his sword if I won or take me as a bag carrier for a whole year with no pay if he won.”

“So that sword is a magic item.”

“Seems that way. He said that when it vibrates with magic energy, its sharpness is increased. I can’t use the magic, but in my hands, it’s still more than enough for felling ogres and the like.”

“Surely you’re exaggerating!” said Oltea. “Ogres are danger level D monsters. There’s no way a hybrid could defeat them without magic!”

“I didn’t do it alone. Some exhausted fighters called to me for help during a battle, so I just leaped in and delivered the killing blow. Struck it on the back. You know what, though? They didn’t thank me at all. They made me carry their bags home and paid me just five copper. That’s why I don’t work with humans anymore.”

“I’ve been a porter too, so I know how you feel. But Kaito is different. He would never mistreat you or use you for being a hybrid,” Oltea said.

Frieze’s ears perked up. *Adorable*, I thought to myself. I was feeling it.

“Kaito...?” Frieze said, looking at me. “*The* Kaito that everyone has been talking about?”

“You know me?”

“Everyone does. The man who hunts monsters one after another using some incredible power. Why would someone of your strength need me?”

“We’ve decided to take the Level B Promotional Exam.”

“And you want to make me fight a level B monster?!”

“No, I’ll be fighting it alone,” I said.

Frieze sighed with relief. “I-I see. So you *are* going to make me carry your stuff.”

“As you can see, I don’t have any bags to carry. It’s just that the exam requires a party of three. That’s the reason we called on you.”

“Sure, but you could bolster your ranks with anyone at all if it’s just to meet the minimum. Why me?”

“I chose you,” said Oltea. “If we had to bring someone along, I wanted it to be a girl. Besides, you’re a hybrid. Surely you can see what a good chance this is to make money.”

“How much?”

“For this job, thirty gold. Divided evenly three ways, of course,” I said.

“T-Ten gold?!” she shouted. “Just for coming along?! Are you trying to trick me or something?”

“Kaito would never do something like that! He’s never used or mistreated me at all!” Oltea blurted out.

Frieze looked at her with surprise but seemed convinced by her verve. “Surely, but... Just ten gold for coming along is... I suppose, well, a level B monster is... It wouldn’t be good—I can’t fight, but... Well, at the same time, the trip...no less dangerous,” she mumbled, her words blending.

“I can’t understand you. If you’re gonna come with us, decide soon.”

“D-Don’t rush me!” she said. “Level B, huh? If you just let me head home and

sleep on it, get some time to— Well, actually, now that I think about it, I probably wouldn't be able to sleep all worked up like this... Of course, I could stay up all night, but—”

“You don't have time to go home!” Oltea said. “We want to complete the first request by the end of the day. Unless you're scared? You did say that you were looking for a ‘hybrid of dauntless courage and an unbreakable will,’ right?”

“I'm not scared! Not scared at all, not even a little bit! I'm brave! I'll do it!” Frieze said. Snap decisions often lead to regret, but it's better to try something out and wish you hadn't than to regret not trying at all. In any case, I had no intention of making Frieze regret her choice.

I informed the receptionist that we had formed our party, and after signing the necessary forms for registration, we left the guildhall. Outside, we opened our map.

“All right, let's go!”

“Hold on, go where?” Oltea asked Frieze, who was already springing into action.

Frieze looked back at her blankly. “To the harbor, of course. First, we'll board a ferry downriver, passing two towns. We'll rent horses after that if they're available. If there isn't room in the budget for three, I am of course fine to walk. It takes longer, but I'm not afraid to sleep on the road if I have to!”

In this world, ferries rather than trains provided the means of transit over great distances. Goods and passengers moved between neighboring towns and nations along the many rivers which flowed through the capital. I hadn't yet boarded a ship myself, but I had watched them from the skies as they moved to and fro. Powered by magic, marine traffic glided along the water without the motive power of sails.

Of course, riding a beam was much faster.

“Actually, we'll just fly to the wetlands.”

“Huh?! I get to fly too?” Frieze asked, her face lit up with excitement. She looked ecstatic to have the chance to do so even just once.

“It’s a little different from regular flight. You might find it a little scary, but—”

“I won’t get scared! I’m a brave hybrid!” Frieze said. She didn’t look so tough, but I wasn’t about to point that out and ruin her good mood.

After checking the map, I summoned Stick Beam and mounted it alongside Oltea. I had made some improvements over the last couple of weeks: sitting on a thin rod for hours could be uncomfortable, so I had widened Stick Beam to the thickness of a log.

“Frieze, hop on behind Oltea!”

“Make sure you hold on tight so you don’t fall, okay?”

“U-Uh, yeah! Okay!” Frieze said. She gingerly boarded the solid-light stick, two meters long and thirty centimeters in width. Our preparations were almost complete.

I summoned Shield Beam to our fore and began to lift us off the ground by firing Jet Beam from my feet. Once we were about one hundred meters up, Frieze started screaming.

“AAAH! WE’RE SO HIGH UP! I DIDN’T THINK WE’D GO SO HIGH!”

“H-Hey! Calm down! Don’t shake around so much!”

“It’s not what it sounds like!!!” she yelled, trying to regain composure.

“*Ngh!* Hey, what the— Don’t grab me so hard! You surprised me!” yelled Oltea.

“But you said to make sure I held on tight?! You heard her tell me that, right, Kaito?!”

“Yeah, you did say that.”

“SEE?”

“Okay, but that’s *too* hard! I know you’re scared, but—”

“I told you I’m *NOT* scared!”

“Yes, you are! You obviously are! Weren’t you just screaming too?”

“Hey! I-I couldn’t help it! It’s scary and—”



“Ah, see! You admit it—you *are* scared!”

“NO! I didn’t say that! I’m not scared at all!”

I could tell already that there wouldn’t be a dull moment on this trip.

As we flew past mountain peaks five hundred meters from the ground, the wetlands, a vast expanse of emerald green pockmarked with bogs and ponds of all sizes, came into view. The contract flyer had directed us to the “swamps,” but just about everything in the area matched that vague description, making it difficult to know where to begin. Searches like this were always a test of patience.

“These must be the Numeille Wetlands, then,” I said.

“We’re...already there?” Frieze muttered, sounding confused. “Oh! It really is the wetlands!”

“Got scared and kept your eyes shut, huh?” mocked Oltea.

“I didn’t close my eyes. It was just a long blink!” Frieze countered. She had, in fact, reacted to earlier scenery, but around the time we passed over the mountains, she had suddenly gone quiet. The rapid elevation gain had probably spooked her.

“That was pretty fast. How’re you feeling? Nauseated at all?” I asked, speaking casually so she’d feel like a party member instead of an employee. We’d been in the air for two hours. Earlier, she had told me that overly formal conversation made it impossible for her to calm down and urged me to just talk like a friend.

“I’m good! I think I’m pretty much used to it now. It’s not as scary.”

“Oh, so you *were* scared!” Oltea said.

“No, I’ve been enjoying it the whole time! I’m actually really brave! In fact, I’m really looking forward to seeing the ophidian soon too.”

“Good, because we all need to keep our eyes peeled and search! Actually, maybe Kaito should take us up even *higher* so that we can see really far.”

“Huh?! Take us even higher?!”

“Actually,” I said, “if we fly too high, it’ll be hard to see much of anything. I think it would make more sense to go lower.”

“Huh?! Take us even lower?!”

“Well, what *do* you want him to do? Sheesh...” Oltea said.

“I think we should just stay right here: if we go higher, then it’s like Kaito said, but if we go lower, then the ophidian could eat us!” Frieze said.

“Well, what’ll it be, Kaito?” Oltea asked. Perhaps feeling sympathetic to Frieze, she wasn’t pushing me on the issue of flying higher, instead letting me make the call.

“We maintain our altitude. This is just the right height to make out the water buffalo down there,” I said. The lumbering bovines were all over the wetlands. I didn’t know exactly how long the ophidian was, but if it was really capable of eating a buffalo whole, it was safe to assume it was fairly large. Even from this height, we should be able to spot it.

Jet Beam carried us steadily forward as I scanned ahead, Oltea searched our right flank, and Frieze watched to the craft’s left.

I was the first to see anything: evidence of some large beast creeping out of the murky water scarred the banks of a large bog nearby. Weeds that looked to have flattened beneath the weight of the advancing monster formed a long, dark line cutting across the wetlands into the distance. The trail led straight to a huge snake slithering through the foliage, its tail dragging heavily behind it. Forget a water buffalo, it looked big enough to swallow a whole truck!

“Th-That’s the ophidian?”

“Definitely Danger Level B! It’s way bigger than anything we’ve fought before!”

“How the hell are we supposed to take down a monster like that?”

“Where would the devil stone on that thing even be?”

“It’s certainly different from a bipedal monster, but I’ve got no idea...”

A devil stone was a monster’s heart. The stones felt and looked unlike any heart I was familiar with, but it was only natural that a monster would be so

different from an ordinary animal. What was important was the role devil stones played: blood flowed within monsters too—just as within any life-form—so if devil stones were their hearts, then it was safe to assume that they likewise served to circulate blood throughout their bodies.

The ophidian was a monster, but it looked just like a snake. Back when I was still a grade schooler, the lecturer at my cram school would go off on all kinds of tangents and rattle off trivia. Once, he had quizzed us about the position of a snake's heart. According to him, the distance between a snake's heart and its head differed based on the environment it lived in. Snakes prone to tree climbing had hearts close to their heads in order to better pump blood against the flow of gravity. Conversely, serpents that spent a lot of time underwater were able to circulate blood well even though the distance between those two points was much greater. Snakes that spent their lives slithering along the ground, on the other hand, had their hearts somewhere in the middle.

The wetlands lacked trees large enough for the ophidian to climb, and even though there was plenty of water, very few of the bogs could accommodate it either. It was too big to live underwater out here. In other words, our mark lived on level ground.

"I'll cut through its neck just like all the rest!" I said. It was impossible to say where the neck ended or began, but if I could slice off the monster's head, then I could take it out without damaging the devil stone.

"S-Saying that is one thing, but you can't just cut right through a neck that thick! If you even get close, it'll just eat you!" yelled Frieze.

"Don't worry; just watch," I said. I flew in parallel to the path of the massive serpent and, just as we passed over the base of its neck, extended Sword Beam from my hand. Like the power pole, it steadily grew until it was around one hundred meters long. Meeting its mark with a whirring noise, it decapitated the monster immediately. We'd been told the ophidian's scales were as hard as steel, but the beam cut through its body as though through tofu.

The serpent, annihilated before it even became aware of our existence, began to dissolve moments later. First its scales fell, then its meaty musculature melted away. Finally, its bones disappeared. In an instant, the monster had

vanished.

“Huh?! The Ophi— You already killed it?!” yelled Frieze.

“It seems even level B monsters are no match for Kaito’s beam...” said Oltea.

“In that case, we’ll have no more trouble completing rank B requests than we have with any of the others up to now,” I said.

“You killed the monsters ‘up to now’ just as fast? No wonder they say you’re incredibly powerful. I feel a little silly for being so proud of my ogre killing now.”

“Nothing to be embarrassed about. I’m only able to do that because of my beams. If I had to fight using just my own body, I wouldn’t be able to do anything like this. The fact that you go toe to toe with these things is amazing. I think you’re much braver than I am,” I said.

“Really?” Frieze said, faltering. “I’m glad to hear that. Makes me feel proud.”

“You should,” I said. “Shall we look for the devil stone?” Hearing agreement from both parties, I brought us down until we were about three meters above the ground. Before long, we saw an object roughly the size of a softball glittering in the sunlight about ten meters down from where the monster’s head had been.

“Wait, the ophidian is venomous, right?” Frieze said.

“Now that you mention it, yeah. If we pick the stone up with our bare hands, we might get poisoned...” said Oltea.

“Don’t worry, I’ll clean that thing right up!” I said. Without dismounting, I fired my cleaning beam into the marsh. Like a foam spray, it fired as a shower of bubbles. Soapy-looking suds flew out as we touched down.

“Is it okay to touch it now?”

“It looks all right.”

“The Clean Beam is good for poison too, it seems!”

“It’ll make anything immaculate.”

“To erase even the ophidian’s poison... You’re incredible, Mr. Kaito.”

“Thanks, but you’re pretty incredible yourself for actually taking a monster

down with just a sword,” I said, clearly delighting Frieze.

We straddled Stick Beam once more, then took off straight for the capital.

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We arrived back at the capital as the sun reached its apex in the sky, beaming down on us from directly above. The main street was full of midday activity and bustle. Rival stores fought for foot traffic, urging passersby to choose them over any other establishment by calling out to them and employing pretty girls to stand on the side of the road, shouting information and inviting potential customers inside.

“Bergamot perfumes, long sold out and too hot to keep on the shelves, finally back in stock! Freshly arrived just today, a new shipment of bergamot perfume!” called a voice, its exact origin impossible to discern in the din. The sales pitch struck a chord with me and got my collection urge going.

I’d never heard of bergamot before, and I wondered what kind of scent it might have. I knew that I had to get my hands on some and find out.

“It’s you again!” called a familiar young voice, quelling my urge. At the corner of the guildhall’s wall, just like before, stood the flower-peddling hybrid girl. Seeing me, she dashed over happily. She carried a basket, densely packed to the brim with wildflowers.

“Looks like you picked a whole lot of those,” I said.

“And they’re all so beautiful!” added Oltea.

“I tried my best to get as many as I could!” Her knees were stained black, and she looked like she’d been diligently picking flowers from cracks in the cobble for quite some time.

“You two know each other?” Frieze asked.

“Sort of. I promised her I’d buy some flowers.”

“Mr. Kaito told me he’d buy up all my flowers even though he didn’t have any money on him, right, Mr. Kaito?”

Frieze’s dignified air fell away for a moment as she looked at the two of us with a gentle face, understanding what we had done for the girl. “So that’s why

you rushed me into joining the party on such short notice... Kaito, Oltea... That's so kind of you," she said. If she took a liking to us, she would want to stay in the party longer than just today. If she did, and we were able to deepen our relationship, I might even get to touch her ears.

Ear talk aside, we would decide our future plans later. For now, there was more immediate business.

"Well, shall we get to it and turn in the job?"

"Sure. Could you wait for just a moment longer?" I asked the girl.

"Yeah, I'll count up all the flowers while I wait!"

"Might be kind of hard to do all by yourself. Can I help you?" Frieze asked.

"Yeah, thank you, miss!" she said. Frieze smiled and led the girl over to the wall again so as not to block the road.

Oltea and I opened the huge, stately door to the guildhall and stepped inside. We went right to the counter and set the devil stone down. The receptionist's eyes widened.

"Just as fast as always," she said. "Did the ophidian give you any trouble?"

"Felt about the same as usual, I'd say."

"Really? That isn't too surprising coming from you. In that case, it should be fine for you to advance right to rank B."

The receptionist asked us to wait a moment and proceeded to appraise the devil stone as always. When finished, she placed our reward of thirty gold coins on the counter along with a silver badge. I removed my bronze badge and affixed the silver one to my lapel.

"It suits you!" said Oltea.

"Thanks," I said. "Speaking of which, is it only me being promoted this time?"

"Yes, that is correct. The request was undertaken in your name, so only you will be advanced at this time. You may continue to tackle lower-grade jobs as a party, but if you decide to take on more rank B requests in the future, please record the names of all your party members on this paper here and present it

as documentation at your next visit,” she said.

The paper had headings for both “Party Leader” and, beneath that, “Party Members.”

“I’d also like to remind you that all achievements recorded by the guild are attributed to the party leader.”

“I see. Seems like that must cause some disagreements, though, no?” I asked. I could imagine the policy leading to a lot of haggling, with party members asking for a higher reward in exchange for giving up credit or leaving a party in order to receive it.

“Well, I don’t really need credit anyways. I’m just glad you asked me to come along. I’m having a great time,” Oltea said.

“Thanks. I’m glad to hear that,” I said. “Also, I’m thinking of having Frieze officially join us. Is that all right with you, Oltea?”

“Sure! I like her too! We’re close to the same age, she’s also a girl, a hybrid... We have to look out for each other, you know?”

“Then it’s settled!” Pocketing the gold and paperwork, we headed back outside.

“You’re back!” said the flower girl. It looked like her and Frieze had finished counting up her stock. She covered the pile of flowers with her hand so that they wouldn’t scatter and ran over to meet the two of us.

Suddenly, the wind picked up and blew as a shadow fell before my eyes and abruptly stopped above us. Someone had swooped down from the sky. The culprit was a handsome and sturdily built middle-aged man. His striking crimson hair was neatly arranged, and he clutched his fine cane, topped with an azure gem, in a hand sparkling with rings. Four others followed him, all of them independently floating in the air. Although I couldn’t make them out too clearly since they were backlit by the sun, they looked exhausted and lifeless.

“Black hair, hybrids in tow... You’re that *Kaito* whose name has been making the rounds lately, aren’t you?” the man said, putting some venom into my name. He moved with extreme arrogance and pomp, the kind of person I’d never gotten involved with before.



I nodded, aware that I was about to deal with a frustrating kind of person. “Yeah, I’m Kaito. You are?”

“It’s Vlad,” he said. I recognized the name. The receptionist had spoken of him often, and rumors of his exploits generally made their way through the mess hall. Vlad was one of only two rank A adventurers in the capital. One after another, promising adventurers had joined his party, making him the head of the most powerful group around. Despite that, he only ever brought along the minimum number of adventurers on contracts, demanding that the rest obediently wait around on indefinite furlough. Normally, people would have felt unneeded and left the party, but the fact that his retainers didn’t suggested that they were happy with the policy.

“I’ve heard rumors about you,” he continued. “You seem to be doing quite well for yourself.”

“Not quite like you. Actually, I only just reached rank B today.”

“Is that so? Already B rank, are we? Somehow, your reputation undersells,” he said. Though his words conveyed praise, his eyes scorned. He looked at Oltea with contempt. “So why do you travel with all these hybrids?”

“Because,” I said, “we have fun together.”

We had only known each other for two weeks, but Oltea had unquestionably become my closest companion. There was no doubt you could call what we had a real *friendship*. Animal ears or no, I would always treasure her.

“Well, that’s a silly reason. Hybrids and the like are nothing but a burden. What do you say—join my party instead? We could use someone of your talents.” The way Vlad spoke, I got the impression he’d been planning to recruit me from the start. He had probably seen my black hair, a rarity in this world, while soaring overhead and had flown down just to try it.

It was an honor to be so wanted, but...

“I think I’ll pass. I quite like my party already,” I said. I wouldn’t want to associate with Vlad even if I weren’t already obliged, but I refrained from voicing that rude thought. His success in monster hunting was commendable, and his many followers gave him an undeniable appeal, but I simply could not

abide someone who openly looked down on others.

“Ah, so you aren’t capable of sound judgment. All the power in the world and yet such a weak mind,” he spat. Immediately, the wind began to stir. Having been rejected, he seemed intent on departing right away. He began to float, lifted by the updraft at his feet.

“*Aaaah!*” shouted the flower girl in a heartbroken voice. Caught in the whirlwind, her flowers had been pulled from the basket and were now fluttering about, scattered in the air. Petals, torn from their stems by the swirling gust, spun in the air. It made for a tragic spectacle.

Paying no mind at all to her troubles, Vlad gathered his companions and started to fly off. I couldn’t just let him get away with it.

“Hey, wai—”

“*Wait right there!*” shouted Frieze in an angry voice, cutting me off. She drew her sword.

“Wait, you say?” said Vlad, glaring down at Frieze with cruel eyes. The wind blew cold as if in concert with his frigid gaze. I felt the chill even through my long coat.

“Where does a lowly *hybrid* like yourself find the gall to give *me* an order?!”

“Shut up and listen! Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”



“Do you?! Do you have any idea at whom you’ve directed your blade?” he shouted. The wind that raged around him was freezing, its numbing air enveloping all of us. Giant icicles, large enough to pierce an elephant, let alone a human, materialized around him. They were not natural products but clearly the result of some magic. Vlad, the seeming source of the icicles, stood before us with the seethe of murder rising in his eyes.

The silence was deafening.

The moment I extended my Shield Beam, having already anticipated the worst, coincided exactly with the release of his icicles. One by one, the flying rods of frost struck the dome I had built around us and shattered into small pieces, the sound mixed with the electric crackle of contact. The area around the guild looked as though it had just been through a hailstorm.

That Vlad had fired the icicles with such tremendous force meant that he had not intended to scare Frieze but to kill her. Moreover, he had done so while a small child stood by her side.

“What in the hell are you thinking?! You could have just killed us both!” I shouted. I had never been so angry in my life.

He responded to my furious outburst frankly and curtly. “Hmph. If magic that weak had killed you, it would have been natural selection. Let this be a lesson to you. You ought to control your pets. Beasts should live as beasts: obediently wagging their tails at the feet of the strong,” he said. Obstinate refusing to apologize to the very end, he and his cohorts took to the skies.

“Are you two all right?!”

“Are you hurt?”

Numerous voices rose in concern; the street was full of onlookers in an uproar. Many began to approach us.

My Shield Beam had blocked all of the projectiles and prevented any injuries, but both Frieze and I were left a little shaken.

Vlad had started it all, but Frieze had escalated by drawing her sword. For that reason, both parties could have been judged guilty in the event of a fight, but,

even so, the icicles had been a bridge too far. It could not really be said that both sides were to blame.

“Er, um... Thank you for protecting us, Kaito,” said Frieze. As if suddenly remembering, she looked over at the girl. She was tightly gripping the empty flower basket with tears welling up in her eyes. She had worked so hard, muddying her knees while gathering flowers, only to have every single one blown away in the chaos. Worse, she had nearly lost her life. To think that mere minutes prior she had been happily counting her flowers. It was pitiable beyond belief.

“I’ll help you pick them back up!”

“Me too! I’ll gather all fifty of them!”

“It’s...it’s okay. Even if I get ’em all again, I can’t sell them, so...”

I tried calling out to her in a cheerful voice and telling her that it was all right, but she just shook her head helplessly. Even at her young age, she could tell that the scraps and petals falling to the ground before her eyes could no longer be sold.

But I had already given my word that I would buy them. I knelt down and picked up one blossom that had fallen by my feet.

“Would you sell me this?”

“But, that flower...doesn’t even have petals anymore.”

“That’s all right. A flower is a flower, after all. So here, take this,” I said, and withdrew a gold coin.

She shook her head. “I can’t take your money... I don’t have any change.”

“Well then, I don’t need any change.”

“Huh? But, but...this is too much,” she said. Originally, she had asked for one cent per set of five. To pay an entire gold for just one flower was like paying one hundred thousand yen for something worth only twenty. In her position, I, too, would have hesitated to accept. She lowered her eyebrows apologetically, so I made a proposal.

“I’ll buy it for one gold. In exchange, would you make me a bouquet?”

“A bouquet?”

“Yeah. I want you to put your whole heart into making a bouquet just for me. If I had a bouquet, the only one like it in the whole world, all my own...I’d gladly pay a gold coin.”



Getting paid more than expected can skew anyone's financial sense, but she still looked guilty about accepting a high price. She seemed well aware that this occasion was special and didn't seem to be at risk of misunderstanding the value of her earnings.

"R-Really? Are you sure?"

"Of course. Will you make it for me?"

"Y-Yes! I'll do my best and make it just for you!" she shouted with renewed energy, her face brightened by a gleaming smile. She had yelled so loud that her stomach grumbled a little, making her look a bit embarrassed. I handed her the gold coin.

"Take your time with the bouquet. For today, go back home to your family and use some of this to treat them to a delicious meal."

"Okay! Thank you so much, mister! You too, ma'ams!" she shouted. Oltea and Frieze smiled as if to say *You're welcome* and waved goodbye to the little girl.

Once she was gone, I turned to Oltea to apologize. "I'm sorry. I used up more of our moving money."

"Don't be sorry. I think that's a great way to use it. That girl was so happy and smiley... This will be a scary memory for her, but tonight, eating a good meal with her family for once will be like a pleasant dream."

"She'll be saying, 'I'm so stuffed, I can't eat anymore' in her sleep!" I said. "Ah, right. Here you go," I added, remembering. I handed Frieze her share of the reward: ten gold coins.

She looked at it with hesitant eyes. "Is it really all right for me to take that? I'm not sure I contributed ten gold coins' worth..."

"Don't worry about that. This is what you were promised from the beginning. Besides, it's not true that you didn't do anything. I had a great time flying with you."

"I agree. It was definitely the most exciting trip I've been on."

"That's why, if you can, we'd like you to join our party," I said.



When I offered her the chance to officially become our comrade, Frieze's face lit up with joy. "I've never felt needed like this before! From today onward, please take me on as a party member!" she said.

*Good*, I thought. With that, our party was formed. I explained the party leader arrangement to Frieze and she gladly agreed. Only our future meeting place was yet to be discussed.

"Frieze, where do you live?" I asked.

"Section Three, Eastern Ward. How about you two?"

"We're living together in Section Two, Western Ward. We're moving to Section One soon, though. Right now, we're in the middle of saving money for that."

"Actually, we're planning on picking a larger room. If you'd like, Frieze, you could live with us too."

"It's a little tight, but if you'd like, you could even move into our current spot with us. Then we wouldn't have to spend time meeting up."

"Cutting out travel is appealing, but...rent in Section One is eye-poppingly high, I hear. I'd be a little uncomfortable with all the expenses..."

"No need to worry about that. I'll pay the rent myself," I said. "I can even cover the other costs of living."

"I appreciate the offer, but I could never accept something like—"

"Nonsense. Even if it does cost extra, I'm willing to pay for you to live with us."

"Even if it costs you more? Why?" she asked, looking perplexedly at me.

I decided to tell Frieze what I had been holding inside all this time. "I want to live with you and see your adorable ears anytime I want, Frieze."

"Wh-Where did that come from?"

"It's not just a sudden thought! I've felt that way from the first time I saw your ears. They're well shaped, their fur has a perfect luster, and the way they move is so cute. They're incredibly charming."

“Spare me the flattery, please.”

“No, I mean it! From the bottom of my heart, Frieze, I mean it when I say I am taken with your ears. If I could touch ears as fantastic as those, I’d feel like I could do anything. They have that much value to me.”

“Okay, I get it! I understand. Don’t compliment me so much—it’s embarrassing!” Frieze said. Her face flushed deep red. She cast her gaze downward shyly.

I could hardly praise ears like hers enough, but Oltea had warned me that complimenting them directly was like proposing. Since we had only just met today, I figured Frieze would take my praise as a real compliment and not a confession of love, but I could tell she was embarrassed and figured that I should hold back some.

Frieze took a deep breath and looked up at me. She began to speak shyly, rubbing her thighs together.

“It wouldn’t be fair to you if you were just supporting me and getting nothing in return... If you really like my ears so much, I don’t mind you touching them.”

“Really?!”

“Uh-huh... As long as you promise not to make it hurt...”

“Thank you! This is like a dream come true,” I said.

“You can pet my ears too, okay?” Oltea said cheerfully, suddenly standing in front of me.

“Thanks to you too, Oltea, of course! I’m the happiest guy in the whole world! I have all these beautiful ears to touch,” I said. Unable to hold back my desire any longer, I started touching both of their ears. Unlike Oltea’s ears, light to the touch, Frieze’s were fluffy. I stroked their ears with my palm and plucked at their pointed ends with my fingers. My cheeks loosened into a smile.

This was true happiness: not to be flanked by two beautiful women, but to have one soft ear in each hand. While the main street recovered from the chaos of the icicle incident, I enjoyed the blushing faces of my two friends and rubbed their ears to my heart’s content.

## Act 3: Hybrid Town and the Move

One week had passed since the Promotional Exam. We were being guided by our realtor, Carmo, to our new home in Section One. It was just as Oltea had dreamed: a room with a view of the castle.

Upon hearing my name, Carmo cheerfully said, “Well, I’ll be! If it isn’t *the* Kaito I’ve heard so much about! It’s an honor to guide you, my good sir.”

The real estate firm that Carmo worked for had a branch in Section Three too. Section Three was outside of my usual area of operations, but adventurers from every district talked about me over drinks. Carmo had probably heard of me from one such retelling.

“Please, it’s no honor. I’m just a guy doing what he wants,” I said.

“So you say, but kindly slaying so many monsters is nothing a helpless fool like myself could even attempt! Thanking you is the least I can do. Even my grandmother feels safer hearing about your exploits! Work like yours keeps the demons from breaking through these walls.”

“Have the walls of the royal capital ever been breached before?”

“No, never. It’s just that the seventy-and-up crowd like my granny are more afraid of monsters.”

“Naturally,” said Frieze, who was walking next to me, with a know-it-all air. “The people of that generation were around for the Demon King’s attack, after all.”

“My grandpa still has nightmares about that sometimes.”

It had been three weeks since my transmigration. I had already gotten pretty used to living in this world, but there was still a lot that I didn’t know. It seemed to be common knowledge, but this was the first I had ever heard of any Demon King. I knew, of course, what a demon king was. Beings like that often appeared in myth and folklore, ruling over all manner of fiends and monsters. That being said, my knowledge of the archetype came from Japan, not this world. If I didn’t

update my understanding, I wouldn't be able to keep up with their conversation.

"Demon King?" I asked.

Everyone looked at me with confusion.

"You don't know? The *Demon King*? The danger level S self-proclaimed king of the monsters!"

"It's been more than half a century since he destroyed the northernmost country of our continent, but the memory still strikes fear even into the heart of a brave old hand like me!"

"The Demon King led an entire army of A rank monsters too."

Just hearing about him imparted a sense of brutality: an entire country destroyed... The way they were talking about him, it sounded like he was still alive.

"You say 'self-proclaimed' king of the monsters. Do you mean the Demon King appointed themselves?" I asked. If that was true, then he must understand human language. Given the foes I'd encountered so far, it was hard to imagine a monster speaking like a person.

"Among the monsters, there are those with higher intelligence, those who speak and behave like humans. Fiends like that are usually pretty tough, so they're classified as danger level A."

"But the Demon King is at danger level S," said Oltea. S rank, it seemed, was reserved especially for the monarch. The fact that he had enough A rank monsters in his service to field an army suggested a level of power far higher than that of his subordinates. It was no wonder, then, that he'd receive special classification.

"So what is this Demon King doing now?"

"He's still at war with the northern lands."

The goddess had said there was no war in this world! It was true there was no war between *people*, but I still couldn't help but feel deceived. A few extra words of explanation would have made a huge difference, though it made little

sense to complain at this late hour.

“This country is peaceful, though. We’re about as far as you can get from the Demon King’s territory. We don’t even have that many A rank monsters around in this part of the world.”

“Mm-hmm,” said Frieze. “Oltea is right; we’re not much threatened by the Demon King down here.”

“True. You should be more worried about our move than some Monster King,” Oltea said.

“I suppose so. How much longer until we arrive, speaking of?”

“Two, maybe three minutes, I’d say!” said Carmo.

We walked together along a quiet residential street paved with bricks. After a short while, Carmo stopped and said, “Here we are!”

It was a three-story apartment building, the likes of which were common all over the city. We had been told in advance that the toilet and bath facilities were communal. While the bath was no issue, we would certainly have preferred a private toilet. Even so, this tenement met our two most important conditions: the castle was visible from its windows and it had at least two vacant rooms.

“It’ll be the two open rooms on the third floor here,” said Carmo. Since there were just two rooms, it had been decided that I would take one, and Oltea and Frieze would share the other. Oltea was fine as long as she could see the castle from her window, and Frieze was satisfied just to have shelter against the wind and rain.

Following Carmo, we made our way up to the third floor. There were two rooms per floor, and we entered the one on the right first. It was about fifteen tatami mats in area, with wooden flooring and an attached kitchen. The bed was a little dirty, but that was no problem. With Clean Beam, it would look good as new in no time.

“Whoa, it’s big! I could even practice with my sword in a room like this!” said Frieze happily.

I felt happy too: with space like this, I could give in to my desires and collect all I wanted. Two rooms would run us ten gold a month, but I had saved up eighty gold coins already. There was plenty of excess to cover living expenses too, so all we had to do was pay. I had no complaints with the room itself, but something wasn't quite right.

"Hold on, you can't see the castle from this room," Oltea said with a dissatisfied look.

"Well, you haven't looked outside yet!"

"I don't have to look outside to know. The castle is over *that way*," Oltea said, pointing to the door. That was what had felt off: the window was on the wrong side of the building.

Carmo opened the window. "Come look over here, please."

We gathered by the window and took in the view. The only thing that could be considered scenery was a small house across the street.

"There's no view of the castle here at all," said Oltea.

"You've got to look really closely at the window of the building across the street!" urged Carmo.

"The window across the street, huh?" said Oltea, squinting to get a clearer look. "Oh!" she said, noticing something. I found it just after her: one of the castle's spires was reflected in the glass.

"Did you see it?"

"Yeah, I saw it," said Oltea. "But I'm not convinced it's worth seeing!" she yelled, no longer playing along with the realtor. "Show us *that* house!"

"Well, you see, that house is occupied, and..." Carmo began, then trailed off with an apologetic expression. The realtor genuinely seemed to have made every effort to meet Oltea's conditions, but the results could not live up to the ideal in Oltea's head.

I, however, was already brimming with desire to fill up the rooms with my collection. Our current cramped conditions were ill-suited to my needs, so I was determined to move no matter what.

“What if we made do with this place for now and have Carmo let us know right away if something better becomes available?”

“I guess, if that’s the only option...” Oltea exhaled disappointedly.

“Well,” said Carmo timidly, “we do, I suppose, have some properties that might meet your conditions, but, well...”

“You do?! It’s not gonna be, like, a poster of the castle hung on the wall or something this time, is it?”

“No, no. This would be a place where you could clearly see the castle from the window.”

“Yes! Did you hear that? ‘Clearly’ see it!”

“That’s great, Oltea,” I said.

“But if you’ve got a place like that, why didn’t you just show it in the first place?” Oltea asked.

“It was probably out of our budget,” I said. “We asked for around five gold per room, after all.”

“Mr. Kaito is correct. The properties that match *all* of your conditions are simply, well, a bit outside of your range...”

“...How much?”

“Well, for one, these are places you buy, not rent. We’re talking about a gorgeous home. Something palatial. Paid in gold coins, it would be...well, around *eight hundred* a month.”

“Eight...hundred...” Oltea uttered, after which she looked to be at a loss for words.

I had eighty-two gold to my name. Originally, we had decided to save forty gold but had doubled it to ensure that we wouldn’t miss out on any good properties. It seemed, however, that we only had a tenth of what we would need for the home we’d imagined.

Already, Oltea looked resigned to the disappointing state of affairs. I put my hand on her shoulder, and Frieze tried to offer some encouraging words, but it

seemed nothing would come to her mind.

“That property—can it only be bought at a lump sum?” I asked. Back in Japan, it was normal to pay for housing in installments. It wasn’t clear whether or not this world had a loan system, but eight hundred gold was probably too much for most people to put down at the drop of a hat. It wouldn’t be so strange if payment plans existed here too.

“Well, originally, the property in question was set to be bought outright. For a person of your trustworthy reputation, however, a deferred payment should be quite possible. We would accept eighty gold as a down payment and, thereafter, eight gold coins a month,” said Carmo. Auto-pay was out since there were no banks. I’d have to bring the cash down to the real estate office every month in person, which was a bit of a drag, but with the ability to fly, it wouldn’t be a huge issue.

The down payment would be everything we’d saved up. But we could save again.

“It’s okay. Don’t overdo it,” Oltea said.

“Don’t worry; it’s not a problem. We’ve got enough to pay,” I said.

In my previous life, I had done nothing but save. I had waited, leading an austere life and rendering my days vacant and lifeless in the process. If something worth spending my savings on had come along—anything—I would have done so even if it had cost me all of them. It would have made me happy.

“But eight hundred gold for my sake is...”

“Oltea, for your sake, it’s easy. I owe you so much,” I said. I knew that she was going to object that I was the one who had done the saving, but the fact of the matter was that I wouldn’t be alive today if Oltea hadn’t pulled me into that shack. If I had been attacked by the wood golem right away, while I was still too dazed to know left from right, it would have easily killed me before I figured out how to fire my beam. It was because I’d survived back then that I was able to live a full life today. I hadn’t tasted happiness even once before my rebirth. Now, I was determined to spend every day in its pursuit.

I owed it all to Oltea. And, above all...



“It’s my friend’s dream. For that, I’ll do anything I can to help.”

“Kaito...” Oltea said, her eyes clouding with tears.

“If you don’t have enough, I can help too. For a friend,” said Frieze, finally finding her words.

We had planned to divide our rewards evenly, but Frieze had refused to accept an entire third and had instead settled for a ten percent cut. She never bought anything when we went out shopping and, after living expenses, probably had about twenty gold, including the ten I had initially given her.

“Frieze, thank you...”

“You don’t have to pay, Frieze.”

“But you’ve even covered my living expenses! It’s my home too. I’d feel terrible if I didn’t at least help some.”

“It’s all right, really. I’m just happy to have you living with us.”

“Well, if you say so...” Frieze said, her face red with embarrassment.

“In that case, allow me to lead the way,” said Carmo. We agreed and followed the agent outside into the heart of the city.

“Wow, we’re getting so much closer to the castle!”

“I’ve never seen it this close up before. It’s so impressive.”

“From here you could probably see it clearly even on a cloudy day.”

“I can’t wait to see the view from the windows!”

Oltea’s face brightened a little more with each step closer to the castle. By the time Carmo halted to announce our arrival, she was grinning ear to ear.

“It’s incredible! Oh my god, it’s—it’s amazing! I can’t believe I can live this close to the castle!” Oltea said.

The house was three or four streets away from the castle, just the right distance. Any closer and the castle would actually have been harder to see. From where we stood, you could see it fully.

“Look, the house is gorgeous too!” It was a two-story building made of stone.

Small windows were set beneath gables on the roof, suggesting an attic. If that was what it was, I could use it to store my collection.

Carmo wasted no time letting us inside. The first floor contained a kitchen (cookware and utensils included), dining room, bathroom, and a drawing room. Carmo made sure to let us know that any remaining furniture would be ours to do with as we pleased. With the down payment requiring all of our saved-up money, not having to pay for furniture was a welcome bonus. Moreover, keeping any furniture that caught my eye would help me honestly come by items to quench my thirst for collection.

After we finished surveying the first floor, it was time to proceed to the second.

There were two rooms on the second floor. Equal in size, they appeared to have been used as bedrooms.

“They’re wonderful,” said Oltea, exhaling in awe.

“This bedroom could be for you two, Oltea and Frieze. What do you think?” I asked. “Or we could put a bed in the drawing room and you could sleep there?”

“No, I like it here,” Frieze said. “It’s hard to get comfortable in a big room when you’re alone, anyways. Of course, if Oltea wants to be alone, then I have no problem with the drawing room.”

“No, I think sharing one sounds great!” Oltea said. “Wow, being able to live in a house this lovely is just a dream. Thank you so much, Kaito, really!”

“Of course,” I said, smiling.

Carmo showed us the last room. Just like the previous one, it was a huge bedchamber. There was a pull-down ladder-equipped hatch to the attic in the ceiling. I went up it to scope out the area and found a ton of empty space. I would definitely be able to use this for storage. With this house, I could shop to my heart’s content!

“We’ll take it!”

“Ah, wonderful!”

With the destination of our move decided, we returned to the real estate

office to take care of the formalities.

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By the time I finished the paperwork and returned home to my now-familiar room, the sun had already set. The slightly elevated walls blocked the setting sun so that only the dimmest light permeated the otherwise total darkness. I channeled some magic into a devil-stone-equipped panel on the wall and, in a flash, the room was lit.

“I guess this is it for this old room, huh...” said Oltea in a quiet, emotive voice. It was small, but it had been unmistakably ours. The once-barren flat now looked, smelled, and felt lived in. Every corner and nook was occupied by some personal belonging or trinket, evidence of our time here. I was happy to move out of an apartment and into a large house—Oltea seemed to feel the same—but this modest home held memories. It was difficult not to feel sentimental about parting with it.

“Our rent is paid through the rest of this month, so I guess we’ve got two more weeks here...”

“No,” Oltea said. “It’s a little sad to say, but I still want to move as soon as we can.”

“How about tomorrow, then?”

“Do you think we can get it done in just one day?”

“I do. If it’s just this stuff here, I bet we can move it all in two trips if we get a cart.”

“How are we going to get a cart?”

“I was thinking we’d rent one from the stables,” I said. Horse-drawn carriages could be hired for one silver coin a day. Usually people didn’t just rent the carriage itself, but it should be possible for the same cost.

“In that case, I’ll take care of the rental. As for packing, we should probably each handle our own items. I imagine you’ll be more comfortable with that, Kaito,” Frieze said.

Even though I could just use Clean Beam to sanitize them, I still had

reservations about touching a woman's underwear. Thus, I agreed to Frieze's proposition.

"Perfect, we'll leave the cart to you."

"Hmmpf," she grunted in the affirmative. "By the way, when do you think we'll be done moving everything?"

"If everything goes smoothly, we should be done by the early afternoon. Why do you ask?"

"There's something I'd like to do."

"Something you'd like to do?"

"I'd like to bring some people close to me up to speed. I haven't shown my face in some time, and they're probably starting to worry about me. I don't have to leave the city or anything, so I should be able to wrap it up and come home within the day. Of course, if you plan to take a job after the move, I'll prioritize that."

"No, tomorrow we'll just be lounging in the new place," I said. She probably wanted to report back to her family. She might have been saving money to send home to them.

"Well, shall we have dinner?" I suggested.

"Sure! Now that we've decided where we're moving, I think a drink is in order!" Oltea said.

"Oh, that's a great idea! I've always wanted to try one," said Frieze.

"Adventurers always make them look so delicious, after all."

"Hmmpf," agreed Frieze. "I've always had to prioritize food over spirits, but now we've got the money for both! Oltea's dream came true and everything's going so well. We ought to have a toast!"

"Absolutely! You wanna have a drink too, Kaito?" asked Oltea.

"Now that you mention it, I don't think I've ever seen Kaito drink. Can't hold his liquor, maybe?"

"No, I can handle it," I said. It was just that I had to fly every day... It wasn't

quite like driving, but I was responsible for the lives of two other people whenever we took off. Furthermore, when I got started, it was hard to stop.

I hadn't drunk much in my past life, but today was the day Oltea's dream came true. It was probably all right to have at least one drink to celebrate...

"But wait, aren't you two still kids? Is it all right for you to be drinking?" I asked.

Both of them looked absolutely shocked.

"Kids?! Did you just say *kids*?!" Oltea demanded.

"All this time, Kaito has been seeing us as kids...?" Frieze asked. They looked disappointed, but they were both only sixteen years old. That may have been adults in this world, but it didn't change the fact that, compared to me, they were both young girls.

"Well," I said, "there's an age difference of thirteen years between us, so..."

"There's an age difference, sure, but I'm not a kid. I'm an adult woman—old enough to fall in love, even!" Frieze said.

"I'm old enough to get married, you know. My mom was already married to my dad by the time she was sixteen!" Oltea said.

The two of them seemed more sulky than angry. I hadn't thought that being treated as kids would make them so upset.

I guessed girls their age wanted to be treated like adults. I didn't know exactly what that would entail, but if they didn't want to be seen as children, then I would change my attitude accordingly.

"All right, well, from now on, I'll try to see you two as adult women," I said. As I did, both of their faces curled into smiles.

"Good, 'cause we're not kids, we're grown women!" Oltea said.

"To drive the point home, we'll make sure to drink you under the table tonight!" Frieze added.

"Let's drink as much as we can stomach!" I said. Teasing Frieze and egging her on, we left the apartment. The restaurant, with its din of lively conversation and

pleasant-smelling smoke wafting through the air, was full of people enjoying a nice drink after work. It reminded me of the yakitori joints back in Japan.

“Yo, Kaito!” came a friendly, familiar voice just as we reached our seats. It took me a moment, but I recognized the voice as that of the general store’s proprietor.

“Oh, hey! Thanks for selling me that fantastic tapestry the other day,” I said.

“Ha! ‘Thanks’? That’s my line! Believe it or not, my wife makes those things as a hobby. If I didn’t sell at least a few, it’d make her sad, so I should be thanking you!”

“You have trouble selling those? But they’re excellent.”

“They are, aren’t they? When you bought that one, looking so happy to pick it up... Well, thanks to you, my wife’s been in a pretty good mood! Enough to allow me to come here after work for a drink or two,” he said. Being thanked just for indulging in my collection habit was a strange feeling. If I could make people smile like this, then I was glad to have picked “collection” from among all those words.

“Anyways, you know what you’re getting yet?” I asked Frieze and Oltea. The two of them, looking intently at the menu nailed to the wall, nodded.

“Meat skewers would be nice, yeah? And some beer, of course!” Oltea said.

“Same for me,” added Frieze. I hailed the server and ordered skewers and alcohol for all of us.

The drinks arrived right away: beer with a fruity aroma. Enchanted items stood in for appliances like refrigerators here, but even so, room-temperature ale seemed to be the norm. The tankards felt tepid to the touch.

Usually an auspicious occasion like this called for a toast. Looking at Oltea and Frieze, both with mugs held up at the ready and eyes fixed on me, I got the impression that was the case in this world too. The honors, it seemed, were mine.

I’d heard tons of speeches at year-end parties back in my salaryman days, but most of them had been dry and overlong. When everyone is ready to get

drinking, simple is best.

“To Oltea’s dream! To moving!” I said. “Cheers!”

“Cheeeers!” Oltea and Frieze returned in chorus as we tapped mugs with a clink and downed the first round. Slight in its bitterness and smooth, the beer went down pleasantly. A hint of sweetness lingered on the tongue. Though I preferred my beer cold, tonight, here with friends, the drink tasted better than ever before.

“See, I appreciate the taste ’cause I’m an adult!” Oltea said.

“A kid could never really understand this flavor, right?” Frieze said.

The two of them seemed to be in high spirits. The meat skewers, generously salted, arrived at the table and brightened the mood even more. I took a hearty bite out of the well-seasoned chunk of grilled meat. Its juices trickled down onto the plate. It was salty as hell but paired perfectly with the beer.

“One more beer, please!”

“Oh, me too, please!”

Both Oltea and Frieze held up their empty tankards in an appeal to the waiter. I started to worry about their pace, but one look at their happy, smiling expressions and any inclination to chide them for rushing disappeared.

“Hmm? Kaito, are you already drunk?”

“Your face! You’re grinning like an idiot!”

My feelings were showing on my face. The drinks were delicious, but that wasn’t the only reason I was smiling. Something fun and interesting had happened every single day since I arrived in this new world. Satisfying my urge to shoot beams, indulging in adorable animal ears, collecting to my heart’s content... I was truly enjoying myself.

My chief happiness, though, was the time spent with my new friends. Back when I had died, I had wanted to go to heaven. Now, however, I could say from the bottom of my heart that I was thankful that the goddess had coerced me into coming here instead.

I gave my thanks to the unseen goddess. As I did, a woman’s voice: “Ah, if it

isn't Mr. Kaito!"

It was the receptionist who had recorded my victories against the rock golem and ophidian. Adventurers could do their business at any window, but I'd made a point of going to hers each time. She'd become something of a familiar face.

"What an unexpected meeting! Do you live around here?"

"Yeah. I prefer to live close to my place of work if I can, but Section One is a little too expensive for that. I'm always sitting at work, so a little walking is good for my health anyhow," she said.

"Ahh, I used to do desk work myself. I know exactly how you feel."

"From desk work to adventuring, hmm? That's an awfully bold career change, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Well, I came to a turning point. I'd say the change-up has been a huge success."

"You've got a talent for adventuring, Kaito. You're calm and easy to work with too. Some adventurers, when they get to the higher ranks, get a little...haughty."

"Like Vlad, huh?" I said. At the mention of his name, Oltea's already reddened cheek flushed a poisonous red.

Frieze vigorously nodded. "That guy—what the hell did he think he was doing the other day?! He fired those icicles even with a little kid standing there!" she yelled.

"If Kaito hadn't been there to protect them, Frieze *and* that poor girl would be dead! Why does that jackass get to run free anyways?"

"Involving a child in a dispute like that is definitely unforgivable conduct, but...Rank A adventurers hold certain privileges. They hold permits sufficient to grant immunity for just about any crime short of murder," the receptionist said. Rank A adventurers were too valuable an asset. It was no surprise that as combat experts who fought to protect the peace of the nation, they'd be afforded special rights.

Even so, they weren't allowed to kill. Despite that, Vlad had clearly



demonstrated an intent to kill when he let loose his icicles. Had he, in going beyond just a threat, resigned himself to the possibility of being arrested? Or...

“That rule against murder—does it include hybrids?”

“Well...” said the receptionist, then trailed off. She looked at Oltea and Frieze with an expression of shame. “I’m very sorry—it is inexcusable—but...hybrids are not included in the rule.”

“Why make a distinction like that...?”

“It is what it is,” Oltea said. “This is humanity’s country. Besides, it isn’t like every human discriminates against hybrids.”

“Until just recently, I hated humans,” said Frieze. “Then I met you, Kaito, and realized that humans can be kind. It’s the outliers like Vlad who are the real problem.”

“It sucks for you too, though, right?” I asked the receptionist. “Having to deal with people like Vlad.”

“It really does!” she shouted, surprising Oltea and Frieze.

“Has something happened before?”

“Yes! All kinds of things. Working with Vlad is absolutely terrible. Whenever I confirm his name for a job, he says, ‘You don’t have to ask every time,’ and I hate it! He’s condescending, but if I ever think about complaining, he threatens me and says, ‘If you talk to the guild master, I’ll have you fired.’ Every time I take a moment to appraise the devil stones he brings, he makes some snide remark like ‘What, you think it’s a fake?’ while clicking his tongue and shaking his head. That man thinks that all of us behind the reception window are the same, so it doesn’t matter how he treats us! He doesn’t have to say it. I can just tell by how he acts!”

“Wow... That’s a lot. It sounds really frustrating.”

“It is! It’s awful. Even today, Vlad was asking who was the closest to becoming Sword Saint. Over and over, like he wanted to pick a fight.”

“That guy wants to be the Sword Saint?” asked Frieze.

“If he became the Sword Saint, our ancestors would roll in their damn

graves,” said Oltea.

*Sword Saint*. Just like with “Demon King,” another bit of unfamiliar vocab had made its way into the conversation. I had better buy a dictionary or something soon—not that I knew if this world had those.

“Sword Saint... Is that like a master swordsman?”

“Not quite. The Sword Saint is a ceremonial position in the Spirit Festival. The ‘sword’ part of the title refers to strength, and the ‘saint’ bit points to personal virtue. Being chosen is a great honor. Everyone who receives the appointment goes down in national history,” said the receptionist.

She went on to explain that in this country, a huge, nationwide festival was held every ten years. It was believed that on the dawn of that day, the spirits of the people’s ancestors returned for a time. A grand banquet to calm their souls ensued. When the sun finally set in the western sky, the ancestral spirits were said to gather at the castle. At that time, the Sword Saint spoke from inside those walls: *Return now to your homes, restful with the knowledge that your progeny remain safe under my watch*. The festival ended after the vow was sworn.

In my past life, I never participated in anything like a festival. This time, though, I was excited for the chance to celebrate with Oltea and Frieze.

“When is the festival next being held?” I asked.

“In two months!” Oltea said. “I’m excited for all the festivities too, but...with Vlad being the most likely contender for Sword Saint, I don’t honestly think I could enjoy it.”

“I really shouldn’t be saying this given my position, but,” the receptionist said, quieting down, “personally, I think either Verrick should be chosen for a second term or the title should be given to Kaito.”

“I’m happy to hear that from you, but the role sounds a little intense for me. I only became an adventurer three weeks ago. Besides, I’m still B rank.”

“No, the conditions for Sword Saint selection don’t just come down to rank. The king himself picks the candidate from a list of all adventurers B rank and above,” she said. The fact that B rank was included lent credibility to her claim

that the selection was based on individual merit in addition to statistical excellence. Just like grades in school, the evaluation process included not only test scores but also a look at personal conduct, behavior, and other things like that.

I had no interest in becoming Sword Saint, but I wouldn't like it if a discriminatory jackass like Vlad were chosen either. If that happened, the hybrid's ancestors wouldn't rest easy.

Having said that, I'd have liked to enjoy the festival as a normal citizen, so Verrick was fine in my book.

"So why does Vlad want to be Sword Saint?"

"He's probably got his eyes set on the reward, don't you think?"

"There's a prize?"

"Yes. When one is granted the title, one receives an invitation to the castle and an audience with the king. The sovereign then bestows upon the chosen their desired reward," the receptionist explained. At rank A in the adventurer's guild, money was likely no object. Vlad must have been aiming to become Sword Saint in order to get his hands on something wealth could not buy.

"I see," I said. "Wait, I'm so sorry. You're off the clock and here I am making you explain things to me."

"Oh no, it's quite all right. I like talking to people anyways. Besides, I feel better after complaining!"

"In that case, you wanna drink with us?"

"Would that be all right?"

"Yeah, I like talking to people too!"

"Well then, yeah, sure! I'd love to," she said, smiling and taking a seat by my side. Another round of beer arrived, and we all lifted our glasses to toast once more.

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*The following afternoon.*

“All done moving!” Oltea said.

“So we’re really living here starting today, huh...” said Frieze.

“I’m excited for our new life,” I said.

We had made it to our new home. Although the place was dusty and in need of a good clean and we still had to organize our belongings, the move itself was complete.

“I was starting to wonder if we’d ever make it.”

“For real. If we didn’t have Kaito, we’d still just be groaning back at the other place,” Frieze said.

Oltea and Frieze had both been hit hard by the hangover and had complained all morning of nausea and headaches. I had stopped drinking after my second beer, but the two of them had kept going until five. By the time we left, they’d already been nearly gone. We had walked home, the girls singing happy songs together. When we got inside, they’d both passed out right away.

When they woke up, their faces had been ghastly pale. My attempts at conversation had been met only with cries of “Argggghhhh” or “Uggggghhhh.”

I devised a beam variant to fix them up; I dubbed it “Cure Beam.” Injuries, poor physical health, general sickness: all cured by one beam. With this power, there would be no need for a doctor. Cure Beam was so effective that just moments after exposure, both Oltea and Frieze looked completely refreshed.

“Thanks again for that, Kaito!” said Oltea.

“Thanks to Kaito, we can enjoy all the alcohol we want from now on! Nothing to worry about.”

“Be a little considerate, though. We don’t want to take advantage of him.”

“But, but...the beer was so delicious, and...” Frieze began. “After last night, I completely understand why adventurers always drink so much after work.”

“Well, yeah, there’s no denying it’s tasty, but...”

They both turned to look at me.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. It was fun. Let’s do it again!” I said. At my

reassurance, they both breathed sighs of relief and brightened up. If they ever drank more than their limit and ended up hungover, I could simply use my Cure Beam and it would be as if nothing had happened. I wouldn't be put out at all: I'd get to satisfy my desire to use my powers *and* have a fun time hanging out with my friends. It was a win-win.

"Well, I'll be on my way. I need to go return the wagon, so you two just stay here and enjoy yourselves," I said.

"Thank you! We will. If you like, we can take tomorrow off too, so why don't you go and see your family, Frieze?"

"Hmm? My family?" Frieze said. Was it not her family she had been talking about earlier?

"You said you had some people close to you who you needed to talk to. I figured that it must be your family."

"Oh, no, that wasn't about my family. Well, speaking broadly, I guess you could say family, but," she began, but then she paused. Perhaps it was a relationship that was difficult to explain, but regardless, Frieze was being evasive.

"Well, whoever they are. We'll just be killing time, so I want you to enjoy yourself too."

"Hmph. Okay, I'll go and see them, then," Frieze said.

We escorted her outside and wished her well, waving our hands goodbye. As the sound of wheels got farther away, I went back inside.

"Hey. Should we follow her? Maybe she's meeting a secret lover!" said Oltea with a mischievous smile. She was, after all, a sixteen-year-old girl. Just the right age to be interested in that kind of frivolous gossip. Frieze was also about the same age as a second-year high schooler in Japan. It wouldn't be weird for her to have a partner. I didn't think that was what this was, though.

"It didn't look to me like she was going to see a partner," I said. Not that she didn't have an appeal. Quite the opposite: she was the personification of charm with those perfectly touchable ears. It was just that she hadn't given any indication that she was in a relationship.

“Yesterday, didn’t she say something like ‘I’m an adult who’s capable of love too’? Then, just now, something like ‘speaking broadly, I guess you could say family’? Don’t you think that could mean someone who will be family after marriage?”

I had interpreted it to mean something more like *I’m going to go see my divorced mom or dad*, but Oltea seemed to have taken the evasive phrasing as concealing embarrassment.

“But if you were dating someone you planned to marry, wouldn’t you move in with them?”

“Maybe she’s just the type to keep her work and personal life separate. She probably figured that work would be smoother if she lived with us. That’s why today, she’d be going to bring her partner up to speed on her situation.”

It was true that if she did have a partner, it would be better to let them know that she was living with a member of the opposite sex. Not being forthcoming about something like that could lead to a misunderstanding.

“Even if she does have a partner, shouldn’t we leave it alone?”

“Sure, but...aren’t you curious? Don’t you wonder what kind of person our friend would be dating? Come on—if we don’t hurry, we’ll miss our chance to see!”

Oltea grabbed me by the sleeve to hurry me along.

“All right, fine!” I said as we left the house. We went after Frieze. It didn’t take long to catch up. Staying about fifty meters back, we began to stealthily trail her.

Pulling the empty luggage cart, Frieze passed through the gate to Section Two. She walked along the wide main street, completely bypassing the turn that led to the stables.

“Is she lost?” Oltea asked.

“I don’t think so. She looks like she knows where she’s going,” I said.

After some time, Frieze came to a stop. She left the cart by the side of the road and stepped into a fruit store. A while later, she reemerged carrying a box

full of apples. She made three trips between the cart and the shop, loading another box of apples each time.

“What the... What is she doing?” Oltea asked.

“Buying a bunch of apples, looks like.”

“No, no, that’s not what I mean. I mean why is she shopping?”

“Maybe she’s picking up a gift?”

“In that case, her secret lover must really love apples...”

“‘An apple a day keeps the doctor away,’ they say. Maybe her boyfriend is concerned about his health?”

“Well, *that* many apples will just make him sick,” Oltea said.

We were left confused; neither of us was able to understand Frieze’s objective at all. We were curious why she’d buy such a massive amount of apples but couldn’t ask her without breaking our cover.

“Oh, she’s started moving again,” Oltea said.

We followed Frieze once more as she continued down the road, stopping this time at a bakery. Just like last time, she bought several boxes of merchandise. Next, she made her way to a butcher. There, she bought far too much bacon for one meal as well as numerous bundles of sausage links, all of which she added to the cart’s load.

She turned back to make a circuit, returning to the fruit store for another load of apples, the butcher and bakery for another haul, and, this time, a clothing store for a cartful of merchandise.

“Is she trying to start a business or something?” Oltea asked. Her behavior certainly seemed to suggest that, but that much inventory would go bad before it could all be sold. Furthermore, Frieze already had a decent income and didn’t need to be hustling for resale revenue like this.

With all her pleasant-smelling items in tow, Frieze had become the center of attention. Passersby were eyeing her curiously as she continued her errands, stopping in a shoe store and stocking up on footwear before returning, once again, to the butcher. After coming back out, she slapped her face as if trying to

reclaim some lost energy before continuing to pull the cart along at a jog. Seeming satisfied with her haul, she pushed on, evidently aiming to reach her destination before sundown. She rushed down the street without even stopping for a breather. Her time as an adventurer, relying solely on her own physical strength, had endowed her with impressive stamina. On the other hand, Oltea and I were quickly reaching the limits of our endurance.

“Hey...should we...fly?” Oltea said, struggling for breath.

“Yeah, that’s...not a bad idea. Let’s...fly a little so we don’t...get caught,” I panted. Flying too high would make it easy to overlook something, so, after hoisting Oltea up, I stayed just fifty centimeters off the ground. Maintaining our altitude with my left foot, I pushed my right one back until we were smoothly gliding along.

We entered Section Three just as the setting sun began to dye the sky a rich orange. Without so much as stopping to get her bearings, Frieze had been marching onward with a strong, purposeful stride all afternoon. She clearly knew exactly where she was going.

“This street, it’s...” Oltea started.

“You’ve been this way before, Oltea?”

“Yeah... I think she’s headed to Hybrid Town.”

“That’s near here?!”

“Hey! Keep your voice down, will ya?” Oltea said, quickly covering my mouth with one of her small hands. Thankfully, Frieze was too focused on pulling her cart along to have noticed us. Unaware of her pursuers, she continued pressing on. Seeing that, Oltea breathed a sigh of relief. “It’s straight down this street and then around the fifth corner. I mean, it’s not like there’s a sign that says, ‘Welcome to Hybrid Town’ or anything, but it’s there.”

Hybrid Town, it seemed, was not a district set up by the central authority but a spontaneous, community-built affair. Since the burdens of a hard life are eased by living near friends and family, hybrids had probably come to settle in the area one by one until, eventually, it came to be known as Hybrid Town.

*A town full of hybrids,* I thought to myself. If I was lucky, I’d have the chance



to see some new kinds of ears. I probably wouldn't be allowed to touch any of them, but I couldn't resist the opportunity to at least sneak a look at some. My anticipation swelling, I flew us down the road until we reached the aforementioned fifth corner. I turned, bringing us to the entrance of Hybrid Town, and then—

“What are you doing here?” Frieze asked. We had nearly flown right into her.

“Huh?! Wh-Why were you just waiting here to ambush us?” asked Oltea.

“Did you see us?”

“I heard your voices earlier. Why have you been following me?”

“We...wanted to know what kind of person you were dating...” Oltea said.

Frieze looked at her, puzzled. “Dating?”

“You're dating somebody you plan to eventually marry, aren't you?”

“Why the hell would you think that?!”

“Yesterday you said something about being a ‘full-grown woman, even capable of falling in love,’ and when you talked about the people you were meeting, you said that ‘in the broad sense, you could call them family.’ Didn't you?”

“What? I was just telling Kaito that I'm not a kid because I'm old enough to have a relationship! It had nothing to do with me being *in* a relationship!”

“I guess that was my mistake... But then what are you doing with the luggage cart? I thought for sure you were putting together a present for your partner.”

“This? It's...” Frieze looked about to say something, but she was interrupted by a nearby door swinging open.

“Miss Frieze!”

Several kids came out of the doorway. Their ill-fitting clothes were too big for their skinny bodies, and each wore hole-ridden shoes covered in black stains.

“Whoa, so many treats!”

“They look so tasty!”

“And there’s pretty clothes too!”

Frieze broke out into a warm smile as she watched the children’s eyes light up with glee. “I bought this stuff for you. You can eat whatever you like and take some clothes and shoes that fit you.”

“Woo-hoo!”

“Thanks so much, Miss Frieze!”

“Mm-hmm,” replied Frieze agreeably. “I’ll be here for a little while, so once you’ve taken what you like, let your family and friends know too, okay?” The kids, looking delighted, began to check the shoe sizes, try on the clothes, and bite happily into the apples. After they had changed into their new footwear and selected clean clothes, they rushed down the streets and into different homes to tell their families and neighbors about Frieze’s arrival.

She was distributing rations.

“Frieze, is this a regular thing?”

“Not so much. It’s been four, maybe five times. Before I met you two, I wasn’t able to save much money, so it was tough to pull off.”

“That makes sense. Living all by yourself is pretty tough, after all,” I said. “How did you make the money for the other times?”

“I challenged drunks to arm-wrestling. Promised them that if I lost, I’d work for them for a year, but if I won, they’d give me a silver coin,” she said. So it wasn’t just the sword that she’d won on a bet.

“You were skating on thin ice,” Oltea said. “What would you have done if you’d lost?”

“I never even considered losing. I’m brave like that,” Frieze said, once again flaunting her courage. I wondered if she called attention to it so often to convince herself more than us. “I’m powerful too. If there is anything you’d like me to do to repay you, please let me know, okay?”

“Repay me?” I asked.

Frieze replied with a small nod. She looked out lovingly at the empty streets. “The people of Hybrid Town saved my life.” She began to tell us her life story.

Frieze's parents worked as pack mules for adventurers. They were killed by monsters before she was even old enough to be aware of what was happening. Orphaned and without family to turn to, Frieze was taken in and lovingly raised by the people of Hybrid Town.

Then, two years ago:

Frieze, fourteen years old, decided to stand on her own two feet and become an adventurer in order to repay the people's kindness. In the end, she was unable to earn much working for the guild and decided instead to start wagering her freedom to bring in more pay. Those perilous days had only ended just last week.

"Thanks to you, Kaito, I was able to earn a lot more coin and finally afford to distribute all these supplies to the people here. I really can't express my gratitude enough."

"Don't worry about it. You know, I would have helped if you had told me."

"He really would have," Oltea said. "You're our friend. You don't have to stay so distant."

"You two are so kind. I knew that you'd worry if I told you, and besides, I just didn't want to bother you," Frieze said. Her features eased into a smile, but her voice retained its tone of apprehension. She knew that I liked to shop and that Oltea wanted to save for the move. So that Oltea and I could enjoy our cash and spend it freely, Frieze had selflessly kept her supply runs to herself.

It was unthinkable that she was still a kid. She was such a splendid young woman.

"I'll help you," I said.

"I'll also lend a hand any way I can," Oltea said.

"I'm happy to hear you say that, but... This is my own prerogative. You should spend the money you earn on yourselves, not me."

Ever since I'd advanced to B rank, money had been easy to come by, but I had thought that using it to distribute supplies to the hybrids would have been like pouring water on a hot stone. When I learned that they were suffering in such

poverty, I had decided not to contribute to them directly but to help maintain the peace by defeating monsters.

I could see now that I had been wrong. I knew how I could save them all.

“I’m going to become the Sword Saint.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. I’ll become the Sword Saint so that I can make a request of the king. I’ll ask him to make this into a land where no hybrid goes hungry.”

“But... What you just said is something that I would like. With a valuable opportunity like that, you should do what *you* like, right?”

“It’s not that I’m trying to accommodate anyone else. That *is* what I want to do. I genuinely want to do what I can for my friends.”

“Kaito... Thank you so much. From the bottom of my heart, thank you!” Frieze said.

“You’re welcome,” I said, smiling. The three of us got back to work and started distributing the rest of the food and clothes to the people who had gathered.

## Act 4: The Plan to Reach Rank A

It had been two months since my transmigration. Using my usual combo of Stick and Jet Beam, I was flying high above a range of rocky mountains, searching for the target of our suppression quest among the jagged peaks.

“I’m not seeing anything over here,” Oltea said.

“Nothing on my side either,” added Frieze.

“Nothing this way,” I said.

Each of us was looking in a different direction as we flew and made our reports to one another. This time, we had been charged with slaying a wyvern. Wyverns were great reptiles with wings sprouting from their backs. When first I glanced at the wanted bulletin, I’d thought I was looking at a dragon, but the receptionist had explained that this beast was not the same.

According to her, wyverns and dragons could be differentiated by their ability to attack at range. Dragons were variously able to strike from a distance by breathing fire, poison, ice, and even lightning. Wyverns, on the other hand, were limited to the offensive options afforded by their claws and fangs. Even so, their scales were harder than even the ophidian’s, and they flew far faster than one might imagine looking upon their massive forms. Up until now, it was the highest-paying contract we’d taken.

Our monster was not where it was supposed to be. That being said, where it was “supposed to be” was the mountains. A wide search area to say the least. To make matters worse, our mark could fly. We hadn’t searched the entire mountain, and it wasn’t out of the question that the wyvern had left for a while to go hunt, but we had taken the task on *yesterday*. For nearly five hours, we had scoured the mountain until retiring to spend the night in a nearby town after the sun had set. Today we had started in the morning and had spent, by now, eight hours on our search. Still, we’d seen neither hide nor hair of our target. A month ago, I would have assumed we had just overlooked it, but...

“Maybe it’s already gone?” asked Frieze.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I said.

“That’s getting more and more common,” said Oltea. Today was not the first time we had failed to find a monster. In fact, it was the third. Since the start of this month, we’d been forced to return from hunts empty-handed once each week. I wondered if adventurers were being double-booked, resulting in other parties scooping up our kills before we arrived. Thinking this, I’d inquired with the receptionist, who had put us in touch with the Adventurers’ Guilds of a few other towns to look into it.

Even in this world, there were telephones. Strictly speaking, since phones converted the sound of a voice into electrical signals, the communicators used here didn’t fit the definition, but they did the same thing. Using the devil stones of monsters with the capability to communicate telepathically, the devices were able to connect calls within a fixed distance. So, for example, in the event of a surprise monster attack, an emergency call could be made between two towns.

It turned out that nobody else had reported completion of this request. Not only that, but several other adventurers had called with questions just like mine. It seemed that a number of flight-capable B and C level monsters had been disappearing.

Putting in all the work to slay a monster without reporting the kill didn’t net any reward, so it was unlikely that anybody was killing monsters off the record. It made more sense to think that the wyvern had moved its territory.

“Shall we head back home before it gets dark?” I asked.

“Yeah. Swing and a miss today, huh? We can always take another contract tomorrow,” said Oltea.

“You two don’t need to worry about that,” I said.

“Thanks. Let’s take tomorrow off, then,” said Oltea.

Including the monsters we hadn’t reported to the guild, like the wood golem, there were only weaker beasts within one hundred kilometers of the city. Inside of that radius, there weren’t any strong foes. In order to prevent harm to the Royal Capital, high bounties had been placed on all of the monsters that posed

a real threat. Veteran adventurers had long since hunted down all the high-level marks near the walls, so now just reaching the site of any given upper-rank job took a while.

To become the Sword Saint, I had no choice but to keep on hunting monsters, but traveling so far every day was clearly exhausting for my friends. For that reason, I gave them a break once every two days.

We hadn't been able to take out the wyvern, but we had been trying for two days. I wanted to let them rest.

"Say, let's go to Hybrid Town tomorrow, yeah?" I said.

"I agree. Everyone will be really happy to see us!" said Frieze.

"You're always thinking about helping the hybrids, aren't you, Kaito?" Oltea said.

"I'm just doing what I want to do, nothing so noble," I said. Buying food for the hybrids brought me joy. When I thought of their happy faces, it made me want to help them, and besides, buying all the supplies scratched my collection itch a little and left me feeling well.

Everyone in town had gotten to know my face and was coming to trust me. Any day now, I'd be able to ask if I could touch their ears and, if the time was right, get a yes in response... Just thinking about animal ears had gotten me all excited. I had to hurry home so I could touch Oltea's and Frieze's!

But just as we had decided to head home, Frieze murmured, "Hmm? What...is that?"

"Huh? Is something wrong?"

"No, it's...that," she said, sounding perplexed as she raised a finger to point at the western sky.

*Has she found the wyvern?* I wondered. I squinted toward the sun, still gently continuing its downward arc, and steadily watched. Five points stood out clearly against the blue sky. Too small to be a flock of wyvern, I thought, looking closer.

They were humans. *Five people flying together*, I thought to myself. It had to be Vlad's group. Sparing no precaution, I prepared to use Shield Beam if things

got hairy.

“Fellow adventurers?” called the figure flying at the head of the formation. It was not Vlad’s group but a crew we had never seen before. The one taking the vanguard position was an older man with a long, white beard. His thin form was clad in loose, white clothing and he carried a cane, the tip of which was adorned with a large, red gem. He looked just like an old sage.

“I’m Kaito, rank B adventurer. The two behind me here are my comrades, Oltea and Frieze,” I said.

The elder’s face broke into a wide smile as soon as I had finished my introduction.

“You’re that youngin’ Kaito! A merchant I met earlier was talking all about you. Sounds like you’ve really had your nose to the grindstone.”

“Thanks, but...”

“Ah, sorry, sorry. I’ve neglected to give you my own name, haven’t I? It’s Verrick.”

“You’re—” Oltea began. Verrick’s name often came up as part of a pair with Vlad’s: the only two A rank adventurers in the guild. The receptionist had said that some guild members became arrogant as they climbed the ranks, but she hadn’t uttered a bad word about Verrick. He didn’t seem like too bad a guy to me, but...when imagining a master adventurer, I tended to draw a more warrior-like picture.





The adventurer standing before me had, instead, a peaceful air and the look of a good-natured old man. Oltea and Frieze seemed to have gotten the same impression.

“You’re nothing at all like Vlad, are you?” Oltea asked.

“I think we all imagined you being a little more full of yourself given the A rank reputation,” I explained.

“I’m not special enough to be full of myself. You two, though: partying up with a B rank without even magic to help you along? Now that’s nothing to sneeze at,” Verrick said to the girls behind me.

“He seems nice,” said Frieze.

“Vlad certainly wouldn’t say anything like that!” Oltea added. The two of them seemed to be in high spirits, and seeing my friends praised put me in a good mood too. Usually, when people addressed us as a party, I was the only one they paid any mind to. It was common for Oltea and Frieze to be entirely ignored, so Verrick’s acknowledgment had made an impression.

“By the by, I heard you mention Vlad. Are you acquainted? Is he still in the Royal Capital?” Verrick asked.

“Yes, I think he is.”

“Really? Well, that’s good.”

“Good...? Is Vlad a friend of yours?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say so, no. The chap invited me to a one-on-one, that’s all. I’m supposed to visit him at home today.”

“But master, that invitation was extended three months ago. He’s almost certainly forgotten by now,” said one of his followers, a woman hovering behind him.

Another one, a man floating next to her, nodded deeply. “Your time is valuable, master. Spending any of it on Vlad would be more than he deserves.”

“At any rate, he’s probably just trying to recruit you again.”

“The way he asked you, all smug-like... Ugh, just remembering it is making me

sick! I think we ought to just ignore him.”

“I promised Vlad that I’d meet with him in three months. I’m *not* one to break a promise,” Verrick said, sharply rebuking his disciples.

It seemed that he had seen us while en route back to the capital and had decided to stop and approach us as he passed.

“Have you been away from the city for three months, Verrick?” I asked.

“Not the city, the country. I started living abroad a year or so back. It’s different outside these peaceful borders: rank A monsters aren’t quite so rare in other lands,” he said.

I knew that this country didn’t have A rank monsters; the receptionist had told us as much when we were all drinking together. Most monsters either operated on instinct alone or followed the will of the Demon King. The farther north one went—and thus the closer to the Demon King’s territory one drew—the more the land was scarred by monster attacks. Rank A monsters from beyond the border occasionally found their way into this country too, but those incidents were few and far between. The receptionist, drunk to the point of slurring, had made sure I knew it was my duty to take care of those stray threats when they arose.

“But if you live in a different country, doesn’t that mean your record doesn’t count toward becoming Sword Saint?”

“Being selected as the Sword Saint is a great honor, but I don’t kill all these monsters for prestige. I fight to make the world safer, even if just a little. They wouldn’t choose me for Sword Saint this year anyways.”

“How come?”

“I’m getting to be an old man. I don’t have all that long left to live, and I want to use my twilight years to bring the fight to the Demon King,” Verrick said.

“I see...” I said. I didn’t know what to say. He really was an outstanding figure. He naturally drew out feelings of respect. I felt it just from one meeting. The followers who called him Master seemed to love him from the bottom of their hearts.

“Please bring us along!” cried out one of them in support of his conviction.

“Allow us to act as companions on your quest!”

“We will do our utmost to be of service to you, Master.”

“You raised us, orphans all. Let us try to repay you in whatever insignificant way that we may!”

*So they were all orphans*, I thought. Even with the busy life of an adventurer, Verrick had found time to act as a foster parent. He really was something.

Verrick smiled happily at the display and waved his hand in dismissal.

“How many times have I turned you all down already? You lot are young yet. Too young to rush headlong into death. It’s better for you to stay alive so you can endeavor, to the extent that you can, to bring peace,” Verrick said, lightly chiding his students. He looked at me. “Anyhow, I’m no Sword Saint. The job ought to go to someone young like yourself. An old man like me with one foot in the grave taking the post and swearing to protect the people isn’t gonna put our ancestor’s hearts at ease,” he said. After that, he gave us some cheerful encouragement, said his farewells, and took off flying toward the capital.

“What an amazing man...” Oltea said.

“I didn’t know there were adventurers like that,” Frieze said.

“He really was remarkable,” I said. “I completely understand why he became the Sword Saint.”

“Hey, you’re pretty remarkable yourself, you know,” Oltea said.

“Mm-hmm. We and everyone in Hybrid Town owe you,” Frieze added.

“Thanks. I’ll do my best to become Sword Saint and save everyone in that village. I promise you that,” I said. Compared to Verrick’s lofty aspirations of world peace, the scale of my ambition was small. Nonetheless, if I became Sword Saint, I could make people I cared about smile. I would think about the big stuff later. For now, my goal was to help the people who were within my power to help. To reach a hand out to those close enough to take it.

That aside, we had failed to find the wyvern and would have to take a new contract. Taking a request from a nearby town would be just fine, but it was

already evening and past time to head home. We'd taken such pains to move; I wanted Oltea to sleep in her room with a view of the castle.

Having decided that, the three of us turned back to make our way home.

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We arrived home in the Royal Capital just as the sun was finally slipping behind the horizon. We touched down in front of the guild and were about to make our way inside when something interrupted us.

"Ah, Mr. Kaito!" called a woman standing out in front of the guildhall. She had short blonde hair and a friendly voice. Despite her recognizing me, I didn't believe we had met before.

"Good afternoon, er—"

"Clié! I've been wanting to talk to you for quite a while, Kaito! It's incredible that you reached rank B at such a young age. That really demands respect!"

"Thank you."

"I'm a brand-new adventurer myself. I don't really understand the contract system at all yet. If it's all right with you, could I ask for some advice?"

"This again?" Oltea grumbled, exasperated.

I understood her frustration: this had been happening a lot lately. I wasn't against offering advice, but I was really just following after my laser lust. Beams weren't magic but the product of a power I'd received from the goddess. There wasn't much of anything that I could teach her.

She spoke with a bright, cheery voice but somehow looked overwhelmed. Maybe she was just tired, but her eyes looked utterly lifeless. There was one piece of advice I *could* give her.

"You should make sure to sleep well and give your body the rest that it deserves," I said.

"Whoa! That's inspiring stuff! That's gonna help me a ton. Thank you so much for your wise words! Come to my home and I'll treat you to a feast to show my gratitude!"

“This again?” sighed Frieze this time.

This, too, had happened lately: I was often invited over for a banquet after giving advice, no matter how trivial. Invariably, the recipient of my suggestions would just bluntly ask me to their home. I understood that people like this were trying to pick me up, but I expected that kind of thing would come with a little more tact. Of course, cultures varied even between countries, so my common sense might not have been applicable to a whole new world.

“Sorry, it’s actually been really busy lately, and—”

“Really? Well, how about you come over just to chat some, then?”

“For just talking, the guildhall should be—”

“It’s much better to have a conversation somewhere a little quieter, don’t you think?” she said, persistent as all the previous women had been to get me over to her place. I didn’t like to be suspicious of other people, but I was always wary of the possibility that I was being lured into some kind of blackmail scheme. Besides, even if she really did just want to find a calm place to share a conversation, I’d still rather spend the time on my friends.

“I’m sorry, but I have some business to take care of and really must be going,” I said. I had been propositioned inside the guildhall before too, so instead of entering, I hopped on to Stick Beam with Oltea and Frieze and took to the skies. Without moving from her position at all, Clié stared intently as we took to the skies, the last of the evening light still lingering above.

It was, frankly, a little creepy.

“There’s been more and more people like that lately, huh?” Oltea said.

“I understand why they want to invite you over, but to come on so strong...” Frieze said.

“Hey, speaking of... Are you going to try and find a girlfriend soon?” Oltea asked.

“Oh, that’s a good idea! That would be a good excuse to say no to people like that too!” said Frieze excitedly.

“But isn’t it kind of disrespectful to the girl if you date her just to ward off

pick-up artists?" I asked.

"The motive that you start with isn't that important. What matters in the end is that you love someone."

"So then...you're not interested in finding a partner?" Frieze asked.

Both of them were seated behind me, so I couldn't see their faces, but their voices sounded earnest. Honestly, I was pretty bad at this kind of conversation, but Oltea and Frieze had thought of me and made a genuine suggestion. It wouldn't do to brush them off now.

"Well, I haven't decided *not* to look for a partner," I said.

"Really? So you think you might?" asked Oltea.

"So then...what kind of girl do you like, Kaito?" asked Frieze.

"I like hybrids," I said. I loved animal ears. If I *were* going to date someone, I'd prefer a hybrid. If I were marrying someone, I wouldn't consider anyone *but* a hybrid. I'd be absolutely over the moon if I met a hybrid I connected with enough to marry someday. Kids were already adorable under normal circumstances, but if I had children with animal ears, they'd be so cute I might go insane.

"H-Hmm, I see. Hybrids, huh," Oltea said, stuttering a bit.

"I see, I see," said Frieze. Both of them seemed to be in a good mood, their spirits perhaps having been lifted by my answer.

"Anyways..." I started. Midsentence, I glanced down and saw Cli , still staring up at us. As if following a command to stay, she was rooted to the spot. I wondered if she planned to stay there until the guild closed.

"Shall we just make our report tomorrow morning and head home for now? Or should we maybe go get some food?"

"Let's get some dinner now and beat the rush."

"I need a drink tonight anyways," I said. Everyone in agreement, we turned to head back to Section One.

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That same night, there was a caller at Vlad's manor. After three long months of waiting, the man he had invited for a private conversation finally appeared late in the night. Irritated at the impropriety, Vlad nonetheless showed Verrick inside.

"Well," said the old man with an impressed whistle. "Ain't this something? Pretty nice place you've got for yourself, son."

"Oh, shut up. You made me wait three months to speak with you. If you weren't such an outstanding peer, I'd tear you to shreds for that."

"You haven't changed, eh? Still as bloodthirsty as ever, but I don't think you could take me," Verrick said. After a moment, he continued. "I hear you fired magic at a hybrid. That's too far, even for a threat."

"It has nothing to do with you, old man. Twelve weeks I've waited—stop wasting my time with idiotic drivel and let's get to the point."

"Sure thing, son. I'd like to get home and snag some shut-eye soon anyways. Whatever it is you wanted to discuss with me, I'm here. We can talk it out just standing here and now, but keep it brief, yeah?" Verrick said.

Having advanced the conversation, Vlad fleetingly glanced out the window. Section One was a quiet neighborhood. This time of night, the road, dimly lit by streetlights along its edge, was quiet. Not a soul to be seen.

"Where's that entourage you're always dragging along?" Vlad asked.

"If you mean my pupils, they're fast asleep. Tired from the long trip, you see. I don't suppose you're going to ask me again to throw them to the wolves and join your ranks, are you?" Verrick asked, voice full of anger and slackened eyes fixed on his opponent. Vlad had learned last time they spoke, three months ago, that to Verrick, the very topic of leaving behind his students was taboo. When he'd brought it up, the old man had suddenly said he was busy and must leave immediately. As if making a parting threat, he had said, *Use these next three months to think over your words and deeds, kid. Really take a good, long look.*

Thinking back on that time only inflamed Vlad's irritation. Somehow, for the sake of the old man whom he so admired, he had managed to exercise some self-control over his rage long enough to have this second meeting.



“I don’t need any rank C adventurers in my group, but if you insist on it, I could make room for your students in the party as well. Of course, I would need to interview each of them to see if they’d make a suitable subordinate of mine,” Vlad said.

Verrick took a long, deep breath. After a spell, he spoke with the instructive tone of a teacher trying to make a student understand.

“Apologies, kid, but I’m not gonna join you.”

“Of course not. You said as much before. For that reason, I’ve taken the time to draw up more favorable terms. I’m prepared to offer you *all* of the reward money from here on out,” Vlad said.

“I don’t care a lick for money. For that matter, why do you collect so many more followers than you need, anyways? Also, why only the most combat-capable rank B adventurers in the country, hmm?”

“Is there something you find objectionable about my gathering associates?”

“No, nothing objectionable to me. It’s the judgment of this old man, however, that such a considerable number of strong fighters could do more good spread all around than clustered up. I understand that you want to cultivate the talents of the next generation and all that, but aren’t you just leaving the town in the lurch by taking all its promising talent?”

“They’re nothing but a distraction in the field. I only recruit them because it works to my advantage in other ways.”

“Now what on earth do you stand to gain from scooping up a bunch of adventurers weaker than yourself?”

“Becoming the Sword Saint,” Vlad said bluntly. Verrick breathed a sigh of recognition, as though he had guessed it from the start. That he had surmised Vlad’s intentions so quickly suggested that he’d had foreknowledge of the purpose of this meeting.

“I see. If everyone else eligible for the post became your subordinate, then, naturally, the title would be yours. There aren’t many other candidates, anyhow,” said Verrick. A party’s accomplishments all belonged to their leader, after all. If the other contenders from around the nation couldn’t bolster their

individual records in time, the position would naturally go to Vlad. He hadn't recruited every rank B adventurer in the country but had already brought every notable guild member into his fold. The only remaining loose ends were the incumbent Sword Saint Verrick and that unstoppably powerful newcomer who was rapidly climbing the ranks: Kaito.

"I understand your plan, but if that's how it's going to go, then recruiting me would be meaningless anyways. I'm leaving the country to pursue the Demon King."

"Pssh. Just one more in a long line. You won't stand a chance against the Demon King's whole army."

"Maybe so, but I'm still going to go. I'd like to help the poor souls being tormented by the brute, even if only a little. Why don't you join me?"

"I can't accept your invitation, but I *will* go to fight the Demon King's army someday... The time is not right, though. I must first become the Sword Saint."

"If that's the plan," Verrick started in a chiding tone, "then you ought to start by dropping that nasty attitude. If you can't put a cork in your arrogance soon, you'll never get picked."

"Then who will?"

"I don't know all their selection criteria, but I do know that the duty belongs to someone who will *ease* the hearts of the ancestors. From that perspective, Kaito is the best man for the job. He's a kind man, a courteous one. At the least, I'd feel more at ease going to the other side with him sending me off than you," said Verrick.

"I see. As expected, Kaito has become my prime obstacle."

"What, you're gonna recruit him too?"

"Nothing of the sort. I had planned to, yes, but that man wouldn't submit so easily. The plan needed changing."

"The plan?"

"It isn't anything that concerns you, old man," said Vlad. He held out his right hand to Verrick. "I'm so glad we could meet today."

Looking at Vlad's extended hand, Verrick widened his droopy eyes in surprise. "Ah, a handshake," he said.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, no. I just never thought I'd see you holding out for a shake. It's like you already dropped a bit of that attitude," said Verrick, grinning and taking Vlad's hand.

A pause—silence hung in the air.

A moment after their hands met, Verrick's face contorted into the strained scowl of a man in pain. Vlad tightly clutched the old man's wrinkled hand as the corners of his mouth twisted into a smile.

"What's wrong? Are you no longer able to move on your own? Good... From now on, you will serve as my puppet—and you will be *honored* to do so."

"Ahh, ugh—" Verrick grunted as his eyes rolled back and forth in his head. His whole body trembled and convulsed, and drool began to spill from his lips. Suddenly, as if all strength had fled his body, he collapsed onto Vlad's chest. Using the last, fading remnants of his energy, he scrambled to grab his attacker's collar. Unable to hold himself up, he slumped to the floor.

"Pssh. You couldn't even defeat me. How did you possibly think you could stand against the Demon King?" He looked down at Verrick, sprawled out face down, and kicked him in the side. "Hey, how long are you planning to sleep, old man? Get the hell up!"

Verrick stood up as if nothing had happened. Once standing, he looked at Vlad with vacant eyes.

"I'm going to give you an order," Vlad said.

"Order..."

"Yes. I don't care how you do it: kill Kaito."

"Understood. Where is Kaito now?"

"Ask them," Vlad said. He gave an order with his mind and, on cue, a series of women came down the steps from the second floor. Useless fools who couldn't even accomplish the simple task of bringing Kaito to the manor.

“Young ladies, has Kaito retired to the Royal Capital?”

“Yes, he’s at home! I spoke to him this evening at the guildhall. I waited a long time, but he took off and flew away without even picking up a request.”

“But I don’t think he returned to his house either?” one of them said with a rising tone. “I waited in front of his house until it was dark, but he never showed up.”

“He was probably out drinking! Lately, colleagues at the guildhall have been inviting him out for drinks after work!”

“I see... Then I’ll wait on his route home to attack under the cover of darkness. Will one of you show me the way?”

“Of course!”

“If you’re all finished talking,” Vlad cut in, “then get the hell out.”

Their orders received, Verrick and crew promptly departed. They were off to assassinate Kaito.

\*\*\*

Oltea, Frieze and I were on our way home, pleasantly buzzed from a night of drinking at our usual pub. The curtain had drawn on the evening, but the streets and the alleys between the numerous eateries and bars were still crowded with drunk people wrapping up their night. Once we turned off the main street, the hustle and bustle grew distant, and by the time we reached our residential street, it was completely quiet. The only sound that could be heard on our tranquil avenue, lit dimly by street lamps, was that of our shoes meeting the cobble.

As I walked along the empty street, Oltea and Frieze each leaned on one of my shoulders and linked their arms with mine. We’d been walking normally until a moment ago, but I guess they’d suddenly begun to feel their liquor.

“Ah—I think I drank too much...” said Oltea.

“If I get too drunk, I might say something out of character...” said Frieze.

As I thought, they were more than a little tipsy by now. Their voices were slurred and monotone.

“If you’re not feeling well, want me to fix you up?” I said.

“N-No, I’m feeling...feeling fine.” Oltea said.

“I feel incredible! Kaito, I feel so good that I wish you could feel it too! Actually—”

“Will you touch my ears?” Oltea asked.

“Oh, that’s what I was gonna say too! Kaito, pet my ears!” Frieze said.

“Of course, I’d love to!” I said to both of them. They jumped in front of me and thrust their arms behind their back to bring their heads closer. Right away, I began plucking the tips of their ears with my finger and thumb and using my palm to rub them lengthwise. I lightly scratched the bases of their ears and glided my touch along their surfaces, continuing until the girls’ expressions melted in pleasure.

“Ahh— That feels so goood—”

“You get better at this every day, don’t you?”

“Only because you let me pet them daily,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Thank you too! But...do you only want to touch my ears? Do you maybe want to touch, like...my tail?” said Oltea hesitantly as I stroked her ear. She had been fired three times in the past, two of those times for getting angry when someone touched her tail. For her to offer me the chance to touch it must have meant she really trusted me.

I didn’t have much interest in tails, but I wanted to make her happy. Besides, maybe if I tried touching one, I would come to enjoy it. I had laser beams, animal ears, and my collection covered, but there was still no harm in finding even more things to enjoy to make life just that much better.

“I’d love to.”

“Okay...but be gentle, okay?”

Oltea turned her back to me. I tried touching her tail, arced in the shape of a J. Its soft, short fur was smooth to the touch. I lightly wrapped my hand around it and gently moved it from base to tip, causing Oltea to jump and quiver.

“Huh?!”

“S-Sorry, did that hurt?”

“N-No. It just gave me a chill is all. It would be like...if someone ran a finger along your spine.”

“It doesn’t feel bad, though?”

“I wouldn’t like it from someone I don’t know, but from you, Kaito, it’s not bad at all. Can you...do it again?”

“No, wait, it’s my turn to have my tail touched!”

“After! I’m getting mine touched right now.”

“Well then, I’m gonna touch your tail too.”

“No, I only want Kaito to do it!”

“But I want to try touching it too! You’ll have to endure my hands too, Oltea. I’ll make it feel good!”

“No! You’re the one who’ll feel good from *my* hands!” Oltea countered. The two of them ran around me in circles chasing each other’s tails. It felt a bit like watching a TV special on animal life. As I watched my friends frolic around, I couldn’t help but smile.

Still, they were drunk and this was a bit dangerous.

“If you run, you’re gonna fa—” I started, but before I could even finish my warning, their feet got tangled up and they both began to trip. They fell toward me and took me down with them.

It was then that the sound began.

*Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!*

There was a deafening sound of rushing wind. One after another, streetlights along the side of the road toppled to the ground. One of them collapsed right in front of me, sending splinters of cobble flying toward my face. Had I been just slightly over to one side, it would have crushed my head.

“Wh-What the hell is going on? What is happening?!”

“What is this?! What’s going on?!” The two of them screamed into my chest. For a blast of wind, it hadn’t felt much like a gale at all. If it had been wind strong enough to topple lamp posts, then we would have been blown away too. I didn’t understand what had just happened, but I knew that it was no natural phenomenon. Still dazed, I stood up and deployed a dome-shaped Shield Beam just in case.

“Huh?!”

“It’s happening again!”

The dome shield rippled with the familiar electronic-sounding crackle of contact as Oltea and Frieze crouched down and clutched their heads. What on earth was happening?

“Impressive of you to repel my attack, son!” came a voice from a nearby alley. As its owner stepped out of the shadows and into the light cast by an unharmed streetlight, I got a better look. It was Verrick and four of the girls who had tried to hit on me.

The combination of assailants was curious, but more curious was what had just been said. Unless I’d misheard, it sounded like Verrick was saying he had attacked us. If so, then that wind must have been magic. Perhaps he had fired some kind of blade made of air. Still, I couldn’t figure out why he would have his sights set on my life. We had only met for the first time today and exchanged a brief greeting. Unless...

“What now, Verrick? We failed to assassinate Kaito.”

“He was supposed to get cut in two by the first kamaitachi blast...”

“No need to worry, young lady. Kill him secretly, kill him out in the open—it’s all the same in the end as long as he dies,” Verrick said.

“Why are you trying to kill Kaito?!”

“Don’t tell me you’re all just mad he turned you down?!” Frieze shouted. As she had implied, it very well could be the women rather than Verrick who were out to kill me. Perhaps they were relatives or grandchildren of Verrick’s who had gotten so angry at my rejection that they’d enlisted him to assassinate me. But would Verrick, who planned on spending his twilight years in pursuit of the

Demon King, accept a request to do such a thing? No matter how much he loved them, it seemed unlikely.

“I’m sorry, Kaito. It’s time for you to die.”

“What are you gonna do this time?!” shouted Oltea, the color draining from her face. Verrick held both his hands out in my direction and summoned in his palms a red ball around one meter in diameter. At first glance, it resembled a fireball, but it did not sway or flicker like a flame would. Not knowing what the magic being conjured was, Oltea and Frieze anxiously clung to my arms.

The glowing red ball rapidly shrunk until it was about the size of a softball, at which point the built-up energy released with tremendous force. In the blink of an eye, it struck the shield—a direct hit—and was immediately followed by the sound of a tremendous explosion. My field of view was consumed by a flash of bright, crimson light.

When my vision cleared, I saw that the dome shield had been punctured; the large hole made it look like a doughnut. A magic explosion, it seemed.

Neither the blast wave or the scorching hot air had penetrated our defenses, but the surrounding street bore the scars of the detonation. All along the road, glass was broken from windows and bits of wall were left crumbling. Screams and the sound of crying children rang out from inside the affected buildings. Hearing it made rage well up from deep in my chest.

“Verrick!” I shouted angrily. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Nothing in particular! I just felt like killing you, Kaito,” he said.

No reason? Did that mean that Verrick was a killer by nature? *No*, I thought. If that were the case, his students would not show such adoration.

He hadn’t approached like some crazed killer who secretly murders night after night. Rather, he had shown up with a whole group of women and had immediately gone loud, ruining any chance at discretion. If he had been regularly killing like that, then surely his crimes would have come to light by now.

“What’s going on out there?!”



“If you don’t quit that, I-I’ll fire all kinds of magic at you!”

The quiet neighborhood had been awoken by the loud explosion, and people from houses all up and down the street were stepping outside. There were some among them who had come armed with magic items, but if they attacked Verrick recklessly, without a plan, they were sure to be killed.

“It’s not safe out here! Everyone please return to your homes!” I shouted.

“Worried about others while you’re in the crosshairs, eh? Aren’t you a kind young man? Well then—” Verrick said, looking away from me. *Was he...?*

I had a hunch something bad was coming, and I protected the people who had come outside with my shield. The very next moment, the sound of rushing wind mixed with the crackling of the shield. Screams erupted from all directions. The sound of Verrick’s cheerful laughter rose above the cacophony.

“You really are such a thoughtful young man! If I can’t pierce that shield, then I’ll go around and kill as many of the citizens of the Royal Capital as I must until you come out and face me!” he said. I knew that it was no empty threat. The kamaitachi blasts he’d fired earlier proved as much. If I hadn’t taken action, the road would be a sea of blood by now. If that was how it was going to be...

“Hah! So it’s come to this, has it?” Verrick shouted. I had encased him in a shield dome. Of course, magic did not always have to come right from the hands. If Verrick had a magic item that could be used at a distance from the body—like Vlad and his icicles—then my shield wouldn’t help.

“Eek!” shouted one of the women. She banged her hand against the shield, but to no avail; it bounced back at her with a crackle. They didn’t seem to have any magic items that could work around the barrier. If that was the case, then this would render harmless all five of our attackers.

“Don’t touch the shield! It isn’t safe,” I said.

“Oh! So you’re worried about us, are you? Such a nice man!” shouted one of the women sarcastically.

“Well, since you’re so kind, Kaito,” started Verrick, “why don’t you just release us? If you don’t, we’re all liable to die, after all.” With that, he looked knowingly at the four women in his company. They nodded in turn, and he released a

volley of ice magic without even hesitating. The icicles flew like pellets from a shotgun every which way, ricocheting off the inside of the shield and tearing their skin to shreds. Taking it further, he unleashed a fireball, causing sparks to fly and scorch all five of the girls.

He was acting completely suicidal. Even so, he showed no hint of hesitation. He really didn't care if he died.

"Wh-What do we do, Kaito?"

"If we don't do anything, they'll all die!"

I couldn't forgive Verrick for hurting my friends, but I also couldn't just watch our attackers die. If I stood by while they perished, my life in this new world, which had been fun up to now, would be shrouded in a cloud of darkness.

Besides, we hadn't even had a chance to discuss whatever this was. Surely it was some unfortunate misunderstanding. The best course of action was to ask what had happened, clear up the misunderstanding, and arrive at some kind of reconciliation.

Still, if I removed the shield, we would surely come under attack. From there, if I didn't fire back, there'd be no end in sight but, conversely, if I *did* shoot back, then I'd kill him right then and there.

"...Of course," I said. I remembered seeing a news report when I was a kid about people who got disoriented from seeing flashes of light on their TV screens. My beams were made of light too. It wasn't out of the question that a laser beam could have the same effect.

I drew an image inside my head and, a moment later, dropped the shield that contained Verrick and the others.

"As I thought: too kind for your own good. You couldn't just watch us die, even though you'd be safe if you had."

"If I'm going to be attacked, I at least want to know why! I want to know why the hell you're targeting us, so please let me ask about it tomorrow!" I said.

A bright light began to shine at the feet of Verrick and his companions before shooting upward with a bang. A dazzlingly bright pillar of light extended high

into the sky and illuminated the street. Reflexively, the three of us looked away as it grew.

A light that causes loss of consciousness as it washes over you: *Stun Beam*. When imagining it, I hadn't invested it with any destructive power, but if it were fired in a straight line like the Death Beam, it was still liable to affect people other than its target. For that reason, I had given it the shape of a pillar.

*They must have passed out by now*, I thought. Squinting against the brilliant light, I turned back toward the pillar. I turned off Stun Beam, and the light abruptly faded. As it did, I saw Verrick and his cohort topple to the ground.

"Wh-What happened?"

"Did you kill them...?"

"No, they're just unconscious," I reassured them. I released the shields that had covered the rest of the people on the street, most of whom began to nervously draw closer.

"Thank you! You saved my life..."

"Was that man...Verrick?"

"It really was him. I can't believe that Verrick would do something like that..."

"I can't believe it myself," I told them. "He's out cold right now. I don't know when he'll wake up, so please return to the safety of your own homes."

"O-Okay... I'll do that. If Verrick attacked me, I'd be absolutely helpless..."

"Thank you so much for saving us, sir."

After everyone gave a word of thanks, they returned to their homes. With that taken care of, we turned our attention back to our erstwhile attackers.

"I'll go take their magic items. If you don't feel safe, you can leave and I'll—"

"I'm brave, so this isn't scary at all!" said Frieze.

"I-I feel better when I'm with you, Kaito," said Oltea.

"Thanks. I'm glad to have you two here," I said. I wasn't comfortable searching through a woman's clothes, so I really appreciated the help. I left the women to Oltea and Frieze while I searched for magic items on Verrick's

person, taking anything that seemed like it could be a magic item. One of the rings on his hand had a crystal ball affixed to it that could have been a devil stone. I reached for it.

“...Hmm?” I said, noticing something.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just...” I trailed off.

A pin badge was stuck into Verrick’s palm: the gold emblem of an A rank adventurer. Another just like it was attached to the lapel of his coat.

“Why would Verrick have two of these?”

“Maybe he misplaced one, got a reissue, and then found the one he thought he had lost?”

“Even if that were the case, why would it be stabbed into his hand?”

“Maybe to make sure he wouldn’t lose it?”

“Would he really do that...?”

“I don’t know,” Oltea said. “I don’t know what the hell he’s thinking. Let’s just get what we need and go.”

Oltea and Frieze searched the women’s bodies, pulling up their shirts and whatnot to see if they had any magic items hidden away. Keeping my eyes averted, I collected Verrick’s ring and pendant.

He only seemed to have small stones on his person. I wondered why he hadn’t brought the devil-stone-adorned cane he’d been holding when we first met. I didn’t know what kind of magic it was capable of channeling, but if he had used the cane in a surprise attack rather than his kamaitachi blasts, I would almost certainly be dead right now.

Had he underestimated me, or had he just decided to kill me suddenly and without much preparation?

“Hmm? What’s this here?”

“Did something happen?”

“No, it’s just... These two both have wounds on their hands.”

“That’s probably from struggling inside the shield, right?”

“This one is just a tiny wound like a needle would make... Can this woman heal herself or something?”

“She’s healing?”

Curious, I had them show me the wounds. All of them had the mark in the same spot on their hands: a scar that looked as if it had been left by a large needle. Frieze reported another and, on a hunch, I checked Verrick’s body too, only to find the same wound on his hand. It was fresh—not yet scabbed over—and must have been made this evening.

“Maybe it’s some kind of bug bite? More importantly: what should we do with Verrick and them?”

“For now, we’ll heal them up. After that, we turn them over to the public safety regiment,” I said. The public safety regiment was an organization similar to the police. I didn’t know if they’d believe my explanation of the situation, but I couldn’t just leave Verrick out here on the side of the road.

I fired Cure Beam at Verrick and his companions. Like a shower of mist, particles of light rained down on their bodies and healed their wounds nigh instantaneously.

Suddenly, an angry voice came from the sky. “Hey, what are you doing over there?” Three men dressed in cloaks swooped down and alighted on the street. When they saw Verrick, their eyes widened.

“It’s Verrick!”

“Did you do this?!”

“What the hell happened here, huh?”

“We were attacked by Verrick and his companions. They’ve only been knocked unconscious; they’re not dead.”

“...Attacked? By Verrick?” one of them asked. All three of them looked bewildered by the information. It was unimaginable that Verrick would ever launch a surprise attack like this. It wasn’t the kind of thing he did. Given the circumstances, it was far easier for them to assume that we were the guilty

party.

“I’m telling you, we didn’t attack them!” Frieze said.

“Ask anyone who lives around here—they’ll tell you the same!” said Oltea. As if they had been listening to her, the people of the area started to emerge from their homes to share.

“If it hadn’t been for them, it would have been a disaster!” said one.

“You public safety regiment boys were nowhere to be seen, so these people had to protect us!” shouted another. So these men were the public safety officers, it seemed. This must be a squadron that was stationed nearby, summoned to the scene by the unignorable bright pillar of light.

“I’m...sorry we doubted your story. But...you won? Against Verrick?” one of the officers asked us.

“Kaito is really strong! He didn’t even lose to an A rank adventurer!” said Oltea.

“Kaito... Ah, you’re Kaito, huh?”

“You know me somehow?”

“The rumors get around. I didn’t think you’d be able to defeat Verrick, but, well... Anyways, thanks for your hard work. We’ll take it from here and deal with them,” said the officer.

“Just to be safe, though, I’d like to ask you a few questions,” said another. “Why don’t you swing by the guardhouse in the morning.”

“Sure thing,” I said. The men of the public safety regiment bowed briefly to us and then got right to it. They used magic to levitate Verrick’s motionless body off the ground and into the night sky. The witnesses who had testified in our favor returned to their homes and the residential district was once again engulfed in quiet.

Oltea let out a heavy sigh of relief. “I’m absolutely exhausted...”

“Seriously,” said Frieze.

“Me too... By the way, are you two still drunk?” I asked. Both of them seemed

surprised at the question.

“I guess that sobered me up!” Oltea said.

“I wasn’t just pretending to be drunk, you know!” Frieze said, red in the face and flustered. We continued down the street. This time neither one of them begged me to pet her tail.

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The rays of the morning sun, filtered through the window panes, melted into the carpet. Such a brightly lit room aroused nothing but irritation in Vlad.

*Why can’t I kill one person with five assassins?* he thought angrily to himself. The night had come to an end, but still no report of a successfully completed mission had arrived from Verrick.

The old man’s target was only a rank B adventurer. Even if they had to battle on even footing, there’s no way Verrick would lose to him. Beyond that, Kaito wouldn’t be suspecting an attack: he’d be caught completely off guard. With Verrick leading the charge, the hit would be carried out swiftly and without complication.

*And yet there was no word from Verrick. Not even from the four women he’d taken along.*

Betrayal was out of the question. There was no way to break free of the brainwashing magic that Vlad had employed—magic that *only he* was capable of wielding. Of course, the spell had to flow directly into the opening of a wound he inflicted, but that condition was easily met, after which there was no magic quite as handy.

Whether it was a young adventurer with a bright future, a beautiful woman with many men under her spell, or the twice-elected, wizened old master Sword Saint himself, anybody could be bent to Vlad’s will with this incantation.

Even from a great distance, Vlad could order minions around with his mind. Without even uttering a word, he was able to communicate telepathically. They never spoke to him without permission, but when spoken *to*, they always replied promptly.

Despite this, there had been no reply. Vlad had been requesting an update from Verrick since the small hours of the morning but had heard nothing but silence in response. He could only assume that the mission had been a failure and Verrick had either been killed or incapacitated.

*These useless bastards can't even complete the simplest of tasks.*

The plan seemingly a failure, anger welled up in Vlad's chest. He had come from deep in the Northern Country all the way to the Royal City with a plan: to brainwash the king and manipulate the polity from the shadows, wearing the sovereign like a puppet. Once he assumed control, he would run the country according to the every desire of the one he held in highest esteem.

He was presently near the center of Section One, just a stone's throw from the castle. Were the palace not so heavily guarded, he'd be able to climb right in if the fancy struck him. There were too many men, though. A bloodless invasion of the royal residence was impossible. On the other hand, a use of force could inadvertently get the king killed. Even if he could survive an assault and successfully brainwash the king, Vlad would become a wanted man in the process. It was feasible in the worst-case scenario, but the far more efficient plan was to secure a one-on-one audience with the monarch. Then, without anyone's knowledge, Vlad could capture his mind.

Toward that end, he would become the Sword Saint.

Until two months ago, everything had been going according to plan. Only Verrick had posed a threat. Just to be safe, Vlad had mentally captured every adventurer in rank B, but, really, he knew that if anyone else was going to earn the title, it would be Verrick.

These past two months, however, new obstacles had arisen.

*To stand up to an A rank hunter like that... Who in the hell is that man?*

He hunted monsters using some unstoppable power, climbing through the ranks even faster than Vlad had been able to. Already B rank, he had even been able to easily defend against Vlad's magic.

Vlad had only meant to kill the hybrids. It was no different than killing a bug: nothing to be taken so seriously, but the man had still so readily, so easily



deployed his own power to block the attack. Such competence demanded respect.

Furthermore, Verrick, who had served two terms as Sword Saint, had himself commented that the newcomer should be his successor. It was too far—this *Kaito* could be allowed to roam free no longer.

*I will not tolerate someone like him derailing my carefully laid plans!*

For Vlad to become Sword Saint, one path stood out as the best: manipulate Kaito into killing himself. Brainwashing someone into suicide was easy. If you ordered them to die, they did so promptly and with pleasure.

The only problem was the initial brainwashing.

The wound could, as usual, be made with a needle planted on a ring. Most people, regardless of their personal opinions toward Vlad, accepted a handshake when he offered one. That bit was always easy, but when the magic flowed into the victim's body through the wound, their mind became erratic. Their eyes went blank, they convulsed and shook, they drooled... Anyone who witnessed the moment of the brainwashing was bound to become suspicious.

For that reason, getting the victim alone was always essential. Kaito, however, always traveled with his two hybrids. Of course, if they were the only two witnesses, they would be easy enough to snuff out. Still, even when Vlad had told Kaito that it was okay to bring his pets, Kaito could not be convinced to visit.

If he was going to be stubborn, thought Vlad, then the only way to kill him was to make use of subordinates hidden throughout the city. If Verrick couldn't even kill him, though, how were lackeys who had languished in B rank supposed to get the job done?

No magic item existed that could break the brainwashing spell. Only Vlad's death could release the victims' minds. If one of his followers was bested and captured by a foe, they were not able to point any fingers at Vlad or inform their interrogators of his power over them. With no risk posed by their defeat, there was no reason not to sic his retainers on Kaito as often as he was able to, even if they were unlikely to succeed. But being that they were unlikely...

*Just to be safe, there is one other plan I ought to put into motion.*

Another plan that could also render assistance unto the object of Vlad's reverence: the Demon King. If Vlad succeeded where the most distinguished generals of the great leader's armies had failed, he would surely make it into the good graces of the Demon King. His position would be unshakable. Resolute.

"Well, then it is decided," he said to himself.

He was preparing to deliver his orders when a knock sounded at his door.

## Act 5: Something More Important than the Three Desires

It was still morning when we arrived at the Public Safety Regiment's barracks behind the castle. Advance word of our visit must have been given to the guard out front who, upon my addressing him, informed us that we were expected and led Oltea, Frieze, and me up to a room on the third floor.

"Right in here," he said, ushering us into what looked to be an office. There was a large window behind the desk that looked out onto the area around the castle and gave the room a grandeur which made an immediate, powerful impression. It was an ideal space for Oltea, but she wasn't looking at the palace as I would have expected. Instead, she and Frieze were looking uneasily at the person we had come to meet: a middle-aged man who, though seated, struck an imposing figure.

"Appreciate the escort, soldier. You're dismissed," the man said.

"Yes, sir!" the guard said, then departed at once.

Once it was just the four of us, the man looked us over closely as if making an appraisal. When his intimidating gaze met Oltea's and Frieze's eyes, they froze up, becoming quiet and meek. Seeing them shrink into themselves, the man let out an amused chuckle at their expense.

"No need to quake in your boots," he said gruffly. "You're not on the chopping block. Actually, I wanted to extend my thanks to you three."

"Well, I wasn't scared anyways!" Frieze said unconvincingly.

"Th-That isn't a face that says 'gratitude,'" Oltea said.

"Well, it's the only one I've got. I was born with this scowl. It even makes my grandkids cry," he sighed, gesturing for us to take a seat. His expression grew somehow even more serious as we settled into the sofa. "I'm Captain Favel, chief officer of the Public Safety Regiment. I've been hearing all about your handiwork. Seems your merry band has been keeping the peace in my men's

stead... I really can't thank you enough."

"We appreciate that, but I'm not sure gratitude is merited," I said. "Verrick and his crew tried to kill us. All we did was defend ourselves."

"That may be, but I'm told that if you three hadn't been there, we'd now be counting corpses."

"You say 'you three,' but it was really just Kaito," Oltea said.

"We're just two more people he managed to save. If not for Kaito, we'd both be dead right about now. We'll be thanking him forever!" said Frieze.

"You shouldn't be thanking me. If anything, I should apologize for wrapping you two up in my mess. If I weren't around, you wouldn't have to be scared of anything like that happening again," I said.

"You don't need to apologize to us! Verrick is the only one at fault," Oltea said.

"Yeah, exactly! Besides, I'm not 'scared' of anything like that happening again," Frieze said. I already knew how they both felt, but hearing them put it into words made me feel better.

Still, if people were going to keep trying to kill me, then it was probably better to keep my distance from Oltea and Frieze. It was likely that Verrick would be set free. Since rank A adventurers were permitted to do anything short of murder without consequence, there was nothing to stop him from continuing to make attempts on my life until he succeeded.

Really, what did Verrick hold so bitterly against me anyhow? The timing was strange as well: if he was nursing grudge against me, why wouldn't he have attacked at our first encounter? I had been completely unprepared and vulnerable. If he had made use of his kamaitachi then and there, I'd have been an easy kill. The fact that he had passed up the opportunity led me to think that he'd had no intention of killing me at that time. I couldn't think of anything I might have said during our brief meeting to offend him either. His urge to kill me must have developed some time after our meeting.

I could only think of two reasons why that might have happened, the first being a request to end my life from one or all of the four women in his company

who had failed to seduce me. The second was—

“Shot in the dark here, but are there any bugs in this country with a bite that can send people into a frenzy?” I asked.

“Hmm? What do you mean?” asked Favel.

“They may have already healed, but...Verrick and the four women who attacked us all had wounds on their hands. Small prick marks like the ones a needle would leave.”

“I’ve lived in the Royal Capital for a long time, but I’ve never heard of any bug like that.”

“I see...” That tracked. An insect like that would have rendered the city extremely unsafe, but in the two months since my arrival, I hadn’t heard talk of any incidents like the one that had befallen us. Furthermore, even if such a pest existed, there was no reason that everyone affected would be targeting me in particular.

It had to be the other explanation: after Verrick returned to town, the four women who’d propositioned me had told him of my rejection and he’d decided to come kill me.

“Do you know what Verrick’s relationship to those women is?” I asked.

“Not in detail. I can say for sure that they share no relation, though. Verrick is a single man,” Favel said.

They weren’t family and yet he’d still accepted their request to kill me? It was hard enough to believe he’d do something like that for beloved grandchildren. If they *weren’t* family, it was even more confusing. It just didn’t seem likely that Verrick, who had already dedicated his twilight years to the battle against the Demon King, would, after all this time, take a hit job for money.

No matter how much I turned things over in my head, I just couldn’t make it click. I would have to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth.

“Where is Verrick now?”

“They’re all in the dungeon. I’d like to pick their brains too, but all five of them are out cold,” Favel said. Stun Beam’s effect had yet to fade, then. I wondered

how long until they would wake up given that the power was only supposed to temporarily incapacitate its target...

“Can we see them?” I asked. They had wanted me dead so badly. Perhaps if I approached them they’d feel another twinge of murderous impulse and wake up instinctively. If not, I could probably rouse them with my beam. No matter how drowsy they still were, one shot from a new variant, which I’d call something like “Morning Beam,” would set them right.

“Sure, I don’t see why not. I’ll show you the way,” Favel said. We left the office behind and proceeded, at Favel’s direction, to the dungeon down below. As we descended the stairs, a troop came running up the opposite way.

“Ah, Captain! Impeccable timing. I was just on my way to inform you that all five detainees regained consciousness just a short time ago.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, sir. I should add that something about them seems off, though.”

We continued down the steps until we arrived at the dungeon. A cold atmosphere, layered with the sounds of distant cries, pervaded the halls. Somewhere, a woman sobbed, her lament provoking an angry yell from another cell.

“Please, someone let me out of here!”

“This is *tyranny!*”

“Ugh... Please... Let me go home, please...”

“Aaaghhh! Father!”

Crammed into one cell, the four women were crying out. Verrick sat in the neighboring enclosure with a bewildered look on his face.

“Did something happen here?” Favel asked the guard on duty.

“Well, er... I was thinking they might’ve woken up and was coming to check when I heard a whole lot of shouting. ‘Why’re we locked up? What did we do?’ and the like. ‘Course, I go on to explain they’ve been taken on account of attempted murder, but—”

“We did nothing of the sort!”

“You’re mistaken, officer! That isn’t right!”

“Please, just let me go home!” They began shouting over one another.

“Well... But then there was an uproar just like you’re seeing now,” said the guard with a troubled expression. It might have been his job, but that couldn’t have made it any easier to lock up a crying woman and ignore her pleas.

Favel turned to their cell.

“You conspired with Verrick to attack these three. There’s more than enough witness testimony to corroborate that too. It’s too damn late for your crocodile tears.”

“I’m not faking it. How could you say that?”

“It’s true! Please, you have to believe us!”

Favel sighed before turning to look through the bars of Verrick’s cell instead.

“And how about you, Verrick? Will you spin me the same yarn as these girls, or do you have something else to say?”

“If there are witnesses, then there’s no mistaking it: I attacked Kaito. Just like you say,” Verrick said, but then he paused. “Still... I doubt you’ll believe me, but I don’t remember a damn thing.” He looked at me. “When I attacked you,” he asked with a pained expression, “did...I hurt you?”

“No, I don’t think so...”

“Really? Well, then you’re as strong as they say,” Verrick said, letting out a sigh of relief. His calm expression, the gentleness in the air—all of it was the same as during our first meeting. The man who sat before me was completely unlike the one who had attacked me last night. The same could be said of the women: none of the prisoners seemed anything like our assailants. Their once-vacant eyes were full of emotion. Last night, they’d acted suicidal, but now they were trembling, clearly distressed by captivity. If they had truly been ready to die just for a chance to take me down with them, would they really be crying over their capture?

None of what I saw looked like a performance. Maybe they really *didn’t*

remember the incident.

*But then...*

If they hadn't attacked me of their own volition, then I had to assume that they were being controlled by somebody else. Manipulated, for instance, by some sort of brainwashing drug administered via injection to their hands. If so, that would explain the wound they all shared. That would beg the question, though, of why the marks would be on their hands. If whoever was manipulating Verrick and the rest had stuck them with the needle discreetly when they crossed paths downtown, it seemed likelier they'd have gone for the shoulder or the arm. The five could have been knocked out by some sort of sleeping pill equivalent and given the shot while indisposed, but if so, I couldn't think of any reason that their palms would have been chosen as a point of entry.

I thought to myself in silence. Suddenly, I was reminded of something I'd seen in my previous world. I'd seen espionage dramas broadcast late at night in which characters got pricked in their palms by needles. The villain would have a tiny poison needle on a ring they wore so that a simple handshake could induce a comatose state in anyone who fell for the trick. If that was what had happened here, then our five attackers must have shaken hands with the real culprit at some point. If that figure really had been wearing a poisoned ring, then we might be able to prove Verrick and the others innocent.

I turned toward the women who were sobbing in their cell.

"Everyone, calm down and listen to what I have to say. If my hunch is right, I may be able to get you all out of here."

"R-Really?"

"You... You can get us out of here?!"

"Y-You can't just make promises like that!"

"Favel, you'll want to hear this too," I said.

"Hmmpf," he grunted. "I'll hear you out, but only because I owe you one for protecting everyone last night."



I thanked Favel and then turned to begin my inquiry with Verrick.

“Verrick, what’s the last thing you remember before waking up?”

“Night,” he started. “It was night. I parted ways with my pupils and went to call on Vlad at his home. Then I woke up here,” he said.

Yesterday Verrick had said he was going to honor a three-month-old promise to go visit Vlad. It was safe to assume, then, that he had been acting of his own accord up until entering the adventurer’s home.

“N-Now that you mention it,” said one of the women, stifling sobs, “I was meeting Vlad too.”

“Really?”

“Yes. He’d bought a bunch of fruit at my store and asked if I could deliver it to his home, and...”

“And then you woke up here?” I asked. She nodded.

The other three women also said they had seen Vlad just before their gap in memory. Every story had one detail in common: they had been asked to visit him at his home.

“He definitely did something to us!”

“That bastard!” Oltea shouted indignantly. “Just the other day he was ready to bury us over a stupid grudge.”

I nodded. “Exactly. I think Vlad manipulated these five into making an attempt on my life.”

“But... There’s a problem with the premise here. It isn’t possible to just take over someone’s mind like that.”

“If we want to understand how he did it, we might as well ask him directly, then.”

“But even if we did, there’s no way he’d just confess. For one thing, there’s no evidence that points to him!”

“If Vlad is the culprit, then he’ll be wearing a ring with a hidden needle,” I said.

“Oh, I get it!” Oltea said. “That way he could stick someone when he shakes their hand!”

“That’s why they have marks on their hands!” Frieze said, the pieces falling into place.

The two of them were convinced, but Favel still looked displeased. “Even if Vlad was wearing such a ring—hell, even if we can prove he’s able to brainwash people with it... It doesn’t change that A rank adventurers have special privileges. With his permits, I just can’t investigate him for anything short of murder,” he said. Even the Public Safety Regiment lacked the authority to do anything more than ask the man a few questions. If they approached to inquire about brainwashing, Vlad would surely just deny everything.

Only Verrick, who held the same special privileges, would be set free.

*Unless...*

“Don’t worry. If my assumptions are correct, you’ll be able to investigate Vlad after all. However, if this is going to work, then we need to arrest him before the guildhall opens for business. For that, I’ll need a guide to Vlad’s house...” I said.

“Sorry, I don’t know where he lives,” Favel said.

“I do,” said Verrick. “I’ll take you there.”

The old man could be released due to his rank privileges. It seemed I’d be traveling with him to Vlad’s.

Favel nodded and said, “All right. I’ll accompany you as well.”

With that decided, I turned to the women.

“I’m going to prove your innocence, I promise. I ask only that you endure a little while longer. I’ll get you out of this,” I said gently, hoping to ease their fears.

Their faces brightened just a little.

“Th-Thank you...”

“Please, Kaito. We’re counting on you.”

“Even though we were so terrible to you... I’m sorry.”

“If we get out of here, I promise to make it up to you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just want to catch the person who’s really behind this—the person who hurt my friends. That’s all.”

Having assured the women that they need not feel responsible, we left the dungeon and returned to the surface.

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I knocked on the door of Vlad’s home—a palatial manor in Section One—and he emerged a few moments later. He looked us over with a suspicious expression, seeming to sense that something was up.

He let out a startled “Wha?!” the moment he saw Verrick. His eyes grew wide with shock. “What is the meaning of this...? Why are you—”

“Is there something strange about my being here?” Verrick asked.

“Hmm? N-No, it’s just... I’m surprised by such a sudden visit, that’s all. What have you all come here for, anyways?”

“There’s something we need to ask you about, son. I dropped in last night, but I just can’t seem to remember anything after that. You know anything about that?”

“You...don’t remember anything?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“Yes, I... Yes, I suppose it is,” Vlad said, then paused to ponder for a moment. “It was quite a lively evening and you had more than a little to drink. It’s perfectly normal not to remember a night like that, I’d say!”

Verrick tilted his head, wordlessly showing his doubt.

“Doesn’t matter how lively the evening gets. I don’t drink. Don’t touch liquor: hate the stuff.”

“Well, I don’t keep track of what you do or don’t enjoy! All I know is that you *did* drink. That’s why you can’t remember anything today. So, is that all you came to discuss?”

“No, there’s more,” I said.

Vlad whipped his neck to fix his gaze on mine the moment I opened my mouth. His bright red eyes overflowed with white-hot rage. “I am a *busy* man! I don’t have time to waste listening to the prattle of some nobody languishing in rank B! Get out of my sight, all of you!”

“We’re nearly done. Could we just get a closer look at that ring first?” I said. Vlad was wearing three rings on his right hand. The two on his ring and middle fingers were inset with rocks that appeared to be devil stones, but the one on his index finger was simple and undecorated. It didn’t seem like his type of accessory at all.

“And why must you see it?” he asked, half shouting.

“To be perfectly blunt: we’d like to see it because we suspect you’ve hidden a needle on that ring. One that you can use to prick people during a handshake and brainwash them.”

“Huh?! What the hell are you on about? Accusing me of such nonsense is beyond improper!”

“I’m well aware that the insinuation is a little untoward. Still, will you show us the ring? If you do, we can clear away any uncertainty and cross you off our list of suspects.”

“Of course I won’t! Now get the hell away from here.”

“No can do. We can’t leave until you show us that ring, Vlad. Proving the innocence of the women involved in the attack depends on it.”

“Hurry up and show us the damn ring,” Favel snapped. The captain had been on the fence about Vlad’s guilt when we’d arrived, but now he was speaking sternly, as he would to a suspect. Tension hung heavy in the air, and Vlad seemed desperate to be rid of us. Just looking at him behaving all shifty, I could see why Favel’s tone had changed.

“‘Show us the damn ring,’ huh? What gives you the authority to speak to me like that?”

“I operate on behalf of the Public Safety Regiment,” Favel shot back. “When

people act suspicious, I investigate them. That authority.”

“And why should that matter to me?! A man of your station ought to know about the privileges afforded by rank A!”

“I don’t believe those apply to you right now, Vlad. After all, I don’t see any proof that you *are* A rank,” I said.

“Proof? If it’s proof you need, then...” Vlad said, looking down at his chest. He searched in vain for a moment but there was no badge on his lapel.

“No dice. You can search your house too, if you like, but you won’t find it. Your emblem isn’t there, Vlad.” I withdrew a gold pin from my pocket. It was the very same one that had been stuck in Verrick’s hand yesterday.

On the way here, Verrick had confirmed to me that he’d never had a badge reissued. He and Vlad were the only two A rank adventurers registered in the Royal Capital and furthermore, Verrick had been with Vlad just before he lost track of himself. The owner of the gold pin in my hand could be none other than Vlad.

“Wh-Why do you have that?!”



“It was stuck in Verrick’s hand,” I said. Vlad tensed up, a sharp inhale betraying his shock. The item seemed to have rung a bell.

I could only guess, but my assumption was that Verrick must have realized as his consciousness was fading that the badge could identify Vlad and alert someone to his crime. He must have grabbed it as he was collapsing and closed his hand tight to avoid losing it, explaining why its point had been stabbed into his palm.

“This is just conjecture, but...when you’re brainwashed, you can’t do anything outside of the orders given to you, right?” I said. That a brainwashed subject did only what they were told—acting with total disregard for their own life—was evidenced by Verrick’s suicidal recklessness while under the dome shield. It also explained why Verrick would attack me without so much as bothering to remove the pin from his hand.

“Brainwashing? Idiotic drivel! Magic like that doesn’t even exist.”

“I didn’t say anything about magic. How do you know I wasn’t talking about some kind of brainwashing drug?”

“Magic, drug, whatever! It doesn’t make a damn bit of difference. None of that changes that I am an A rank adventurer whether or not I’m wearing some sodded badge on my chest!” yelled Vlad.

Favel merely shook his head at the man, who was now anxiously ranting and raving. “I don’t see anything here that proves your rank. Now pipe down and show us the damn ring. If it really is just a regular ring, then we’ll leave you be. If, on the other hand, it’s like Kaito here says? Then we’ll bring you down to the station and get to the bottom of all this, the function of that ring included,” he said.

“Oh, shut up. Even if I did have a ring with a needle on it, that still wouldn’t implicate me in any brainwashing!”

“It wouldn’t constitute material evidence, but it sure would constitute circumstantial evidence.”

“C-Circumstantial evidence?”

“I already snapped everyone out of it,” I said. “All of them lost their memories. All of them also reported that just *before* that point, they were visiting you. So, all the evidence points to you, no?”

Favel nodded.

“Just do as you’re told and come along. If you try to resist, I’ll consider it a breach of the peace and arrest you right here and now,” Favel said.

Vlad’s entire body trembled as he glared at me with bloodshot eyes. Grinding his teeth, he spoke in a low, strained growl. “I’ll make you regret...ruining my plan.”

*“Ruining my plan,” he says...*

“Is that a confession?”

“Yes, I suppose it is. I manipulated them like puppets on strings. I did it to *bury* you. Just like *this*!” Vlad’s gaze shifted to someone behind me.

Realizing something was amiss, I turned around just in time to see a man on the verge of firing an icicle blast.

“Watch out!”

Almost reflexively, I summoned a shield dome. In the same moment, the projectiles came flying at us and shattered on the shield’s surface with a cacophonous smattering of crackles.

“You’re with Vlad?!” I shouted.

“He’s been brainwashed by Vlad, there’s no doubt!”

Before the second volley could come, I dropped the shield and immediately fired Cure Beam at the assailant. A bluish-white mist showered over him and halted him mid assault.

“Wh-Where am I?” he asked, looking as though he had just woken from a dream. He scanned his surroundings with confused, vacant eyes. It was certainly a perplexing thing to awaken to, but I had absolutely no time to explain.

Vlad had disappeared. To make matters even worse—



“Huh?! What’s going on?!” yelled someone.

“What’s that noise?!” came another voice.

The unmistakable boom of an explosion rang out nearby. In the direction of the castle, thick black smoke rose into the sky. A tumult of shrieks and cries could be heard from farther away. I realized what Vlad was trying to do.

“Is he making his minions go berserk?”

“That bastard—he’s gonna blast away the whole damn city!”

I didn’t know whether this was an attempt at destruction of evidence or just an act of desperation, but either way, if it continued, the whole city would be up in flames. If the violence reached Hybrid Town, where the inhabitants could not use magic to defend themselves, they’d be helpless to resist the slaughter.

“He’s certainly trying! We have to snap everyone who’s brainwashed out of it, but—”

*Crassshhh!*

Suddenly, the roof crumbled and collapsed, sending rubble flying. As I materialized Shield Beam, I looked up and saw the silhouette of a man flying overhead.

*Vlad.*

He wasn’t running away at all but hovering in stillness above the city as if to witness its destruction.

“I’ll handle Vlad! Verrick, you take this,” I said, tossing him a leather bag. Inside were the numerous magic items I had recovered from the scene of the battle yesterday. “Use those to keep the rioters under control! As long as they are kept alive, I can fix them up afterward!”

“Got it, kid!” he said. Verrick and Favel immediately began flying toward the disturbance.

“You two wait here, okay? I won’t take long to finish this.”

“O-Okay! Do your best, Kaito! You’ve got this!” shouted Oltea.

“I know we can’t help you fight, but we’ll support you with all our might!” said

Frieze.

“Thank you! It helps more than you know,” I said. It truly did: when it came to protecting the friends I held dear, I felt as though my power was infinite.

I encased Oltea and Frieze in a shield dome and took off on Jet Beam to confront Vlad.

When I reached his altitude, I was around three hundred meters off the ground. From that height, the people far below were completely indistinct. Only the numerous columns of thick, black smoke rising into the sky stood out against the expanse of the city. Down on the streets, brainwashed adventurers were casting fireballs. Others were raining them down from the skies.

Defeating them would be easy, but they were under Vlad’s control. It wouldn’t be right to hurt them. Even Stun Beam would cause the ones who were flying to plummet to their deaths. Cure Beam, on the other hand, required closer range. It wouldn’t do much good with Vlad keeping them all dashing around as they were.

Healing the afflicted adventurers would have to wait. Doing something about Vlad came first.

*But before that...*

Thinking I could at least guard the town from the aerial attacks, I created a massive Shield Beam. Starting from the castle, it spread like an opening umbrella until it had covered the entire city. One after another, the falling clusters of fire broke against the thin, bluish-white surface of the dome.

“Wh-What is this magic?” Vlad, floating some fifteen meters to my fore, shouted in astonishment. In his hand, he clutched the trademark cane—an azure gem set in its end—that he hadn’t had been holding earlier.

“How can one person possess the power necessary to cover the entire city?! Are you even human?!”

“I am! But you...acting so cruel and violent—do you even have a human’s heart?”

“I don’t even claim to! I’m nothing like man, lowly, vulgar species that it is!”

“...What?” *Is he really not a human? If that’s true, then...*

“I, ever-faithful servant to the great Demon King and one among the chosen commanders of his grand horde, am no mere man! I am known to my kin as *Vampire Lord!*”

I had heard that there were level A monsters who possessed great intelligence and could conduct themselves like people, but I hadn’t expected the mimicry to be *this* convincing. I had never imagined that such a powerful demon would be hiding here, in a country so remote from the borders of the Demon King’s territory, let alone in the lands adjacent to it.

“What business has a general of the Demon King’s army here anyways?”

“I aimed to control the king’s mind. To make him my puppet, pull his strings from the shadows, and drive this country to war!” Vlad shouted.

Like stabbing a friend in the back. If war broke out between the two nations, humans would stand no chance against the Demon King. Not just this country but the entire world would be torn asunder!

“Your meddling ruined my first plan, but the next is already prepared. I don’t need to control this country to please the Great One, I just need to wipe it off the map! I’ll destroy the whole damn thing!”

“I won’t let you!” I shouted. Vlad had the appearance of a human but he—*no, it*—was a monster. Above all, his intentions were terrifyingly violent. I could not afford to hesitate in killing him. Just like every monster I’d felled before now, I would take Vlad down effortlessly with one move.

I assumed the pose of a kendoka brandishing their bamboo sword and, from my hands, drew forth a blade of light.

*Sword Beam.*

So that the monster wouldn’t have time to dodge my strike, I swung and extended the blade in one motion. The cutting edge met its mark with a heavy, slapping sound and severed Vlad’s neck. The beast’s head fell away like a stone, shaking violently from the impact.

Or so it seemed.

The head dangled beneath his body, suspended in the sky. It was connected to the neck by strings of blood. With a strange squelching noise, the blood was sucked back into the body until the disembodied head, trailing along, returned to its original spot atop Vlad's neck.

*"Useless!* That kind of magic can't kill an immortal!"

"You...can't be killed?" I muttered.

*Of course you can be! I don't buy that crap!* I thought. Decapitation might not have been fatal, but something certainly would be. I just needed to destroy the devil stone. No matter how great Vlad's regenerative power, destroying a monster's core caused it to instantly decompose.

I contracted Sword Beam once more, pointed its shortened length toward the beast's heart, and reextended the blade of light as fast as I could, causing it to fly out and pierce Vlad right through the heart. I yanked the blade sideways and a geyser of blood sprayed out along its path.

Still, the blood reversed course and began to flow back into the monster's body.

"Didn't you hear me?! *Useless!*" Vlad shouted, letting loose a massive volley of ice bullets.

I drew my shield and countless projectiles crackled on its surface all around me. Thanks to my beam, I was unharmed, but the dome shield covering the city below was blackened from within in various places. I realized that the heavy smoke, with nowhere to escape, was trapped inside the shield. Carbon monoxide poisoning from inhaled smoke was one of the most common causes of death in a fire. It would take a good long while for smoke to pervade the entire town, but my opponent was immortal. If the fight dragged on like this, everyone in the city could die. On the other hand, if I dropped the shield to ventilate the smoke, the city would once again become a prime target.

"Impeccable timing," said Vlad, smirking at my back.

I turned back to face my opponent and saw countless black spots darkening the sky.

*Those spots...*

A swarm of demons. Among their numbers were wyverns just like the ones I'd seen on so many hunter's bulletins. Their timely arrival could be no coincidence.

"You've brainwashed all these monsters..."

"Yes! I prepared these forces for the unlikely event of my plan's failure. They'll have no trouble destroying this blasted town! If you drop this damned shield, that is. If you don't, well... They'll just start invading other towns," Vlad said.

I was clearly being threatened. The Vampire Lord was holding the people of every nearby settlement hostage to force me to lower my shield. Of course, I could do no such thing. I had to annihilate Vlad before he could give any orders to the horde.

If I tried to take the demons out one by one with Sword Beam, they'd just scatter and flee, but if I used Death Beam, I could get them all in one go!

*"Hyyyaaaaa!"*

I put my wrists together and opened my hands to fire the massive bluish-white beam. The beam's trajectory followed the movement of my hands, its pale glow devouring monsters one after another. Their bodies evaporated the instant the light touched them.

I hadn't fired Death Beam since leaving the abandoned mine all those weeks ago, but its destructive power was just the same as I remembered. Moreover—

"Wha?! What is that?" said Vlad, face trembling and expression overwhelmed. The beast was probably surprised he couldn't buy more time with his army, but it was still an unexpected reaction.

Vlad was immortal: the very existence of a being like that is to bide its time. Why, then, would Death Beam cause so much consternation?

"Come to think of it..." I said to myself. I thought back on Vlad's speech and suddenly a hunch came to me. Vlad had said something interesting while bragging about immortality, something he wouldn't have had to say if he really was immortal.

"Are you sure you're just a human?" he shouted.

“What you see is what you get: I’m a human!”

“If that’s true, then how do you wield such power? A man of your capabilities would be given a suitable position in the Demon King’s army if you willed it. I could put in a good word for you! Leave these insignificant humans behind and surrender yourself to the Great One!”

I couldn’t imagine that he’d made the invitation out of kindness. Vlad wanted me to join him because he feared for his own safety. The way my Death Beam had him scrambling to protect himself seemed to affirm my suspicions as to the true nature of his “immortality.”

“Well? What will you do? Come over to our side? Or perhaps—”

“I’ll never surrender! I have no interest in any position among your ranks!”

“If you would bow to the Demon King, this world could be yours! If you would submit, even the riches of an A rank adventurer would seem paltry beside your gains!”

“Status, fame, fortune—I don’t need any of it! My heart is fulfilled by the life I already lead!”

Until I came to this world, I had been dead even while I lived. I’d been sleepwalking through a succession of dull, insipid days with nothing to even hold my interest. Studying hard to find a good career hadn’t brought me anything like happiness. It had emptied me. I had been alive, but I had not lived.

But things had changed.

With the knowledge of the three words imparted upon me by the goddess, my life had completely changed.

Living true to “laser beams” had helped me make friends. It had taught me the joy of protecting people I cared about.

Living true to “animal ears” had given me something to like. It had taught me the joy of loving.

Living true to “collection” had expanded my interests. It had taught me the joy of being exposed to the unknown.

Together, all three had taught me the joy of being alive.

Just as the goddess had told me to, I had found the things I loved and started leading a good life.

I wouldn't let that be taken away from me!

"I'll defeat you. Then, I'll keep on living for the things I love!"

"You'll defeat me, will you? Ha, you fool! You think you can defeat an immortal?"

"I know I can! Because you *aren't* immortal in the true sense of the word!" I said. When Vlad was gloating earlier, he had said, *That kind of magic can't kill an immortal.*

Subconsciously, he had prefaced his boasting with the critical admission that "that kind of magic" couldn't kill him. In other words, different magic existed that could. Just like any monster, Vlad's life would be annihilated if his devil stone was destroyed.

Normally, the devil stone was in the same part of the body where a heart would be. Vlad had taken the form of a human, so I had pierced the left side of his chest, but he was a monster. The internals of his body were not guaranteed to be the same as his outward appearance suggested.

If there was a devil stone inside his body, then it would of course be unnatural for him to remain calm after having his chest pierced. Furthermore, if he really was immortal, he wouldn't be trembling with anxiety over the sight of my Death Beam. "That kind of magic," it seemed, did not include such a powerful laser.

The difference between Sword and Death Beam was pure scale. Vlad couldn't be defeated by a precision attack, but a broad strike could fell him. In other words—

"Your devil stone is extremely small and you can freely move it around inside your body! Is that right?"

A moment of shock twisted Vlad's features. He allowed only an instant of vulnerability before immediately resuming a relaxed grin.

"That's right. It's just as you say: I can change the position of my devil stone—my one weakness—at will!"

“Then I’ll blow your whole body away!” I shouted.

As long as his devil stone remained intact, Vlad could just keep regenerating. He could move it around as much as he wanted, but if I blasted his entire body away, it wouldn’t make a lick of difference. That was why seeing my Death Beam had so flustered him.

That being said... Even though I had revealed his trick, Vlad’s face betrayed no sense of disturbance. He was still looking at me with the same cocky smile.

“Did you think that I would just sit back and wait while you asked your trifling questions?” he said.

“What are you—”

“Ha, now you see! But no matter, it’s too late!”

Far in the distance, suspended high in the sky, was an enormous, bluish-white cluster. It was as if a pocket of clear blue sky were falling over the night horizon. Terrifying in its overwhelming scale, the object became clearer as it grew. It was a great mass of ice. If it made landfall, half of the city would be instantly crushed. The resulting shock wave would kick up enough rubble and sediment to level the remaining half. The entire capital would be returned to the dust from which it came.

Vlad had been channeling magic power into his cane all throughout our conversation. It usually took multiple people to wield a magic item that powerful, but he had so much magical energy that he was able to do so alone.

I was still shielding the city with my dome, but I couldn’t be sure it would be of any use against such an enormous chunk of ice. It was incomparable to anything I’d defended against before.

I, however, had no intention of blocking.

I had come to understand over these past two months that despite the phrase “laser beams” referring to one desire, there were different kinds of satisfaction involved. Lasers are, essentially, lines of light. Both the line and the light were pleasant to work with. I felt good when I made the light of my beams as bright, luminous, and dazzling as possible. I felt good when I made the lines of my beams as long and true as possible.



*Nothing* felt as good, then, as the Death Beam.

“You’re persistent for a human, but you’ll reach the limits of your magic soon enough! At this rate, keeping up your defenses will...” Vlad trailed off when he noticed my expression. “Huh?! What amuses you so?” He raised his eyebrows in suspicion.

*What amuses me, huh? You’ll see.*

“Just knowing how good it’s going to feel when I put everything I’ve got into this next shot, that’s all!” I said.

I drew my hands down to waist level and began to produce a ball of light between them. Ten centimeters in diameter, twenty centimeters, thirty—it gradually swelled.



Death Beam was powerful enough when fired immediately. I didn't even know how powerful it might become if I amassed energy like this.

I wanted to fire it already!

"Wh-What are you doing? Don't you see that a piddling ball like that can't possibly break the ice?"

"No, it can!"

"Ha, I'll have to just watch and see, then," Vlad said. "From a safe distance!"

He cut off his own head. He probably planned to move his devil stone to his head, have one of his brainwashed minions take it, and flee to some distant refuge. I wouldn't let him!

I encased Vlad in a shield so that his freshly severed head would be stuck bouncing around inside.

"N-No! Stop that! Stop that at once and remove this stupid, horrid shield!"

"Oh, I will!" I said. I had finally finished charging up! I looked past Vlad at the looming mass of ice.

*"DEATH BEEEEEEAAMM!!!"* I shouted with all my might. I let loose the ball of light, now fifty centimeters in diameter. Even with no charging at all, the first Death Beam I had ever fired had been wide enough to swallow the entire three-meter-tall wood golem I had targeted. This beam, which had grown until it was fifty centimeters across, swelled explosively the instant it left my hands and rapidly expanded until it was big enough to completely engulf the enormous cluster of ice.

It was as if the sun itself were shining. I reflexively averted my eyes from the effusion of radiant light. The edges of my vision flooded with white. The glow of the Death Beam, which kept growing larger and larger, consumed Vlad and passed easily around his enclosure to annihilate the ice.

"Nonsense! Magic wielded by a mere mortal like you could never compare to the power of the Demon King!" Vlad shouted from within. It seemed the Shield Beam was holding up.

In this way, I'd be able to destroy the ice and protect everyone below, though

the sight was undoubtedly terrifying from the ground. Cleaning up in the aftermath was bound to be a hassle, so the more of the ice I could completely evaporate with the beam, the better. Even if it looked scary from below, it was best to fire as big a beam as I could.

Besides, it felt incredible! Dopamine was practically flooding my brain. The pleasure was unceasing.

*Death Beam is the goddamn best!*

“It’s not magic!” I shouted at Vlad. “It’s a beam!”

With that cleared up, I let the shield surrounding Vlad vanish. It dropped in an instant to let the beam rush in and take him. I didn’t even hear death throes as he was swallowed whole.

I wanted to keep firing the beam forever, but the people down below were surely worried. Besides, I needed to be there with Cure Beam for the wounded as soon as possible. By the end of this day, I would certainly be satisfied by the plentiful opportunities to use my abilities.

When my Death Beam finally disappeared, there wasn’t a cloud left. Its great force had killed Vlad, destroyed the ice, and cleared the skies. I looked down to see the once brainwashed masses gazing up, dazed, at the heavens. As they made no move to attack me, I assumed the spell was broken.

I spun around to face downtown and let the giant dome shield dissipate as I flew straight to my friends.

“Kaito!” shouted Oltea and Frieze. The moment I landed, they both ran over to meet me.

“Kaito, that was incredible, that huge beam! You blasted the magic right out of the sky!” said Oltea.

“That thing was so huge that even I was scared, but you just smashed right through it!” said Frieze.

“I couldn’t have done any of it without your support, Oltea and Frieze,” I said. My words caused both of them to erupt with involuntary laughter. Seeing them do so, I couldn’t help but break into a smile.

It wasn't lasers, animal ears, or collection that made my life in this new world so wonderful. No, this right here was the number one reason my time had been so special: friends. Friends I had come to hold dear.

I looked at the happy smiles on Oltea's and Frieze's faces and, once again, felt genuine joy.

## Epilogue: The Sword Saint's Wish

Just one day later, I was visiting the castle.

I had been exhausted from exerting myself so much the night before and had been trying to sleep when I was interrupted by a clamor of noise and voices outside the house. The sound of knocking at the door and countless people calling my name had me worried, and I had opened the door wondering what was going on. There, I'd found someone standing at the entrance claiming to be the king's messenger. I had boarded their carriage and let myself be escorted to the castle and into its audience chamber.

The audience chamber was a spacious, expansive room—big enough that it could have accommodated all my collection desires had it been my own. A tapestry, embroidered with the image of a lion I assumed to be the national crest, hung on the far end of the room. A platform beneath it bore the throne, in which sat an old man dressed in regalia. Because the attendant who had led me this far had opened the grand double doors and informed me that “beyond this vestibule, His Majesty awaits you, sir,” I knew the man seated before me to be the sovereign himself.

I started to kneel, but the king stood up before I could pay my respects.

“Aah, Mr. Kaito. I'm glad you came.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Your Majesty. I'm honored to receive your invitation,” I said and bowed my head.

I hadn't become the Sword Saint. Even so, here I was, invited to a royal audience inside the castle, somewhere I'd never imagined even in my wildest dreams I'd go.

Despite the unexpected nature of my summoning, I had a pretty good idea why I had been called. There was something the king wanted to say to me about the incident with Vlad last night.

I had spent the rest of the day following the battle flying in circles over the

city and showering it with mist from Cure Beam. I had been too busy to distribute supplies in Hybrid Town, so I had planned to go today, but I, of course, could not turn down a royal invitation. Oltea and Frieze were waiting for me at home. I wanted to get this over with quickly and make my way back home to get started, but...

“I asked you here so that I might express my gratitude for your brave conduct last night. For protecting the Royal Capital from harm, I must thank you from the bottom of my heart,” said the king.

“Oh, not at all, Your Majesty. I was just doing what I had to do,” I said. It was true: I had defeated the man who had masterminded an attempt on my life, and in the process, I’d protected the city and friends that I loved. Beyond that, I had been able to satisfy my urge to fire beams to an unprecedented degree and experience immense pleasure in the process.

Of course I welcomed the display of gratitude, but having the ruler of the entire country go out of his way for my sake was a little much.

“Be that as it may, had you not done so, the entire city—perhaps the whole kingdom—might have been destroyed. To think that a monster had concealed itself in the guise of an adventurer right here in the heart of the land...”

After everything concluded, I had found Favel and told him everything I had learned about Vlad’s true intentions and nature. From there, the information seemed to have made its way to the king.

“As the man charged with governing this land, it behooves me to show my appreciation to the man who saved it from annihilation. And so, in accordance...” said the king, signaling someone with a glance. A man standing in the corner of the room, presumably a royal retainer, made his way to us with an excessively heavy leather bag in tow.

“A small token of my gratitude. Please, take it,” the king said.

“What is it?”

“Gold coins.” If the bulging bag was full of gold coins, it must have been at least eight hundred. We were already on track to pay off the mortgage, but with all this wealth, it could be taken care of in one go. Beyond that, I’d be able

to supply Hybrid Town with tons of provisions.

*But...*

"I cannot accept," I said.

The king's face betrayed his surprise. "And why not? You needn't be humble. It's an appropriate reward for saving the entire country."

"Even so, I can't take it. Not after what has happened to the city," I said. Vlad's brainwashed minions had been mostly people from Section Two, and as such, the area had suffered greatly from the incident. Even the house I used to live in with Oltea had been partially destroyed.

Apartment buildings comprised most of Section Two's housing. Even one destroyed building could displace numerous people. An uptick in demand meant a rise in rents that could push the destitute of Hybrid Town into the city streets. Eight hundred gold coins were a drop in the bucket against that kind of market shift, but still...

"I'd like you to set aside that money for reconstruction."

"Reconstruction... You're sure that is all right with you?"

"Of course. Even without money, I've got more than enough to be content."

"Is that so?" the king asked. He wore an expression of admiration as he sighed, considering what he had heard, and then smiled.

"The list was accurate as to its description of your character," he said.

"The list?" I asked.

The king nodded. "An index of Sword Saint candidates that arrived just yesterday. I suppose you must be very good at what you do, Kaito. There's no shortage of positive impressions from your guildmates recorded under your heading on the document. Taking into account your performance yesterday, I see no reason to hesitate in granting you the title."

"Really?" I said, thoughtlessly raising my voice to a near yell in excitement.

The king's eyes sparkled as he looked on. "Not the reaction I expected. You want to become Sword Saint so badly?"



“Yes! I’ve heard that anyone appointed as Sword Saint is granted a wish as a reward!” I said.

The king’s face became a little uneasy. He frowned ever so slightly. “That’s true, but...I’m not sure what we could give that would satisfy you given your refusal of such riches just a moment ago,” he said.

It was true that my request might not be the easiest to fulfill. It would take a lot more money than eight hundred gold, and what’s more, it wouldn’t be a onetime deal but an ongoing change.

Still, it was the reason I had wanted to become Sword Saint. Now that I had done it, I had nothing to lose by at least asking.

“What, then, is your wish?”

“The introduction of a rationing system.”

“Rationing system?” the king asked, puzzled.

“Yes. I’d like food delivered regularly to the people of Hybrid Town and, if possible, to all the hybrids in the kingdom. Distributing daily would be difficult, of course, but even a week’s worth every seven days would do.”

“Now just what are you talking about?” demanded the retainer who had handed me the bag of gold earlier. At some point, he had returned to the corner of the audience chamber, but now he was walking back over with an unpleasant look on his face.

“I realize it’s no easy task to accomplish,” I said.

“Whether it can or cannot be done is besides the point. Opening the treasury for the sake of the beastkin is foolish. They’re already living here in the Royal Capital without asking for our help. If they don’t like it, they’re always welcome to leave. Besides, if they would just cultivate the land themselves, then—”

“Will you shut up?” the king loudly rebuked his retainer.

“B-But, Your Majesty! We already risk our lives to protect them from monsters, and now he asks us to go further and distribute food to them? They —”

“‘Protect them from monsters,’ eh? And where were you last night, then? Up

there, fighting the threat?” the king asked.

“W-Well, no... I wasn’t fighting, but...”

“Then I don’t want to hear another word from you about how we ‘protect them from monsters!’” the king said sharply. The retainer shrank into silence.

I was glad the king had stood up for me, but it wasn’t the same as granting my wish. Like the retainer had said, distributing food to the hybrids inside the city would be expensive. It wasn’t difficult to see why the crown might turn down such an obligation during this critical period of reconstruction.

Even though it had been said that becoming Sword Saint meant getting one’s wish granted, there were practical limits to such things. A week’s worth of food every week might be too much to ask. If that wish was denied, I would propose three days’ worth of food every week. If that too was refused, I would try again at one day’s worth. It wouldn’t be enough to fill all the stomachs in Hybrid Town, but it would be better than nothing.

The king looked as if he was considering, his brow furrowed in honest thought.

“You are the Sword Saint, after all. And the hero who saved this country from ruin.”

“Well, I’m no hero, but...” I began. A title like that ought to go to someone who had done something more important. Something like defeating the Demon King himself. It was too grand an accolade for someone like me, who until recently was just a regular old salaryman.

“There’s no need to be so modest. Practically everyone in the country would agree that the title suits you. If I were to deny our champion his one and only request...I would not be able to face the ancestors. The shame would be eternal. For that reason, I will happily grant your wish.”

*Yes!*

“Thank you, Your Majesty!”

“Gold doesn’t please you, but helping others does... If you swear the oath as Sword Saint to protect our fair lands, I have no doubt the ancestors will be able

to rest easy as they journey home.”

“Yes! I promise I’m prepared to take the oath at the Spirit Festival and adhere to it with all my heart,” I said.

The king smiled brightly. “Wonderful! I will send a messenger later with further details pertaining to your schedule on the day of the festival. Until then, I anxiously look forward to our next meeting,” he said.

“Understood. Truly, thank you so much, Your Majesty,” I said, bowing my head deeply and leaving the audience chamber behind.

“Now just what the hell was that attitude about, hmm?!” I heard the king say, reprimanding the unruly retainer.

Once I was outside, I used Jet Beam to take off and fly home.

“Welcome home!”

I entered our home—luckily undamaged from the recent clash—and Oltea and Frieze ran over to greet me. They looked at me with eyes full of curiosity.



“Well? What did you talk about?”

“Your reward for yesterday? What did you get?”

“Well, I was offered eight hundred gold coins, but—”

“Eight hundred gold coins?! With that, we could pay off this entire house!”

“They’d be so surprised if we came in and paid it all off at once!”

“...But I didn’t take it,” I said. The news landed with a thud, and both of them stared vacantly at me.

“What? Wh-Why? Were you too modest or something?”

“It was your reward. Shouldn’t you have just taken it?”

“Yeah, well... I felt a little bad about turning down such a generous offer. I told the king I’d like him to use the money for reconstruction efforts.”

“Ah... I see. That’s just like you, Kaito,” Oltea said. “I guess Section Two was pretty devastated.”

“It really was,” Frieze said. “I hope they can restore it to its former self soon.”

“Exactly. After that, he told me I was going to be the Sword Saint,” I said. As soon as I did, their faces broke into huge smiles.

“Whoa! No way? That’s amazing. Congratulations!”

“I can’t believe you really got picked!”

“I can,” Frieze said. “He worked so hard killing all those monsters!”

“Our strong, kind Kaito became Sword Saint,” Oltea said, smiling. “The ancestors and the living alike will be happy it’s you.”

“Mm-hmm,” said Frieze. “The hearts of my father and mother both will be eased by your appointment.”

“Thank you, both of you. Your kind words mean a lot to me,” I said.

The Sword Saint was little more than a ceremonial post for the day of the festival, but that was no excuse for upholding the position’s duties only on that day. Even if only in small ways, Verrick had vowed to protect the people. He put his words into action too. He was so beloved because of the countless monsters

he fought and the even more countless people whose lives he saved.

Though he'd only served for two terms, he had left massive shoes to fill. Stepping into his position was a lot of pressure, but with Oltea and Frieze cheering me on, I couldn't bring myself to worry. I would do my best not to get worked up or self-conscious. I'd always reach out a hand, just as I had up until now, to help those I was able to.

"Oh! I should also mention that the king happily took up the rationing system proposal we talked about in the past."

"Yes! Now everyone can breathe a little easier," Oltea said.

"Kaito, you're like the savior of the hybrids!" Frieze said.

Savior, hero—today was just full of exaggerated claims as to my importance. Being praised didn't feel too bad, of course, but it really was a little much.

"Still, it'll be a little while until the system takes effect. Until then, we'll keep distributing provisions just like we always have!" I said. They cheerfully nodded, having already assumed that was the plan from the start.

"After we finish breakfast, let's head out right away and start shopping!" I said.

"Let's make sure we get a good haul and really make everyone happy!"

"Hey, after we finish at Hybrid Town, can we shop some on the way back too?" Frieze asked.

"Of course," I said. "In times like these, we've got to support the businesses with our patronage."

"Plus, on the way back the cart is empty. So...that way, you can buy whatever you want, Kaito!"

"Thanks! I can't wait to!"

I was just as excited to go to Hybrid Town as I was to shop. If I continued to deepen my relationship with the locals...I might get to pet more ears!

As I looked forward to fulfilling my desires to shop and play with animal ears at the same time, I went outside and summoned Stick Beam and Jet Beam,

satisfying my desire to use my beams to round it all out.

Cherished friends by my side, I mounted up and turned toward our destination. The long, wide road stretched out before us.

## Afterword

Hello, my name is Nuko Nekomata.

I'd like to extend my sincerest gratitude to you for purchasing *From Desk Job to Death Beam: In Another World with My Almighty Lasers* and coming on this journey with me.

This book tells the story of Kaito Irie, an unremarkable salaryman sent to live in a new world by a goddess who awakens him to the three desires of his heart.

The psychological test that appears in the text is modeled on a real one that was going around Twitter earlier this year. When I tried it, I got the three words “teachers,” “swimsuits,” and “tempura donburi,” so I can't help but think Kaito had a luckier draw than I!

I should also give a few words of special thanks.

It is only due to the tireless support of many people in my life that this book was ever able to make it to publication.

First of all, I must thank everyone in Hobby Japan Publishing's paperback editorial department for their work.

I also want to express gratitude to Cut, the artist who handled all the illustrations for this book even though they were already busy with other work.

To the designer, proofreader, and every other person who had something to do with any stage of the process of bringing this book from concept to fruition: I cannot thank you enough.

And, of course, above all, I must extend the greatest possible thanks to you, the reader, for purchasing this work. There is no greater happiness than the knowledge that my efforts might have brought some small measure of joy into your life.



I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Until then,

From a moderately cold day sometime in 2023

Nuko Nekomata

## Bonus Short Stories

### The Greatest Reward

*Early afternoon.*

Having decided that Frieze would move in with us, we arrived in the skies over the Eastern Ward of Section 3. We'd come here to work on the move. Since Frieze had said that she had just about nothing in the way of personal belongings, I figured we could get it all done in one trip.

"Which neighborhood is your place in, Frieze?" I asked.

"I'm not used to this perspective, so it's kind of hard to tell from up here, but... I'm pretty sure it's that one," she said, pointing. I followed her finger and brought us down to a small road. Frieze didn't seem confident at first, but after walking around a bit, we came upon a road that was familiar to her, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Before long, she stopped and announced, "This one."

Our destination was a run-down three-story apartment building. Frieze showed us right to her room on the second floor.

"Excuse me," I said politely, entering after Frieze. It was a modest wooden-floored room about six tatami in size. There was no bath or toilet, and the single piece of furniture was a small bed. The only item that could have been called a personal effect was some cloth sitting on top of the mattress.

"Do you...really live here? It doesn't feel lived in at all," Oltea said, bewildered. The room she'd moved out of to live with me had been pretty sparse too, but not quite as empty as this. I knew that hybrids struggled for cash, but this was downright barren.

"Well, I basically just sleep here. A bed is enough for that," Frieze said.

"Still, this is too much. You don't even have clothes!" Oltea said.

"My clothes are in here," Frieze said, picking up the cloth. The ragged, worn-

out bits of fabric could just barely be recognized as a shirt and pants.

Oltea was at a loss for words.

“Do you go out dressed in those?”

“No, these are my pajamas.”

“And you don’t have any other clothes?”

“Other than the clothes I’m wearing now, I just have these pajamas,” said Frieze, sloppily folding them up. “All right, that’s my packing done. Can you two show me to your place now?”

“Wait, done? But... What about underwear?” Oltea asked.

Frieze looked away awkwardly and paused before saying, “I...don’t have any kind of underwear.”

“Huh? So right now, you’re...”

“...Not wearing any.”

“You pervert...”

“N-No, it’s okay that I’m not wearing any! It’s not like it causes problems for anyone else!”

Oltea looked completely dumbfounded to have discovered this unexpected side of Frieze. “That’s not really the issue. I understand that things are tough, but if you can afford to rent a room, you should at least get yourself some underwear!”

“Of course I think it would be better to wear underwear too, but...I just don’t want to spend the money,” Frieze said. I couldn’t tell whether she’d always been thrifty or was saving her money for something else, but either way, she spoke with determination.

“Look, I’ll pay, so why don’t we go buy you some underwear and clothes?” I said.

“N-No! I can’t have you do that, Kaito. I said I didn’t want to spend money, but I’ve earned a lot of it lately thanks to you. If *I’m* getting clothes, then *I* can buy them.”

“Don’t worry about it. You did let me pet your ears a little while ago, after all. It’s the least I can do,” I said. “And anyway, I really went for it when I was rubbing them. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Frieze shook her head.

“Didn’t hurt at all. It actually felt really good!” she said in a slightly embarrassed voice.

“I’m glad,” I said. “Let’s go to the clothing store!”

We left the room, mounted stick beam, and headed to Section 1. After landing on the main street, we entered the clothing store. The spacious interior was lined with clothes in all kinds of designs and varieties. With this wide a selection, Frieze was sure to find something suited to her taste.

“Pick whatever you like; don’t worry about the price,” I said.

“I appreciate that, but I’m completely lost with all these options...” Frieze said, sounding overwhelmed.

“Haven’t you ever thought ‘I’d love to wear that someday’ about anything?” Oltea asked.

“Not really. I’ve never been that interested in clothes.”

“What made you pick the ones you’re wearing, then?”

“I value ease of movement. So...that, basically. I picked the pajamas the same way.”

“Ease of movement isn’t all that important with pajamas, is it?”

“What do you think is important with pajamas, then?”

“Design, of course. If you sleep in stylish clothes, then no matter what difficulties the day brings, you can feel good while resting!”

“Hmph. You pick my clothes, then, Oltea.”

“Sure!” Oltea said readily. She immediately began to look around at the merchandise. Frieze followed along behind until Oltea grabbed a cute pair of pajamas with frills around the neck, saying, “Ooh, these are good, right? What do you think?”

Frieze furrowed her brow. "They're kinda... Aren't they a little too...cute for me?"

"Not at all! Right, Kaito?"

"I think they would look good on her," I said.

"See, Kaito thinks so too! You should get them," Oltea urged.

Frieze looked hesitant and, after a spell, shook her head. "They're embarrassing. Can you pick something a little more low-key on the cuteness?"

"Sure, I guess. They *do* suit you, though," Oltea said, putting the frilly pajamas back and resuming her search.

Suddenly, her eyes lit up.

"This! This is perfect!" she said. Excitedly, she grabbed the item that had caught her eye: a negligee. It still had frills, but its cuteness was, as requested, understated. Its design was elegant and graceful, and its loose fit made it look comfortable and easy to wear.

"This one wouldn't be embarrassing, would it?" Oltea asked.

"It's still kind of..."

"You don't like this one either? But the design is fantastic! What's not to like?"

"I know I haven't mentioned it before, but I'm...just not a fan of skirts."

"Because you don't wear underwear?"

"No, that's not why. I just don't like the feeling of them fluttering around. It unsettles me. The kind of clothes I like to wear are like... Well, like these, for example," Frieze said, pulling down a pair of pajamas.

"You wanna get those?" I asked.

"Mhm," Frieze nodded. "These are good... Sorry, Oltea. I know you really put some thought into your picks."

"It's all good. Sleeping in clothes you like is a better way to get a good night's rest anyways. Besides, I agree that those suit you," Oltea said.

Reluctantly, she began to return to the negligee to the rack when I asked, “Oltea, do you wanna buy those?”

“Huh? Me?”

“It seems like you like them, yeah.”

“Oh, no, it’s okay. I already have pajamas. Besides, these are pretty expensive, and...”

“Don’t worry about it. You let me pet your ears all the time. I feel like I owe you.”

“But... Are you really sure?”

“Of course,” I said with a nod.

Oltea’s face lit up with glee. “Thank you so much, Kaito! To show my thanks, I’ll let you pet my ears as much as you want!”

“You can pet mine as much as you want too!” Frieze added.

“Thank you both! You two make me so happy,” I said.

To be able to touch two beautiful sets of animal ears like theirs was incredible. And so, after paying for the clothes, I indulged my desire to pet their perfect ears without holding back.

## **A Fun Night Out Drinking**

*The day we finished moving.*

“Sake, pleeeeeease!”

“And a beer for me!”

“One here for me too, pleeeeeease!”

Fragrant smoke filled the interior of the little yakitori-joint-esque shop in which we had gathered. Oltea, Frieze, the receptionist—all three of my drinking buddies were obviously smashed.

I wasn’t one to overindulge, but in my previous world, I had, on one or two occasions, acted as the designated caregiver at my workplace’s year-end party.

Nursing drunks was no trouble for me. Hangovers were the real problem. If the three of them kept drinking at this pace, tomorrow would be killer. We'd have to start laying off the alcohol soon.

"Hey, how about we finish that one and call it a night?" I said.

"Go home already? *Come oooooon*," Oltea said.

"You're slurring your words. I can take you out drinking again another time, so why don't we hold back for tonight?"

"*Thatsh just...*"

"Oh, don't be so dejected, Oltea," said Frieze. "Kaito is just looking out for you! He's right—you've had enough!"

"And sho have you, Frieze!"

"Eh? Me? Wh-Why?"

"Your face is completely red!"

"My face always looks like this!"

"Yeah, and thish is how I *alwaysss* talk!"

The drinks must have really been delicious; they didn't want to stop. Just as I was wondering how to proceed, the receptionist burst out crying.

"Wh-What's wrong?"

"I don't want to go home! Because, 'cause, if I go home, then I have to go back to work! Work *sucks*! 'I'm strong, so you should let me take better contracts,' 'Can't you give me more cash?' 'Lucky you, you've got a nice gig earning money just by standing around'—everyone's always *saying* stuff to me! People like that are the only ones who come to my window!" The receptionist, it seemed, was a weepy drunk. She collapsed sobbing on the table.

"I think it's admirable how hard you work," I said.

"Th-Thank you... You're so kind, Kaito... I should give you a head pat to show my thanks," she said before rubbing my hair. She may have been even drunker than the rest of the table. Oltea and Frieze were fine since I was here to take care of them, but I wondered whether the receptionist would be able to make it

home safely.

“So, did you come with a partner today or anything?” I asked.

The receptionist blubbered in reply, and more tears welled up. “I don’t have a partner, how could I have a partner?! I’m constantly at the guild, I never have time to meet anyone!”

“Really? What about chatting with adventurers, or—”

“No! Of course adventurers will talk to the young women at the guild, but I...but I... No matter what, everyone just likes the younger ones! My window is always empty because I’m the oldest!”

“You’re overthinking it. Your line only looks empty because you’re so efficient with your work that fewer people are waiting in it.”

“That makes me so happyyy!” the receptionist shouted, dragging out the last syllable and hugging me with an ear-to-ear grin. Her ability to flip moods so rapidly was amazing. She really was drunk...

“I think you’ve had a little too much, no?” I suggested.

“No, Kaito. I’m completely sober... You... That doesn’t make me happy at all. It’s just like I thought—you don’t even think I’m attractive!”

“What? No, that’s not it at all.”

“Yes it ish!” shouted Oltea. “There ish no way he’d be into you ’caushe... Kaito, you know, he likesh petting earsh more than huggin’.”

“That’s right! Okay, Kaito,” the receptionist said, “you can pet my ears.”

Thinking that she’d probably start bawling again if I refused, I reached out to touch the receptionist’s ears. It was animal ears that interested me, not human ones, so I got nothing from feeling hers.

*Still...*

“A *man* is touching my ears...” the receptionist said. Her face was completely red. She seemed embarrassed in some drunken way. For her sake, maybe it was better that she did drink a little more. That way, rather than being troubled by hazy memories tomorrow, she’d be left with no memories at all.



“Well, how was it?” she asked.

“They’re great ears.”

“Whoa!” the receptionist said. “He praised my ears...”

“You can touch my ears later too, okay? As much as you like!” Frieze said.

“Mine are really good too!” Oltea shouted.

The two of them gulped at their beers. Before long, their mugs had emptied out, leaving them looking dejected.

“Ugh, I drank it all...”

“Tonight was so fun, but I guess it’s over...”

If I let these two drink anymore, I’d really have to worry, but...then again, I did have my beam. If Oltea and Frieze woke up with hangovers tomorrow, I could fix them right up.

“You can each drink one more,” I said. “As long as you promise just *one* more.”

“B-But...didn’t you want to go home, Kaito?” Oltea asked.

“I don’t want to cause trouble for you, Kaito...” Frieze said.

“You wouldn’t be. I’m just worried about you two. It’s no bother to me at all,” I said.

I had never been able to enjoy those end-of-year work parties, but tonight was nothing like them. I was still playing the role of caregiver, but watching over my friends as they enjoyed themselves was as fun as drinking along with them.

“Thank you, Kaito!” said Oltea.

“I’m so grateful!” said Frieze.

The two of them happily ordered another round of beer.



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From Desk Job to Death Beam: In Another World with My Almighty Lasers  
Volume 1

by Nekomata Nuko

Translated by Nolan Good Edited by Shakuzan

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