



Nekomata Nuko

illustration ▶ Cut

FROM Desk Job TO DEATH BEAM

2.

In Another World
with My Almighty Lasers



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with My Almighty Lasers



"It's a little safer if you put
your arms around my neck,
just in case..."

"Th-That's all right.
At this height, at least."



“I bet the beer
will taste even
more **delicious**
than usual today...”



“Ahhh!
I feel like I’m
coming back to life!”



“Thank you, Kaito!
As thanks, you can
touch my ears
as much as you like!”



“How does starting
with some **skewers**
and beer sound?”



I saw Oltea inside.

**She was in the middle of
changing out of her
pajamas and into her day
clothes.**

**Standing in just her
underwear, she looked at
me with a stunned face.**

**Slowly, a deep red color
flushed her cheeks.**

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Prologue: The Lord of the Flies

The forest was red with the light of the setting sun. Far from civilization, in a clearing just off the wooded path, Monstro watched as open flames licked the bottom of his cooking pan. He stirred its contents with a well-worn wooden ladle as rising steam warmed his face.

On today's menu: tomato stew with beans and potatoes. He let the pot simmer until the tomatoes grew tender and everything blended into a soup. A taste confirmed that the acidity was just right. The secret ingredient—red wine—gave the dish both a refreshing lightness and a rich depth of flavor.

Not bad, if I do say so myself. I'm sure I won't be hearing any complaints about this one.

Monstro put the finishing touches on dinner, pouring the tomato stew into bowls and withdrawing some bread wrapped in cloth from his rucksack. The meal was ready.

Monstro called out in a small, timid voice to the three men who had been making vulgar conversation as they waited in the shade of a nearby tree.

"Dinner is, uh... Dinner is ready..." he said.

"Eh? I can't hear you!" one of the men shot back. The anger in his voice made Monstro shrink and cower.

"M-My apologies! Dinner is ready!"

"Finally! You work slow as hell. Are you trying to starve us to death or something?!" he said.

What did he think this was, a restaurant? Monstro thought. It shouldn't have been difficult to see that cooking at a campsite would take more time than doing so in a fully equipped kitchen. Anyone could understand that.

Although maybe not these three.

"I... I'm sorry. I'll be faster next time," he said. Of course, he already *had* been

rushing, but if he didn't want to rouse their anger further, there was nothing for it but to apologize anyways.

Monstro was traveling with the party of C rank adventurers as their cook. He left the monster fighting to them and, in return, received just over ten percent of the rewards: one gold coin per contract. Though it was his first time in their company, he had heard rumors about the band for quite some time. They were said to be hotheaded, impulsive, and violent, but also undeniably competent, completing contracts at a rate of one per week. After today's job, they would advance to rank B.

At that level, one job could bring in around thirty gold coins per contract, meaning that, for the same work under the same conditions, Monstro could earn three gold coins instead of one. Even while covering the cost of ingredients himself, he made more money in the party's employ than he would have at a regular job. He had to stay on their good side. Couldn't risk spoiling his bosses' good mood.

It was a stressful gig, no doubt, but he could endure some hardship if it meant earning good coin. If he played his cards right, he could save up enough cash to quit in a year or so and realize his dream: opening his own restaurant.

It had been four days since Monstro started traveling with the men. He was confident in his abilities, so it was no surprise that even though they had shouted all kinds of trifling complaints at him, they hadn't once said his cooking was bad. Monstro was particularly proud of today's tomato stew. Perhaps, he thought, they'd try a mouthful and be so happy with the result that they'd apologize for their rudeness.

"Eh? Ay, Monstro! What the hell is this crap?!" yelled one of the men, holding out his bowl.

"It's a tomato stew with beans and potatoes..."

"I have eyes. I can see that much! What about meat, though, huh? Where's the meat?"

"We used the last of the meat yesterday..." he said. He was too afraid to say it, but it was their own fault there was no meat left in their provisions. He had heard about the group's penchant for flesh in advance and had, accordingly,

packed plenty. There had been enough smoked meat and sausage to last. While Monstro had been cooking on the very first day, one of them had approached him and said, “That’s not enough meat! Here, this is better,” and, without asking, reached into Monstro’s rucksack to pull more out and throw it in the pot.

To make sure nobody else came and spoiled his cooking again with arbitrary corrections, from the next day onward Monstro had started using more meat. The result, of course, was that their stash of supplies had been whittled down to just bread and vegetables.

Still, he had been able to make something truly delicious out of what was left on hand. *If they would just shut up and try it...*

“There’s no meat?! Quit bullshitting me! How am I supposed to fight monsters if I can’t eat meat?!”

“I’m sorry, I... B-But I think it turned out quite tasty. If you tried it—”

“I’m telling you to serve us some damn meat!” he shouted before smashing his bowl on the ground and pointing into the dense woods. “If there *isn’t* any meat, then go hunting!”

“M-Me?”

“Cooking is your job, ain’t it?”

“Th-Then at least give me a magic item to use,” Monstro said. The only magic item he had was for starting fires. Since it was just for cooking, the item didn’t make a large enough flame to be of any use while hunting.

At Monstro’s request, the man’s face grew more and more agitated.

“You think I’d just hand over the tools of my trade to a hireling? Use your damn knife!”

“Got it? Then get the hell out of here,” said another. “If you don’t, I’ll kill you myself!”

“You’ll be damn sorry if you come back empty-handed, you hear?”

Monstro didn’t know whether it was empty stomachs or general disdain for him that caused the men to express their anger so vehemently, but he did

worry that he risked getting beaten if he hung around any longer.

In fact, he had just heard them getting riled up under the tree while they exchanged crude, meaningless remarks. Remarks like “The face that hybrid made when you punched their lights out was a masterpiece!” and “I just want money, I don’t care! I wouldn’t even say shit if you rubbed my ass or fondled my chest.” Monstro wondered whether he’d been hired not so they could eat well while adventuring but just so they could use him to blow off steam.

He wasn’t a hybrid, but they treated him just as bad. These past four days, he had been completely disrespected and made a fool of. At this point, he probably wouldn’t even hit back if they struck him. If Monstro spent any longer with these men, he might have to waste his earnings on medical expenses.

“I... I understand.”

Monstro stepped into the forest to get away from them. He gripped his knife and, little by little, went deeper into the gently rustling trees.

As soon as the men were no longer visible, his anger came out as screams.

“Idiots! Stupid damned idiots! How am I supposed to hunt with just a knife?!” he shouted. With just one small knife and no experience hunting, the whole thing was a fool’s errand. With what he had, he couldn’t kill anything bigger than a wild rabbit, but they were far too nimble and clever for him to catch. Even if Monstro could catch one, he didn’t think it would provide enough meat to satisfy the party. Bringing back a wild boar would do the trick, but attacking one with a knife was a sure way to turn hunter to prey. If, by some small chance, a monster appeared, he’d have no recourse. That would be the end.

“I can’t... I can’t die in a place like this... I still have to open my own restaurant! I’m gonna earn money with my cooking and climb the ladder. I’ll become successful and important and then get my revenge on those jerks!”

Cheering himself up by shouting and cursing his harassers, he continued deeper into the forest.

“H-Huh?!”

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by an eerie buzzing noise. At first, he thought it was a fly buzzing around his ear, but he couldn’t see anything of the

sort. No matter how many times he turned his head, the sound neither went away nor got quieter. To make matters worse, the sudden darkening of the forest meant the sun must have set. It was impossible to hunt like this.

He would be humiliated, but there was no option other than returning to apologize. They might beat him, but they wouldn't really go so far as killing him.

Irritated by the weak, incessant buzzing noise and nearly tripping on roots and sticks jutting up from the ground at all turns, Monstro eventually made it through the forest without incident.

"Huh?" he said. What he saw at the other end had him at a loss for words. The three men who had been tormenting him were all lying in puddles of blood. One of them had been decapitated, another had a gaping hole in his chest, and the last had been torn in half. An older man sat atop one of the corpses.

The man—whose gentlemanly air struck one immediately—had white, swept-back hair streaked with gray. Blood, almost certainly sprayed from the wounds of the three dead men, dyed his arms a dark crimson.

Monstro gagged. The stench of the blood from the slaughtered men was strong enough to make him want to vomit. He wanted to get away as soon as possible, but his feet were rooted to the spot. He was completely paralyzed by fear and his body would not listen to him. His teeth ground, his frame trembled. The old man looked at him with cruel, piercing eyes. At that moment, Monstro realized that he was about to die. Memories of his life scrolled by like the pictures cast in the light of a revolving lantern.

The early death of his mother.

Helping his father out with the restaurant that he ran.

The first time his father, so picky about taste, had praised his cooking.

The destruction of his hometown, victim to a stampede, on a day he had left to head into town for ingredients.

"Did you make this?" the old man asked in a cold voice, snapping him back to reality. Realizing that there was still room for questions like that, Monstro knelt down where he stood and began to beg for his life, face contorted in fear.

“P-P-Please... Please don’t kill me...”

“Answer my question. I’m asking whether or not it was you who cooked this food.”

“Y-Yes! Yes, it was me. I made the food.”

“I see. Are you an adventurer?”

“N-No! I’m no more than a worthless cook who can’t fight at all! I-I have no quarrel with you! Please, just let me go...”

“You’re overdoing it. If you don’t want to die, then you will respond only to my questions, nothing more.”

Monstro started to say yes but stopped partway through forming the sound and swallowed his words instead. He nodded.

The old man continued. “Can you make things other than this?” he asked. “This,” Monstro assumed, meaning the tomato stew.

The old man was holding a spoon and bowl in his hands. Monstro couldn’t believe that he was able to enjoy the food while the stench of the corpses still filled the air around them.

“Y-Yes. As long as I have the ingredients.”

“I see. If that’s the case, then depending on your qualifications, I may refrain from killing you.”

“My...qualifications?” Monstro asked in a terrified, wavering voice. The old man pointed at the sky with his spoon. Monstro—although terrified that he would be killed the moment he took his eyes off of the man—followed his point and gazed upward.

Monstro screamed inside, but no sound left his mouth. Directly above him were countless thousands of small flying insects.

Not regular bugs either. The fact that he could see them so clearly at this distance meant they must have been massive. They resembled flies, but they had giant, scissorlike mandibles. A massive swarm of them—*devil flies*—blotted out the sky.

“No way...” Monstro was not an adventurer and therefore had a limited knowledge of monsters, but he knew devil flies. These were the monsters that had descended upon his birthplace in a swarm: the “stampede” that had destroyed it.

Rumor had it that another monster existed where the swarms gathered: the Lord of the Flies. Because it was always accompanied by innumerable devil flies, which were level C, the Lord of the Flies was assigned an A rating. Class A monsters were said to be highly intelligent, even capable of mimicking human behavior.

The Lord’s apparently advanced age lined up with the timing of the first devil fly stampede that had ever been observed.

“Are you...the Lord of the Flies?”

“Name’s Beelzé. So it seems humans *have* become aware of my existence, then,” he said, furrowing his brows in anger. Somehow, his mood had been soured. Panicking, Monstro prepared to apologize, but Beelzé cut him off. “That’s why I decided to separate myself from the devil flies.”

“Separate...?”

“That’s right. I’d love to just spend my days satisfying myself with the simple pleasure of good food like this, but the devil flies draw adventurers. None of them have managed to reach me yet, of course, but it’s starting to bring me down. That’s where you come in.”

“...Me?”

“Mm-hmm. If you swear to provide me with good food and a peaceful life,” he said, “I will grant your wish.”

His cold, cruel eyes looked into Monstro’s and seemed to say, *Well?*

Monstro could do nothing but nod.

Act 1: The Spirit Festival

It was the morning of the festival. I opened my eyes to the sun shining in through the big picture window...and the sight of two girls peering over at me as I stirred.

One of them was a girl with big, round, crimson eyes. Her gray hair was pulled into twintails and her body was wrapped in fairy-tale-esque clothing. Atop her head were two catlike ears.

The other boasted brave, dignified features. Her smooth blue hair extended down the length of her back, and she wore a mantle cape over tightly fitting garb. Doglike ears adorned her head.

The two girls were Oltea and Frieze, my dear friends. My housemates.

“Good morning. You two are up early, eh?” I said. Without a clock, it was tough to know exactly what time it was, but the softness of the sun’s rays suggested it was still early in the morning. I typically woke up later, but we had eaten dinner earlier in the day than usual last night, and my now empty stomach had roused me.

It was only a guess, but I doubted that Oltea and Frieze had intended to wake me up yet. The two of them had apologetically lowered their brows.



“Sorry for waking you up, Kaito! The sound of my stomach grumbling woke you up, didn’t it?” said Oltea, blaming herself despite the fact that I had come to all on my own.

I was about to tell her as much when Frieze shook her head. “No, it wasn’t your fault, Oltea. In terms of timing, Kaito probably woke up after hearing *my* stomach grumbling. Your stomach went, ‘*Gurgle gurgle rumble rumble!*’ and then my stomach went, ‘*Rumble!*’ and then Kaito woke up, right?”

“Hey, my stomach doesn’t sound like ‘*gurgle gurgle rumble rumble...*’” Oltea said, her cheeks turning red at Frieze’s imitation. Even though we were all friends, it could be embarrassing to be talked about like that in front of a member of the opposite sex. Oltea glanced at me with an embarrassed expression and started trying to explain herself to Frieze. “U-Usually your stomach makes louder noises than mine! I’m the one who just went, ‘*Rumble,*’ and then you went like, ‘*Gurgle gurgle gurgle!*’”

“You’re totally exaggerating! Mine was like, ‘*Rrrumble,*’ and then yours was like, ‘*GURGLE GURGLE!*’”

As the two of them argued, the ears atop their heads perked up and seemed to *blip-blop blip-blop* back and forth like a two-frame animation in an old video game. The moment I saw them, one overwhelming desire welled up in my chest: the need to pet their ears all over.

Noticing the change in my demeanor out of the corner of their eyes, the girls stopped fighting. They looked at me with expectant eyes.

“Did you start wanting to touch my ears...?” Oltea asked.

“If my ears are all right, then you can touch them all you want!” Frieze said.

“Thank you. That makes me so happy,” I said, and I really meant it. For hybrids like Oltea and Frieze, having their ears praised was like receiving a confession of love. Oltea had once told me that it was the kind of thing one heard when being proposed to. That each of them gave me such ready permission to touch them was proof of their trust.

Happy that they were happy, I reached out to gently pet them both. Right hand on Oltea’s ears, left hand on Frieze’s ears. When I pinched the tips and

rubbed them between my fingers, the sensation was soft. The closer I moved my hands to the base of their ears, the more firm they felt, though not in the way a human's cartilage would have. While I enjoyed the feeling of running my fingers along their ears, Oltea and Frieze both narrowed their eyes in pleasure and smiled with their whole faces.

"It doesn't hurt, does it?"

"It doesn't hurt at all! It feels really good," Oltea said.

"You're good at that, Kaito," Frieze said.

"That's 'cause you two let me get so much practice!"

"It's our pleasure. Don't mention it. Can you pet a little more fully?"

"Yeah, I think I can do that," I said. Taking advantage of the request, I started to rub their ears with my whole hand instead of just my fingers.

Every animal ear was a little bit different, from the shape to the feel of the fur. Oltea's had short, smooth fur, whereas Frieze's had a long, fluffy texture.

When I used my entire hand, their ears bent and flattened down, so it was like I was rubbing hair. Stroking their ears like that seemed to feel the best for them, as both of their faces relaxed into expressions of pleasure. I liked the method best too; it allowed me to more fully enjoy the feeling of their ears.

Aah, I'm so happy, I thought to myself. If anyone had told me I would be this happy three months ago, I never would have believed them. In twenty-nine years of life, I had never once been able to find the joy in being alive. Even in my earliest memories, my mother was already telling me, "Study hard and get hired at a good company so you can be happy." She never let me meet with friends or do anything fun—studying was all I ever did, day after day.

For my efforts, I was able to get into a "good company," but the happiness my mother promised would come as a result never did. I tried to find a hobby or something to enjoy, but nothing ever caught my interest. On days off, I never had any idea of what to do, so I just accumulated money and let the days roll on by.

Then, one day, I was struck by lightning and instantly killed. I awoke in the

private domain of a goddess—the so-called afterlife. She told me that I hadn't been supposed to die yet. My untimely demise, it seemed, had been the result of her own ineptitude.

To apologize, she offered me two choices: go to Heaven or go to a new world. Going to a new world turned out to be the only choice that was actually on offer. I, however, had never enjoyed being alive, so I wanted to go straight to Heaven, but the goddess said, "You could find something you enjoy and lead a pleasurable life." She then administered a psychological test designed to help me pick out three favorite things.

As a consequence of the test's findings, I was granted "the power to collect honestly," "the power to love animal ears," and "the power to fire laser beams."

After that, I was sent to this new world to wonder where life would take me. The answer, it turned out, was straight into the best days I'd ever had.

Chance meetings with Oltea and Frieze had led to wonderful friendships, and since arriving, I had been able to live every day to the fullest.

"Kaito, you look really happy."

"Does petting our ears really feel that good?"

"It's the best. Thank you, Oltea, Frieze," I said. My expression of gratitude made both of them bashful.

"'Thank you' is our line! It's thanks to you that we're able to live this amazing life," Oltea said.

"Mm-hmm. I can assure you that there isn't another hybrid alive living like this," Frieze said.

This world was populated not just by humans but also many hybrids like Oltea and Frieze. They looked different, of course, but the largest difference between humans and hybrids had to do with the presence of magical ability.

Rather than technology born of scientific advancement, magic had been the motive force in developing this world. Hybrids, though, were unable to use it. It was like being unable to use electric appliances: they couldn't turn on the lights,

draw water from the tap, or take advantage of other basic conveniences. Finding work wasn't easy for them either. Hybrids were often overburdened and exploited by mean-spirited and uncaring human employers.

Oltea, in fact, had been drowning in debt before she met me, and Frieze had made a living by wagering her own freedom.

"Really, we can't ever thank you enough, Kaito. Living in this incredible house is a dream come true!" Oltea said.

"Don't mention it. Have you gotten tired of looking at the castle every day yet?" I asked.

"I don't think I ever could," Oltea replied.

"I can't imagine Oltea getting bored of that," Frieze said, laughing. "Just this morning, she was staring at it like she was spellbound."

It was Oltea's dream of living in a house with a view of the castle that had been the deciding factor in choosing to purchase this home. Making my friend's dreams a reality was as good as pursuing my own happiness.

"If it makes you happy, then it was worth the move," I said.

After I first arrived in this world, the three of us had lived in Oltea's house for a while. At only eight tatami mats in size, however, it ended up feeling a bit cramped. Beyond that, living true to my desire to collect led to the room overflowing with my personal belongings. We decided to move before someone got hurt tripping over all the accumulated stuff and, in the end, wound up in this house.

It had cost eight hundred gold, which, converted, amounted to eighty million yen. Unable to just slap that kind of money down on the table, we'd been obliged to take out a loan. It wasn't entirely paid off yet, but luckily, thanks to my laser beam, I was able to earn a healthy living as an adventurer. Instead of being overwhelmed by the burden of repayment, we were able to live in comfortable, moderate excess.

I had already satisfied my desire to pet animal ears, but thinking about laser beams had me itching to fire one off. I wanted to shoot a beam ASAP!

“After we eat, shall we head to the guild?” I asked.

The two of them, having already been waiting, nodded. “*Rumble rumble!*” groaned their stomachs in agreement.

After enjoying breakfast at the bakery nearest our home, we walked to the guild beneath a cloudless sky.

“You just can’t beat fresh baked bread! The smell, the way it feels in your mouth... Fantastic. Leftovers just aren’t the same,” I said.

“It’s half the price, but old bread is so dry, crumbly, and bland,” said Oltea “The stuff we had today was absolutely delicious. Thanks for treating us, Kaito!”

“I feel bad that you’re always buying us food. Should I make it up to you by carrying you on my back the rest of the way to the guild?” Frieze asked.

“I appreciate the thought,” I said, gratefully.

The sight of a twenty-nine-year-old man loaded onto a sixteen-year-old girl’s back would surely be a spectacle, and not one I wanted to be a part of.

“I’d like to return the favor once in a while, you know...” Frieze said.

“We’re friends! You don’t need to think of it like that. Besides, I need to do my own walking or else I’ll start putting on extra pounds,” I said. I was already pushing it by using my beam powers to fly everywhere. Doing so satisfied my urges, and I preferred to use my lasers whenever I got the chance, but my thirties were fast approaching, waiting in the wings, and it wouldn’t always be so easy to keep my weight in check.

I wasn’t all that concerned about my appearance, but without any exercise, my health would suffer. I had never been attached to my own life before, but things were different now. For the sake of securing my own longevity, a moderate amount of exercise was going to be a necessity.

The distance between the bakery and the guild was about what would separate one train station from another back home. Just right for getting a bit of cardio.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about getting fat, Kaito,” Oltea said. “Actually, I

think your abdominal muscles are even starting to firm up a bit!”

“Yeah, you really don’t look like you’re getting fat at all,” Frieze said, then paused. “Wait, how do you know his abs are getting stronger? Are you...taking off his clothes while he sleeps or—”

“N-No, I would never do something so disgraceful! I only know because whenever we fly, I cling to him!” Oltea said.

At Oltea’s response, understanding came over Frieze’s face. Then, as if she’d just thought of it, she said, “Cling to him, you say... Speaking of clinging, I can’t help but feel that *you’ve* felt a little softer lately, Oltea.”

“Eh?! Really?!”

“Really. Your stomach is feeling a little more tender.”

“My stomach...is...” Oltea muttered. She hung her head in apparent shock. She patted her stomach as if to check, murmuring “Soft... Tender...” in disbelief.

“I-I’m sorry!” Frieze said, panicked. “I didn’t mean to make you sad! I just... I meant that it feels really nice when I hold on to you! Clinging onto your soft body when we fly around in the sky keeps me calm! Or, I mean, it would if I got scared, which I don’t.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Oltea said dejectedly. “It’s my fault that I got fat, anyways. I’ve been eating too much. I’m always guzzling down beer too... I mean, how do you stay so thin even though we have such similar lifestyles?”



“Well, I’m always swinging my practice sword in my room. I fear that could be the reason.”

“...Do you mind if I start doing that with you?”

“Actually, could I join you as well?” I asked. “It’d be good exercise.”

“Of course! The more the merrier, right?” Frieze said, her voice perking up at the thought of practicing with everyone.

And so we walked along, savoring our conversation. Finally, we arrived at a building in Section One with an air of history: the guild. We entered without delay and, upon stepping inside, were met with a wonderful, appetizing smell. The clean and orderly guildhall had an attached cafeteria where numerous adventurers were merrily breaking their fast.

I gave the mess a sidelong glance before making my way to the reception window, where the receptionist with whom I was familiar was already waiting with a smile.

“Good morning, Mr. Kaito.”

“Good morning. I came to take a contract. Something close by, if you’ve got it,” I said. Normally I took whatever the receptionist suggested without paying attention to distance, but I had an important obligation tomorrow: the Spirit Festival.

Once every ten years, the entire country came together to hold a grand festival. It was said that the spirits of the people’s ancestors came down to visit on the dawn of that day. In an effort to ease the hearts of their predecessors, the citizens of the nation spent the entire day in revelry, feasting in their honor. It was believed that at sunset, the ancestral spirits gathered at the castle, where the Sword Saint spoke to them from within the halls.

“Return now to your homes, restful with the knowledge that your progeny remain safe under my watch,” they would say, the words acting as both oath and finale. The festival would then come to an end.

The Sword Saint was chosen from among the land’s adventurers. This time around, I had been the one to receive the appointment.

I had always been skeptical of spiritual matters. Experiencing the ethereal for myself had changed that. Maybe the spirits of the people's ancestors really did return for a day even if one couldn't see it with one's own eyes. Even if that wasn't the case, it made no difference: I had been appointed as Sword Saint and charged with the responsibilities pertaining to the post. I was thus obligated to be earnest in my attempt to communicate with the spirits.

With dereliction of duty out of the question, it was imperative that I finish up whatever request I took and return before the end of the day.

The receptionist, who was also aware that I had been picked for the job, quickly understood the situation.

"One moment, please," she said, then turned to the cabinet behind her and began to search its contents. "How about this one?" she said, withdrawing a single-sheet bulletin and showing it to me. It bore an illustration of a mothlike monster labeled "Poison Moth." As it was a danger level B monster, the reward for slaying it was thirty gold coins. Its listed habitat was "the Great Forest of Mist, Greeze River vicinity."

It had been just under three months since I began my life in this world. At first, I'd hardly known left from right, but as I continued to travel as an adventurer, I'd come to understand the geography of my surroundings. The Great Forest of Mist was an expansive woodland 250 kilometers east of the royal capital. It was just a little farther than the abandoned mine where Oltea and I had first met.

Traveling that distance one way would take less than two hours. The beast would go down in one hit, of course, so the only unknown variable was the time it would take to find the thing. Still, it was only morning. Even if the search ran into difficulties, I would likely have no problem returning to the city within the day.

"The Greeze River vicinity, huh? Bit of a tough place to live," I said.

"You know it?" the receptionist asked.

"Yeah. It's one of the rivers that serve the royal capital as commercial arteries," I said. In this world, long distances were traversed with boats rather than trains. All cities, including the capital, were connected by waterways along

which both goods and people moved.

“The Greeze River is one of the most important thoroughfares linking this city to others, but it has been unusable since the appearance of the poison moth. It’s already been two weeks since then... If the interruption continues, shipments will be delayed and life in the city will be negatively affected.”

If shipments were delayed, goods would not arrive in the city. It would be a grave situation for me, given that my power to honestly collect made shopping a way of life. I had to defeat the poison moth without delay!

Oltea and Frieze looked over the poster closely, commenting:

“But this thing doesn’t look all that strong. What gives?”

“It looks like even the sailors could take this thing down if they really tried.”

Looks can, of course, be deceiving. Still, I understood where they were coming from. Danger level B monsters were always things like serpents, wyverns, or other creatures the outward appearance of which readily conveyed their strength. The wanted posters didn’t lie, though.

“Danger level B is appropriate for the poison moth,” the receptionist said in a warning tone. “If physical toughness were all you took into account, it would be even weaker than most E level beasts, but it can fly and it spreads its poisonous scales over a wide area. Inhaling just a few of those would have you dead in less than a minute.”

“Less than a minute...”

“Have us dead...”

Oltea and Frieze’s faces went pale, and each grabbed tightly onto one of my arms.

Even though one blast of magic could kill the moth, it could scatter poison from above. Fighting it would require flight, but the magic available to humans had limits. Flying, defending, and attacking all at once would quickly deplete anyone’s reserves.

In other words, it would be necessary to divide roles between multiple adventurers. Thus the danger level. Monsters that could be crushed by a solo

adventurer were limited to level C and lower.

Then again, my beam was not a kind of magic. The goddess had recreated my body such that I was able to fire the beam as much as I liked. I didn't have to worry about depleting magical energy in battle.

"As long as you pay attention to the direction of the wind, you shouldn't have any problem fighting that thing from a distance, right?"

"I shouldn't... The more pressing worry is how heavy the mist is along the Greeze River. I won't know where the monster is going to come from," I said.

The receptionist gave me a look of confidence and said in a bright voice, "You're really strong, Mr. Kaito! You'll have no problem taking it out."

"I'll do my best to live up to your expectations," I said.

Having accepted the contract, we left the guild. We were about to make our way to the specified locale, per usual, but I stopped.

"What do you want to do? It would be fine if you two wanted to stay behind this time, but..." I started. They had seemed so scared earlier. If they said they would prefer to remain in the city, I would respect their wish. It was necessary to have a party when picking up contracts of level B and above, but carrying out the objective safely was of the utmost importance. In practice, it wasn't required that every member who signed up actually participate in the battle.

The two of them shook their heads without hesitation.

"No way. We're coming with you," Oltea said.

"It's not like we can be all that helpful, but I don't want you to face that danger alone!" Frieze said.

"Thank you both! I'm happy to hear it," I said. I cherished them both as friends. My desire to keep them far from danger was strong, but so was my desire to have them by my side. For me—someone who'd never had friends growing up and had been unable to enjoy school trips at any point in my childhood—flying along while talking was a pleasure I did not take for granted.

I promptly summoned Stick Beam. It was as thick as a log but made of light and thus not at all heavy. Like witches mounting a broom, we all got on. I

brought forth Shield Beam to serve as a windscreen to our fore and fired Jet Beam from my feet to bring us into the air. We began flying straight toward the Great Forest of Mist.

It felt like we were moving at about two hundred kilometers per hour. Safe and secure, we enjoyed the flight until the sun was high in the sky, at which point a large wooded expanse came into view beyond the marsh below us.

“I can’t believe how massive the forest is...” Oltea said.

“Finding the poison moth down there is gonna be like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Frieze said.

“The poster said it was in the vicinity of the Greeze River, though. We don’t need to search the whole forest,” I said, driving us all the while toward the skies above the dense woods and searching for the waterway.

The Greeze River was a huge artery, as majestic and impressive as the Amazon, enveloped by the thick trees. Were it not for the heavy mist, it might have made for a nice kayak cruise.

“Poor visibility, just like we were warned. Dropping our altitude a bit could help, but...” I said.

“I’m fine with that,” Oltea said. “How about you, Frieze? Scared?”

“Of c— Of course I’m not scared! I’m a brave hybrid!”

“For someone who isn’t scared at all, you sure are holding on to me *real* tight...”

“Th-That’s ‘cause I like the way you feel! Your nice softness is addictive, that’s all!”

“Don’t call me ‘soft’!” Oltea shouted. Frieze did seem spooked, but I knew that acknowledging that would wound her pride. Pretending not to be aware of her fear, I flew lower. If I flew too low, we would run the risk of inhaling the moth’s poison powder. I stopped fifty meters above the ground and, paying heed to the direction of the wind, began the search in earnest.

We glided smoothly above the trees for some time. Eventually, as the setting sun was casting brilliant light on the western horizon, we left the forest having

failed to find our mark.

“Ugh, my neck hurts from looking down for so long...” Oltea complained.

“My eyes are feeling really strained...” Frieze joined in.

“Did you forget to blink?” Oltea said.

“I didn’t know when the monster would pop out, so I did my best not to. Not that it made a difference... What if the poison moth has just changed up its territory?” Frieze asked.

“It could have, or maybe it’s nocturnal. There was one place that looked kind of suspicious. We should swing back and give it another look,” I said.

“A place that looked suspicious?”

“Yeah, where the trees were dead. Could be the fault of the moth’s poison and, if so, could be where it makes its home base.”

“Now that you mention it, I think I saw that too,” Oltea said.

“I’m pretty sure I saw that spot too, but the poison moth wasn’t there,” Frieze said.

“Moths are pretty good at camouflage,” I said. “I think it’s possible we missed it because it blended into the background.”

“In other words, you don’t think we’ll be able to see it unless we get up close?” Oltea asked. Doing so would require putting ourselves in danger of inhaling the poison powder. If possible, I’d prefer to keep our distance.

“That would be the last resort, but if this moth shares the characteristics of a normal moth, then that won’t be necessary.”

“The characteristics of a normal moth?”

“Yep. In any case, we’ve gotta take care of this while the sun is still out. Once it’s dark, we won’t be able to find the spot with the dead trees.”

We turned around and headed for the skies above the river once more. After flying for a spell, we finally arrived at our destination as the sky was growing gloomy. From above, we could see a cluster of dead trees, around one hundred meters long, despite the lush, verdant greenness of the foliage surrounding it.

The lone stretch of dead and wilted trees stood out as obviously unnatural against the rest of the scenery. Perhaps the poison moth really was lurking within.

“I still don’t see the poison moth, but...you think there’s a way for us to find it without getting closer?”

“Yes, but I can’t be positive it will work. If my prediction is correct, then its appearance is going to be pretty sudden. We need to make sure we’re mentally prepared,” I said. Having warned them, I created a ball of light, roughly five meters in diameter, below us. I dubbed it Light Beam. I directed the luminescent ball—the movements of which followed my mental guidance—toward the dead trees. That’s when it happened.

“Ahh!”

“Th-There it is! It came out!”

Oltea and Frieze both screamed. A massive moth had suddenly burst forth from within the withered trees. It flapped its heavy, dark brown wings, and jet-black scales scattered in their wake. It matched the depiction we had seen on the bulletin. It was the poison moth!

Like a small insect drawn to a flame, the giant insect was lured to the ball of light I had created. I extended my right hand toward the beast, drew forth my Sword Beam, and imagined it rapidly extending like the magic staff of legend.

The blade swept across the horizon until it met its target with a resounding *snickt!*



The moth's head, now detached from its torso, dropped like a stone. At the same instant, the monster's corpse, plummeting all the while, began to dissolve into a syrupy goop. Before all five meters of its hulking form could dissipate, its remains slammed violently into the thicket of dead trees.

Watching the defeated beast's descent, Oltea and Frieze calmed down and breathed sighs of relief.

"I know you said it would, Kaito, but the moth really did jump out suddenly," Oltea said.

"If it was so well hidden, why did it burst out so quickly?" Frieze asked.

"Phototaxis. The poison moth was drawn in by the light," I said. There were two kinds of phototaxis: the kind in which light was repellent to the subject and the kind in which light drew the subject in. For example, mice possess the phototactic characteristic of light avoidance, whereas moths, flies, and the like are phototaxically lured toward light.

The poison moth only outwardly resembled a normal moth and was perhaps not, strictly speaking, a proper insect. Nonetheless, it had jumped out at the light, meaning that our monster likely possessed the same phototactic characteristic as a normal moth.

"You're so knowledgeable, Kaito," Frieze said. "But why wouldn't the poison moth have flown toward the sun, then?"

"I suppose because it's nocturnal," I said. As I did, I sprayed the swath of dead trees with Clean Beam. The laser passed over the woods and removed the poison as we descended. As we drew closer, a sparkling object was visible sitting amid the decay, nestled in the roots of the wilted foliage.

The object, bright and shining red, was the poison moth's devil stone.

"I guess this means mission accomplished, yeah?" said Frieze.

"We were able to take it down without incident thanks to you, Kaito," said Oltea. "Now that things have calmed down...I'm kinda hungry."

"Me too," I said. "Let's head back to the capital and get a bite to eat."

We straddled Stick Beam once more and set off for the city while we debated

what to have for dinner.

I woke up early the next morning, the long-awaited day of the Spirit Festival. The festivities were supposed to start at dawn, so they were likely already underway when I came to. Still, the sun had barely risen in the sky, and our quiet neighborhood—which never received much foot traffic to begin with—was still tranquil. I opened the window, but no lively voices could be heard. Despite the early hour, I was sure that if we went out to the city's main drag, where the procession should already be underway, we'd be surrounded by enough energy to feel it in our skin.

"I'm excited," I said. In my previous life, I had studied constantly and never had the chance to go to anything like a festival. Then again, it wasn't as though I had much wanted to. I'd been a person without interests.

Things were different now. Since I'd come to this new world, I had discovered the joy of living. When I looked out at the world now, I saw something that shined and glittered with beauty.

Best of all, I had found friends. With Oltea and Frieze by my side, the festival was sure to be a wonderful time.

The Spirit Festival was only held once every ten years, and what's more, I'd been entrusted with the role of Sword Saint. There was no going halfway today; I had to give it my all. Wanting to enjoy the festival's full length to the best of my ability, I decided to call out to the girls even though they were probably still asleep. As soon as I finished changing my clothes, I left my room and made my way to the next. I was about to knock on the door when it opened with a click.

"Oh, Kaito! Perfect timing. I was just about to go and call you."

Frieze had opened the door. I saw Oltea inside. She was in the middle of changing out of her pajamas and into her day clothes. Standing in just her underwear, she looked at me with a stunned face. Slowly, a deep red color flushed her cheeks.

"AHH! CLOSE THE DOOR, CLOSE IT!" she yelled, hiding herself in a blind spot. Frieze, startled, jumped and closed the door.

Before long, the door opened again and the two showed their faces once more. Oltea's face was still bright red.

"I'm sorry, I came at a bad time," I said.

"No, it wasn't your fault, Kaito. By—the way...you didn't see my stomach, did you?" Oltea asked, more concerned about whether I'd seen her build than her underwear. Despite her worries, she hadn't looked chubby at all. If anything, a little more weight would be healthy for her, but...

"No, I didn't."

"I-I see. That's good," she said. Commenting on her body could have been misconstrued as sexual harassment, so I figured it was better to just evade the question.

"By the way, what did you come here for?" Frieze asked.

"I thought I'd wake you two up. I mean, hey, today's the festival! If you're still tired from yesterday, we could relax for a little longer first, but—"

"No, we're rested! Besides, I've really been looking forward to today. I'd love to get down and enjoy the festival as soon as we can, but..." Frieze said, trailing off. She glanced at Oltea with a worried expression. "Well, I think Oltea hurt her arms."

"Did you get hit somewhere?"

"No, it's just sore muscles," Oltea said while massaging her arms. We had practiced sword swinging the day before. Frieze's blade had been much heavier than either of us expected, and I'd quit after a few goes. Oltea, on the other hand, kept on going with a zealous determination.

"Yours don't hurt, Kaito?"

"I stopped swinging pretty quick. I'm almost thirty, after all. Muscle pain setting in so soon is proof that you're young, though. How about you, Frieze?" I asked.

"I don't get sore anymore after all this time. The pain means your muscles are growing, which is great but not so convenient for having fun on festival day, so —"

“I was having Frieze go get you. I figured your beam could fix me up.”

“True. Cure Beam could easily take care of this,” I said. Sore muscles were the result of muscular fibers repairing themselves. Cure Beam couldn’t directly eliminate pain, but could speed the process of recovery, lessening the pain as a natural consequence.

I wasted no time using Cure Beam on Oltea. A bluish-white shower of mist emerged from my hand and began to spread around her.

“Well?” I said, after a pause. “Does it still hurt?”

“Uh,” she said, checking, “w-wow! It doesn’t hurt anymore at all!”

She swung her arms around to confirm and broke out into a wide smile.

“Thanks, Kaito. This way I can keep up sword practice without having to worry!”

“Just don’t be reckless, yeah?”

“I won’t, but I want to eat a lot today, and you’ve gotta work out as much as you eat!”

“Mm-hmm,” said Frieze. “We’ve waited a long time for the festival. May as well eat and drink to our heart’s content.”

We departed the house as the two of them talked about the day to come in high, cheerful voices. We walked beneath the clear morning sky toward the large main street that hosted the guildhall. It was still early in the morning, but the street was already more active than usual. Restaurants that would normally have been shuttered at this time of day were already open and filled with lively voices even deep into their tucked-away corners. Because some festival attendees had been drinking since dawn, there was already a smattering of plastered drunks to be seen as well.

A blonde woman who was looking after one such drunken old man saw me and called out in a bright voice, “Kaito? Is that you?”

“Good morning, Clié,” I said. It was the woman who had tried to assassinate me a while back. That sounds pretty bad, but she was being controlled by someone else at the time. The man behind it all was Vlad, a level A monster

masquerading as an A rank adventurer.

Still, Vlad's true nature had not been known at the time, and Clié had been imprisoned for attempted homicide. She had still been in captivity the last time we met. Once it had come to light that Vlad had in fact used brainwashing magic on my attackers, Commander Favel of the Public Safety Regiment had promised to release Clié and the rest of those involved, but I had been busy spreading Cure Beam over the city and hadn't gotten a chance to see her again.

"I'm so glad to see you! I've been wanting to give you my thanks," she said.

"You don't have to thank me! I just wanted to take down Vlad for being so cruel to my friends," I said.

"That doesn't change the fact that you saved me. Please, let me show my gratitude. I'll treat you to a nice time at my place."

"That's what you said last time, isn't it?"

"You're not being controlled again, are you?"

Frieze and Oltea interrogated Clié, their eyes fixed on her. She had extended a similar invitation when trying to seduce me, but with the intention of catching me in a trap.

"No, I'm not being controlled. I just honestly want to show my thanks to Kaito."

"Your 'thanks,' huh? What exactly does that mean?" asked Oltea. For some reason, her eyes were fixed on Clié's ample bosom. She might have been jealous of Clié, who, after all, had the figure of a model.

"I was going to offer him some fine wine," Clié said.

"Hmm, wine..." Frieze said.

"Do you share an interest in wine, Frieze?" Clié asked her.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't. I've wanted to try some for a long time, but..."

"It's rarely available in the stores around here. Even when it is, the price can really skyrocket compared to beer," Clié said. Beyond the capital's outermost wall, fields spread far and wide, but most cultivated barley. Because beer was

produced inside the city with local ingredients, it could be cheaply obtained, but wine was likely marked up due to the added cost of transit. On top of that, because wholesalers gave retailers priority over restaurants, I couldn't remember ever seeing wine being served with a meal anywhere.

"My father loves wine. He bought a bunch of it for the Spirit Festival. There's vintage too! I imagine it's aged quite deliciously."

"Would it really be okay for us to drink such valuable stuff?"

"Sure. As you can see, my father is completely intoxicated. It's not like he can drink much more of it himself!"

"So this person is your father, then?"

"A little embarrassed to say yes, but...yeah. Late last night he went out to get some drinks with his friends in anticipation of the festival. I started to worry when he still hadn't come home by first light. I went out to check on him and found him in this condition."

"The feshtival is the besht!" the old man slurred. His daughter looked on with an abashed face, her features turning red.

"Since Dad's in this condition, please, drink as much as you like. You two are invited as well, of course."

Oltea and Frieze looked quite surprised to hear that.

"It's okay if I come too?" Frieze asked.

"But it was Kaito who saved you..." Oltea said.

"Still, my actions caused terrible trouble to you two as well. If the wine would suffice as an apology, I would ask that you two also enjoy all you want."

"Hmm. Well, if you really mean it, then I suppose it'd be all right to take you up on the offer," Frieze said.

"I agree. In fact, I'm sorry I didn't accept your apology at first," Oltea said. She and Frieze seemed thrilled by the prospect. Their tails swished back and forth in tune with their happy moods.

Because it was a special occasion, there was no problem with drinking before

noon, but I had always heard that doing so on an empty stomach could get one pretty sick. If we wanted to enjoy the festivities, it would probably be better to have breakfast before we started on the wine.

“Where’s your house, Clié?” I asked.

“Section One, West Gate neighborhood. But I don’t think we can go there right away...”

“Ah, sure. I guess we can’t just leave your father like this, can we?”

“No, I was gonna leave dad to his own devices. It’s not that, it’s just that I was going to meet up with some friends. Everyone is going to be so delighted to hear that I ran into you! They’ve all been wanting to thank you.”

“You mean your friends are the other people Vlad was controlling?”

“Yes. Actually, I’d really, really love it if you would come along.”

“I see. In that case, shall we meet around noon?”

“That sounds best. Starting with alcohol too early in the morning can get a little intense, after all.”

Having decided to regroup at the guild later when the sun reached its zenith, we parted ways with Clié.

“I can’t wait to try the wine!” Oltea said.

“Maybe we should buy some snacks to pair with it, yeah?” Frieze suggested.

“Shall we go shopping after breakfast, then?” I said to their energetic agreement. With that, we set off to find seats at one of the many lively eateries.

Evening.

“And then, and then Kaito told him, ‘Don’t you dare mess with Oltea again!’”

“Ahhhh, that’s so cool!!!”

“He even gave up a really special ornament for me!” Oltea added.

“Woow, he’s like a prince!”

“Right?! He’s my Prince Charming, white steed and all.”

“Except I don’t have a white horse,” I said.

“Little details like that don’t matter!” Oltea said.

“What matters is that you protect her.”

“Right! Exactly as Clié said.”

The room was filled with the sound of the women’s animated conversation. We were in Clié’s home. About four hours prior, we had met up with her friends, made our way to her place, and opened the wine bottles. After a few drinks had loosened everyone up, the occasion had quickly taken the shape of a girls’ night.

When first we encountered Clié in the morning, she’d come across very adult, mature. After four bottles of wine, however, she was completely plastered.

“Are you having fun, Kaitooo?” she asked, her sentence ending in a drawn-out, upturned vowel.

“Are you getting enough to drink?”

“It’s a waste not to enjoy life!”

“Please, don’t hold back! Drink up!”

They were leaning on me, shoulder to shoulder, getting friendlier. The turn of events had me losing my bearings a bit, but it was not at all unpleasant. Being in such a vibrant space and seeing my friends enjoy their conversation so much—which I always loved—had put me in a great mood.

It would be more fun if I were drunk too, but the responsibilities of my position as Sword Saint prevented me from indulging too much. The wine was rich yet light, delicious, and easy on the way down. Still, I had made myself stop after one glass.

“Hey Kaito, have some cheese! Say ‘aaaaahhhh,’” Oltea said.

“Oh, thanks... Mm, that’s delicious.”

“There’s crackers too! ‘Aaaaahhh.’”

“Ah, thank you... Mm-hmm, also delicious.”

“Oh, oh, I wanna feed him too!”

“Me too, me too!”

Eager hands put food into my mouth one bit after another. I felt like everyone’s plaything. I wondered what kind of faces they would make next time they saw me—if they even ended up remembering any of this. Apologetic? Embarrassed? Were they already drunk enough to forget all of this?

“I’m gonna head to the castle soon,” I said, putting aside the question. The evening glow of sunset had filled the sky. The time to fulfill my duty as Sword Saint drew near.

Concerning the schedule, I had been told that a messenger would come to my residence when the evening sun was obstructed by the city’s low walls. Given that time in this clockless world was measured only by the sun’s position, punctuality was defined less strictly. A little delay was always within the range of possibility. Still, keeping the king’s messenger waiting long would be inexcusable.

“Oltea, Frieze—you two want to stay here and keep drinking?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. The feast is just beginning!” Frieze said.

“I have to drink a lot and reassure the ancestors!” Oltea said.

Overdrinking was bad for the body, but today was a special occasion. Hangovers were all but certain for those two, but they’d be fine after a Cure Beam treatment. At this point, it would be dangerous to get either of them onto Stick Beam, and even if we walked home, I wasn’t sure they’d make it. I wanted them to stay here and continue to enjoy the festival, making merry with the others.

“I’ll come back after I finish up, so just stay here and enjoy some more drinks until then. Is that all right with you too, Clié?” I asked.

“Of course. Oltea, Frieze, let’s have fun till the sun comes up!”

“Can’t wait!”

“Let’s keep going till every bottle’s empty! Cheers!”

At “cheers,” I left the group of high-spirited women behind and exited Clié’s home. Because I was alone, I could fly without using Stick Beam, instead

returning home with just the propulsion of Jet Beam. I waited in the quiet of our neighborhood until a knock sounded on the door.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Kaito,” said the messenger who was standing at the threshold when I opened the door. I boarded the horse-drawn carriage and let him take me first to the castle and then, after arrival, into the audience chamber.

Large tapestries bearing the embroidered image of a lion hung in the spacious chamber. At the far end, atop a dais, was a throne in which sat a well-dressed elderly man. The king.

“You’ve come, Kaito. Did you enjoy the spirit festival?”

“I did. I had an excellent time,” I said. I hadn’t seen much of the charmingly decorated downtown, instead deriving most of my fun from the heightened excitement I’d felt while drinking at Clié’s, but that kind of thing was true to the spirit of the festival anyways. The Spirit Festival was about gathering to ease the hearts of the ancestors. Surely seeing people act so joyfully, regardless of the particulars, brought them relief. I, too, had been uplifted by the vibrant atmosphere. Everything that happened after noon could be more aptly described as a drinking meet-up than a day at the festival, but I had spent my time having fun with friends.

“That is what is most important,” said the king. “That we could enjoy this momentous day in peace is thanks to you for protecting the royal capital from Vlad. As thanks for your service, supplies will be disbursed to the hybrid population starting tomorrow.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm,” said the King, nodding. “To begin with, it will only be within the city. We will gradually extend services to other towns one at a time.”

“I see,” I said, pausing to take it in. “Thank you, truly!”

Oltea and Frieze now led lives in which food was no concern, but there were a great many hybrid people. With my earnings, I could not afford to distribute supplies to all of them. For that reason, I had vowed to become the Sword Saint. Upon being appointed to the position, one received any reward one

asked of the king. I had requested the introduction of a system to ameliorate the poverty of the kingdom's hybrid population. That way, I could help those suffering under the burden of poverty.

The king smiled warmly at my expression of gratitude. Soon, though, his expression was clouded with concern.

"Right now, we enjoy a surplus of food, but if there were to be a stampede, maintaining the new system would become difficult. That is the only thing you must bear in mind," he said.

"Stampede...?" I asked. I had general knowledge of the word. A stampede was when a mass of animals or people suddenly began to run in the same direction. That knowledge, though, was from my previous life. The word was the same, but the meaning may not have been.

The king looked at me with surprise, as though I lacked common knowledge.

"Kaito, how old are you?"

"I'll turn thirty this year."

"Hmm. At that age, it isn't so strange you would lack knowledge of the stampede. To explain in brief, the stampede is a mass migration of devil flies."

"Devil flies..."

"Think of them as normal flies but much larger. Devil flies are classified as danger level C monsters. This may sound strange coming from a man such as I—one useless in a fight—but they are no great threat by themselves," he said.

"So when a stampede occurs...how many devil flies migrate?"

"It's impossible to get an accurate count, but...enough to wholly blot out the sky. Ten thousand, perhaps."

"Ten thousand...?" I repeated. It was an abnormal number. The king's description made it sound like a plague of locusts except that the descending horde was made up of monsters rather than insects. *Wouldn't it just be crops that were damaged, then?* I thought to myself.

"We've suffered many stampedes in this country. Once, long ago, an entire village was reduced to a wasteland in just one night."

“Were there survivors?”

“None.”

In just one night, not only every building but every person in a town, wiped from existence. Vlad’s plan had been awful, but the stampede sounded even more threatening.

“There hasn’t been a stampede, then, these past thirty years?” I asked. When the king had asked my age, my response had led him to say it wasn’t strange that I should be ignorant of the stampede. That meant it had been at least three decades since the kingdom had been hit.

“It last occurred thirty years ago. That time, though, the stampede’s advance was halted by the actions of one young man.”

“So it can be stopped.”

“I was surprised too. There was no precedent for it, and the person who did it was so lost in the action that he later reported that he could not recall how he drove off the horde.”

“I see. And where are the devil flies now?”

“They’ve remained in a dense forest along the nation’s border,” he said.

So the devil flies had not descended on any town in the past thirty years. It was likely they were slowly devouring nature out where they lurked, but at least no stampede had occurred in that time.

“That being said, we don’t know when next they may come. I’d like to see the Lord of the Flies exterminated before the end of my reign if such a thing is even possible.”

“The...Lord of the Flies?”



“Mm,” the king grunted affirmatively. “The stampede was first observed sixty-five years ago. Put another way, before that time, the devil flies were never observed moving in any way that suggested leadership. To begin with, devil flies were not a monster type known to gather in swarms. For that reason, conjecture has it that where the beasts gather in the greatest numbers, some sort of Lord of the Flies also resides. Because the destroyed regions are all on the Southern Continent, this individual is sometimes called the ‘Southern Demon King.’”

Like an imitation of the original Demon King, I thought. The Demon King, I had heard, first appeared on the Northern Continent seventy years ago. The resultant strife and conflict continued even today.

“If you’ll allow me to be forthright, I must say that the Southern Demon King is far and away a greater threat to our nation than the original Demon King. It is unlikely we will ever exterminate all of the devil flies, but I wonder if at least the Lord of Flies might not be defeated,” the king said.

It seemed conceivable, though the enemy was protected by more than ten thousand flies and nobody knew what they looked like. The king, perhaps unable to envision success against a foe so difficult to find, seemed utterly overwhelmed with emotion at the thought.

It was not just for him that I spoke.

“If anything happens, I will fight.”

I was no hero. Until recently, I had been nothing more than an insignificant salaryman.

Verrick, my Sword Saint predecessor, had dedicated his twilight years to battling the Demon King. Unlike him, I had no great ambitions of contributing to the achievement of world peace.

Still, I had the power to fight. I had my beams. Above all, I loved this world. In order to protect the joyful life I led here with my newfound friends, I would do whatever proved necessary to sweep away any given flame that should cast a spark upon us.

At my declaration, the king seemed overjoyed. He said gratefully, “That’s the

Kaito I know. That's why I chose you as Sword Saint. If you would now take your vow, I am sure the ancestors will be as pleased as I!"

A weather-beaten lighthouse stood on the edge of the sea, keeping its watch atop a sheer cliff. The structure, abandoned by time and decrepit with age, adjoined a hut that must once have housed its keeper. A man, advanced in age, sat inside the abandoned lodging and ate without a word.

His tailcoat and head of neatly swept-back ashen-gray-and-white hair gave one the immediate impression of an elderly gentleman. To the old man's side stood a hybrid girl dressed in a maid's uniform.

I can hardly breathe... she thought to herself.

The man had ordered the girl, Tigaro, to wait upon him and keep him company while he ate but, to her frustration, merely continued to eat in silence. Quiet hung heavy in the air. She stood before him and watched, keeping her face expressionless and feeling increasingly uncomfortable.

Still, she had no intention of starting a conversation. When she had landed the server job, her employer had emphasized one very strict order: *never* bother the master while he eats. She would, of course, respond appropriately if addressed, but in the two years she had worked as the old man's servant, she had yet to hear his voice. Perhaps, she thought, he was unable to speak.

Having finally cleared his plate, the old man set his fork and knife aside. This was Tigaro's cue: she gathered the discarded tableware onto a tray and offered a polite bow before stepping out of the hut.

Outside, brilliant rays of sunlight cascaded down upon the coastline. A salty ocean breeze blew across the clifftop and tousled Tigaro's orange hair. She narrowed her eyes, squinting at the bright sky, and released a deep sigh.

It was still midday. Her duties as server included breakfast, lunch, and dinner and thus occupied her thrice each day. She would return to serve another meal to the old man when the setting sun began to redden the sky.

I worked damn hard on that meal. I wish he would eat it like he actually enjoyed it. If it's always going to be that awful in there, I may as well not bother.

She didn't know the details, but she had heard that her employer—the mayor

of the town—and the old man whom she had been tasked with attending to were old acquaintances. As thanks for some long-ago favor, the man was allowed to live in the ruined lighthouse and given three meals a day.

If they're such good friends, why don't they eat together? And why do I have to go to the trouble of bringing the food all the way out to his residence?

There were many things she'd found strange since taking the job, but she dared not complain. Delivering three meals a day to the old man was easy work and it paid well. There was no reason to jeopardize that. Because the job was live-in, it also relieved Tigaro of the burden of paying rent. On top of that, she herself was provided with food—although only leftovers—and the salary was two gold coins a month. The working conditions and compensation were extraordinary by hybrid standards.

Her employer found all kinds of small things to nitpick, and it wouldn't be accurate to say his personality was pleasant in the slightest, but that was all par for the course when dealing with humans. There were stresses, but the pay was good and it was less objectionable than just about anything else she could be doing for a living.

As long as she could continue to provide for her cat, the simple, quiet life was just fine. She even earned enough to send a bit to her parents here and there.

I've saved up a little. I should probably send them some more.

Tigaro's employer kept ten or so maids on the payroll, all of them hybrids, and divided the work between them. Serving the old man's food was Tigaro's role.

Once, she had asked the boss for a few days of holiday so that she could go back home and visit her family. He'd angrily shouted down the suggestion, saying that hybrids weren't allowed to ask for time off. She had wanted to talk back and stand up for herself, and she'd nearly done so without thinking before she stopped herself in time to relent and ask if she might be allowed to send money back to her relatives instead. Her employer had told her to leave the money in the care of the maid who handled miscellaneous chores—that she would handle shipping it off.

I'll ask him if I can send some money again, she thought to herself while making her way back to the mansion, tray cradled in her arms. The palatial

estate came into view after she had walked about five minutes from the lighthouse. It was built atop a bluff from which the entire seaside town could be surveyed. Its splendidly elegant exterior did, fittingly, suggest that it was the home of a mayor or magistrate.

“Good work today, Tigaro!” said Chestnut, greeting Tigaro with a smile as she watered a flowerbed. The two maids shared a dorm.

“And the same to you, Chestnut. The flowers look to be coming along nicely.”

“Aren’t they? It’ll be a shame to see them eaten.”

“Sure will. Is that what they’re for, then? Eating flowers... I just don’t understand the way rich people think,” Tigaro said, letting the last bit slip out.

“D-Don’t say things like that. You’re liable to be overheard, and Master wouldn’t be happy,” Chestnut replied in a panicked haste.

“It’s fine. Besides, he’d be in the kitchen around this time anyways, no?”

Though her master was wealthy and kept many maids in his employ, there were none who tended to the kitchen. He cooked all of the meals himself and, as such, remained there until he’d finished preparing dinner.

“All right, well, I’m off that way now,” Tigaro said. As she went to open the mansion door, a wine glass nearly fell from the tray. Chestnut opened the door for her.

“Here, let me take that glass,” she said cheerfully.

“That’d be a huge help, thanks. I’d never hear the end of it if I broke it. Are you done out here, though?”

“Yeah. I already watered the plants. Now I’m supposed to meet up with the cleaner and start weeding around the house.”

“It’s so nice that you get to work outside, Chestnut. I’d love an assignment like yours.”

“I think you have it better, Tigaro. Only one person gets to work as the server. It’s proof that the master trusts you. That’s an incredibly high honor, if you ask me.”

“Sure, but it’s so dull. I bring food over three times a day and then I spend the rest of my time on standby in my room. I’d like to actually exert myself once in a while, you know?”

Chestnut chuckled a little, as though she found Tigaro’s words strangely amusing.

“You’re not at all how you look, are you Tigaro? You’re so adorable, but inside, you’re like a determined boy.”

“Hey, I-I’m not *cute*,” Tigaro said. She felt embarrassed and her cheeks grew hot.

She was not aware of it herself, but she was objectively quite beautiful. As a matter of fact, it was Tigaro’s good looks that had gotten her hired in the first place.

She had been an adventurer just two years earlier. In the course of her duties carrying luggage and equipment for the human party members, she had passed through the seaside town in which she presently resided. When the mayor happened to lay eyes on her, she was offered the position right away. He’d told her that nothing added flair to a well-cooked meal like a beautiful woman to serve it. For that reason, only the most attractive maids were entrusted with the position.

The maid who’d previously held the job had needed replacing after she fell and injured her face. When Tigaro’s employer told her that she’d spend the time between deliveries on standby in her room, he had explained that it would be to prevent her from accidentally ruining her beauty, too, with a wound. A measure of preservation.

Tableware in hand, Chestnut and Tigaro made their way to the kitchen.

“Excuse us.”

They entered. Inside, a middle-aged man was washing vegetables. He was thin, with dark bags beneath his eyes and scant few hairs left atop his head. Despite his high station as the headman of a large town and his great wealth, the man looked quite unhealthy.

“We’ve brought back the plates, Mr. Monstro,” Tigaro said with utmost

politeness.

“Set ‘em down there. Did Mr. Beelzé say anything about the food?”

“No, nothing.”

“I see... Well, set the tableware down and get out, then.”

“Understood, master,” Tigaro said, placing the dishes in the sink before turning to depart alongside Chestnut. They were on their way out when, suddenly, something fell to the floor with a thud loud enough to make Tigaro’s heart jump in her chest. Startled, she pivoted around to see a bottle fallen at Chestnut’s feet.

The walkways in the kitchen were narrow. Chestnut, failing to take account of her large, fluffy tail on the way out, had knocked it over by accident.

“What the hell are you doing?!” shouted Monstro, picking up the bottle with a rapid change of expression.

“I-I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Monstro!” Chestnut said, lowering her head apologetically as her skin went deathly pale.

Monstro grabbed Chestnut’s ears tightly.

“Hey,” Tigaro demanded, “what are you—?!”

“I’m so sorry! I’m really, really sorry!”

“Is ‘sorry’ supposed to make me feel better?! That wine was set aside to be served to Beelzé tonight! What the hell would I have done if you’d broken it, hmm?!”

“H-Hey! It didn’t even break. It’s fine! Besides, we have tons of other wine if you need a replacement!” Tigaro said, pointing at the wine rack.

“Shut up!” shouted Monstro without letting go of Chestnut’s ears. “That wine was perfectly suited to tonight’s dish. ‘Tons of wine,’ *come on!* Don’t take that tone with me. Who do you, a lowly, vulgar hybrid, think you’re talking to with that attitude anyways?”

“To you!”

“To ‘you’? You will address me appropriately as your master, damn it!”

“Do you think that being master gives you the right to be violent toward us? It —”

“It does if I’ve decided it does! You damn hybrids only get to live comfortable lives here because of *my* generosity. If you don’t want to go back to whatever miserable lives you led before me, then you’ll remember your place and obey. From now on, do only what I instruct you to do! I don’t remember giving you permission to enter anyhow!”

Chestnut’s face contorted with pain as Monstro yanked on her ears. She began to apologize through her distorted expression.

“I am so terribly sorry, Mr. Monstro! I promise I won’t come into the kitchen again! P-Please forgive m—”

“You too, Tigaro! Beg for my forgiveness!”

“No, I refuse to apologize!”

“You want to get fired then, you bitch?”

“Fine! I’ve already decided that I won’t work for you anymore no matter how much you ask. Fire me or not, it makes no difference to me!”

“You ungrateful little... Get out of here! Immediately!”

“I will!” Tigaro shouted tersely. She left the room immediately and rushed straight to her room. As she was packing her stuff, Chestnut entered looking apologetic.

“I... I’m sorry, Tigaro. It’s my fault that—”

“It’s not your fault, Chestnut,” Tigaro said. “Are your ears okay?”

“Y-Yeah. They still sting a bit, but... More importantly, are you really not going to apologize to Mr. Monstro? You’re the only one who serves the food, Tigaro. If you apologize soon, he’ll probably still forgive you,” Chestnut said.

“I’m not going to, really. I’ve had enough of working under humans,” Tigaro said. Humans thought they could just treat hybrids however they pleased and have them quietly take it. It was the same when Tigaro had worked in the city: her employers had rubbed and grabbed at her tail, and even the smallest pushback would lead to dismissal. When she became an adventurer, she’d been

paid terribly and pushed around by everyone she worked for. Since hybrids were replaceable, other party members had seen no issue with abusing her. The memories were terrible.

When hybrids worked under humans, harassment and discrimination always followed. Wherever she worked it was the same. Still, she had to earn money. For financial reasons, it had been easy to decide that taking employment at the mansion was a less objectionable option than any other.

But I'd rather be fired, thought Tigaro, then bow down to the human who manhandled my friend.

"B-But...what will you do?" Chestnut asked. Perhaps feeling responsible for Tigaro's situation, she was anxious thinking about her friend's future.

"Well," Tigaro said, thinking, "it's been two years since we've seen each other, but Frieze is still in the royal capital's Hybrid Town. A long time ago, when we were younger, she asked me to become adventurers with her once we grew up. That's what I'll do."



“Are you sure that’s okay? You can’t use magic, and fighting monsters as just a hybrid is—”

“I’ll manage it one way or another. In any case, I’m leaving here of my own volition. It’s not your fault that I got fired. You needn’t feel responsible for what happens to me now,” Tigaro said.

When she said goodbye to Chestnut, she did so in a bright, cheery voice to make clear there was no hint of reproach in her farewell.

“I’ll see you around,” she said. With that, she left the mansion behind.

Act 2: The Hybrid Maid

It had been one week since the day of the Spirit Festival, and we were coming home in the early afternoon after a shopping trip. We had bought two carpets made in a foreign style, three tapestries embroidered with botanical imagery, five belts, four bottles of wine, and a set of quill pens that came housed in a birdcage complete with intricately carved wooden birds inside. It had been a while since I'd been able to so completely satisfy my desire to collect.

"I'm grateful for your help! Thanks to you two, I had a great time shopping today," I said. Since I wasn't able to carry everything alone, Oltea and Frieze were lending a hand. Originally, the plan had just been to go out and buy some wine, but the two of them had assisted me in purchasing all the rest without once showing a hint of displeasure or annoyance.

"Of course! We like seeing how happy you get while shopping," Oltea said.

"I'm pretty happy myself that we found wine! I hope we can drink some soon..." said Frieze.

"Hold on, shouldn't we let it age some?" I said.

"Of course, that's the plan. I'll always remember the taste of that vintage we had at Clié's," Frieze said.

"If anything, the taste of that vintage is probably *all* you remember from Clié's."

The setting of the sun had officially drawn the curtain on the Spirit Festival, but Oltea and Frieze had enjoyed the occasion until the small hours of the morning and had ended up sleeping at Clié's. When they finally woke up the next day, both of them had been white as a sheet. I'd used Cure Beam to fix them and Clié up, but their memory of the night had already vanished. Still, they'd been able to recall that they'd had a great time—and, it seemed, able to recall the taste of at least the first few rounds. Unable to shake the thought of that delicious flavor, we had been looking since morning for a bottle of wine to

buy for ourselves.

“That’s exactly why I’ll be patient. How about we let it sit for a week or so?” Frieze suggested.

“Will just one week be enough for it to mature, though?” I asked.

“I’m no expert on wine, but I’m not confident I’d be able to wait much longer than that. What do you think, Oltea?”

“I’d love to drink it as soon as possible too, but... Well, what do you think, Kaito?”

“Well, to be honest,” I said, “I’m not sure one week will be long enough.” I didn’t know much about wine, but I at least knew a good bottle needed more than seven days to age. That being said, the two were clearly more than a little eager to drink it as soon as possible. The shopkeeper had enthusiastically recommended the bottle, saying, “That’s an absolutely delicious wine.” Perhaps the proprietor’s praise alone could create some sort of placebo effect that would make us feel as though it had aged longer.

“Well, anyways, I look forward to the day we’re able to try it,” said Frieze.

“Me too! Should we prepare by buying some good cheese to go with it?” Oltea suggested.

“Mm-hmm! By the way, Kaito, where should we set all this stuff down?”

“In my room, please,” I said. The three of us went to my room, set everything down, and then stopped for a breather. This load alone would have made my previous room cramped, but in this house, there was no shortage of space. In addition to the storage available in my room, up a nearby set of stairs was an attic where everything I had accumulated until now was being stored.

“Good work, you two. I’ll handle getting this stuff into the attic,” I said.

“Actually, do you want to use one of these carpets?”

“Would that be all right?” asked Oltea.

“Sure. We bought two, after all.”

“Well, if you say so, I don’t see why not! We’ll have to clean up a little bit first, though.”

“Is your room messy or something?”

“You could say that. It’s a little dusty. I keep the window with the castle view clean, but other than that it’s pretty much the same as when we bought it.”

“Have you been cleaning yours, Kaito?” Frieze asked.

“Not really, as you can see,” I said. Unlike back home in Japan, it wasn’t customary in this world to remove one’s shoes inside. For that reason, dust and grime was wont to gather on the floor. The windows accumulated filth and spiderwebs gathered in the corners of the ceiling. The smell of the bed and the stains in the wall had been easy enough to handle, but the dust couldn’t be removed. Dust had its origin in the bits of fiber that came off of clothing, and if Clean Beam could erase fibers, then it would erase clothing too.

“Shall we give the place a good cleaning, then?” I suggested. We’d be living here for a long time to come, and a well-kept home was more pleasant in the long run. Without the occasional clean, even the best home can grow pitiful.

“Obviously if you’re too tired we can do it tomorrow, but—”

“No, I’m good to go. It’ll make for good exercise,” said Oltea.

“Same here! But...do we even have cleaning supplies?” Frieze asked.

“When we moved in, there was cooking gear that’d been left behind in the kitchen, so there’s probably cleaning stuff around here somewhere.”

We’d already confirmed that the reception room had nothing but a sofa and a table in it. If there was anything to find, it would likely be in the kitchen. We’d been in it when we bought the place and took a tour, plus I went there daily to get water and such, but none of us had thoroughly explored every corner. Perhaps some cleaning supplies hid in one of the room’s yet unseen nooks. We went to the kitchen to check. Sure enough, a tall door a ways in marked the location of a closet in which were stored a broom, some cleaning cloth, a bucket, and an assortment of other things for cleaning.

I didn’t love the idea of using such old, worn items to tidy the place up, but a little attention from Clean Beam made them good as new.

“Well, that solves one problem! That just leaves the cleaning itself to do. If we work up a good sweat, the beer afterward will taste even better than usual!” I

said.

Frieze's look of enthusiastic determination stood in stark contrast to Oltea's apprehensive expression.

"But can we really clean this whole place up in one day with just three people?" she asked.

"True, this place is huge..." Frieze said.

Back in Japan, it wasn't uncommon for senior citizens entering retirement to lease out their homes and move elsewhere, one of the reasons being the burden of keeping up with cleaning and maintenance in one's old age. Perhaps the previous owner of this place had left for a similar reason.

"Are you pretty good at cleaning and whatnot, Frieze?" Oltea asked.

"Do I look like a woman with that kind of skill set?"

"Not really, no. You even fold your pajamas messily. It seems like a weak point of yours, actually."

Frieze was quiet for a moment before responding.

"To be honest, that's kind of disheartening to hear. What about you, Kaito?"

"Not much of a strength of mine either," I said. In my previous life, I had entrusted my room's cleanliness to a little robotic vacuum cleaner. I hadn't held a broom since graduating high school. On top of that, the broom we'd found was the old-school type, like a witch would ride: a rare sight in Japan. I'd need extra time to get accustomed to using such a relic.

"We might not be able to finish all of this today..." I said.

"Yeah... Well, either way, we may as well get started. It's not like we have a maid to rely on or anything," Oltea said.

"A maid, huh...?"

"Huh. That might not be a bad idea, actually."

"You think so?"

"We should hire one," I said. After all, none of us knew the first thing about cleaning. We had money to spare after our living expenses were taken care of

each month, and hiring someone would certainly make things simpler.

“If we do, it should be a hybrid!” Oltea said. “Thanks to you, the city’s got that distribution program up and running, but there are still a lot of people struggling through unemployment.”

“If it’s okay with you, Kaito, it might be easiest if they just lived with us too,” Frieze said.

“True, having them stay with us might be best,” I said. It would be nice for the maid to draw a continuous income, and after all, it wasn’t as though cleaning this place would be a one-and-done task. With a skilled maid to keep the place tidy, we’d be able to lead a pleasant life here.

With our course of action decided, it was time to go to Hybrid Town.

“We’ll clean up a bit and wait for you here,” Oltea said.

“You two don’t want to come with me?”

“It wouldn’t do to leave *all* of this work to someone else. We’d like to lighten the load at least a little bit first.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll leave it to you.”

With that, I entrusted the task to Oltea and Frieze and headed for Hybrid Town alone.

Early afternoon, the same day.

At long last, after two years without returning home, Tigaro arrived in the royal capital, Section Three. She was back in Hybrid Town. Walking once again the streets where she was born and raised, she was stricken with pangs of nostalgia.

Something feels different, she thought to herself, feeling somehow out of place. The home she knew felt like a shady, dangerous back alley no matter what street you were walking on. Strangled by economic strife, it was a place where no one was certain of their next meal and no one—whether young or old—saw a future. It was a place where everyone spent their days under a gloom so thick that even the clearest days were, somehow, still shrouded in shadow.

That was the Hybrid Town that Tigaro knew. But now...

“Race me to that spot!”

“Okay! Let’s do it. Ready, set, go!”

“Hey, be careful, now! Running is dangerous!”

“Ah, hello, mister!”

“Hello. Nice weather we’re having today, isn’t it?”

Voices, full of energy, filled the street. From the youngest children to the oldest elders, everyone exuded a bright aura. Of course, there had always been strong hybrids like Frieze who refused to give into despair and maintained a sunny disposition, but never before had Tigaro seen so many of the town’s residents happily going about their day like this at the same time. No one had had the energy for it when hunger was ever present.

What on Earth is going on here? Did food start falling down from the sky or something?

She knew all too well that it hadn’t, but she could think of no other reason that Hybrid Town would be so unusually lively.

“Hmm? It really is her! It’s Tigaro!” a kind male voice said to her, interrupting her bewilderment. It was the man who lived next to her parents’ home. He wore, as ever, an animated smile.

“It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen you!” she said.

“It sure has! Are you off work for a bit, then?” he asked.

As soon as the question struck her ears, Tigaro was at a loss for words. She had only returned home to catch up once since being scouted by Monstro. Her family and neighbors had all been happy to hear it, congratulating her on finding good, safe work. She could hardly bear the thought of telling them she’d lost the job for talking back to her boss.

“No, actually, I, uh... Some stuff came up and I decided to quit!” Tigaro said. Then, before the man could ask any further questions, she decided to change the subject. She wanted to find out why everyone was so abnormally full of life, but to directly ask, “What happened to the usual gloomy mood?” seemed to

her a tad rude.

“That aside...has something changed lately?”

“It certainly has!” the man said, taking the bait right away and excitedly continuing. “Remember how last month a level A monster attacked the city?”

“A level A monster?!”

“Huh? Isn’t that what you were asking about?”

“No, that’s the first I’ve heard about it,” she said. So a high-level monster had attacked the royal capital, home of the entire country’s ruler... News like that would certainly have been well-known not just to those inside the country but even to those in neighboring nations. Certainly, word of the attack would have reached the harbor town where Tigaro had been living.

That being said, she had spent all her time on the grounds of Monstro’s mansion. Being that her boss was in charge of the town, he was surely aware of the news, but she hadn’t been close enough to him for small talk or gossip. In any case, Monstro didn’t bother himself with informing the hybrids he employed about anything.

“But...this doesn’t feel at all like a place that was attacked by an A level monster just a month ago,” she said. When she worked as a pack mule for adventuring parties, she had seen D level monsters with her own eyes. Even those had been so terrifying that they’d made her conscious of her own mortality. The strength an A level monster must possess was unimaginable to her. Despite that, the streets around her seemed to be unaffected by the attack. She hadn’t yet seen anything more than what lay between the river anchorage and the entrance to Hybrid Town, but what she had laid eyes on so far seemed perfectly peaceful.

“That’s all thanks to Kaito,” the man said in a loud voice. As he did, children began to gather. Each of them wore new, clean clothes and shoes that were actually to size. She couldn’t think of where they would have obtained such things.

“Are you telling the story about Kaito again?”

“I wanna hear too!”

“Hey, where is Kaito and what is he doing now, anyways?”

This Kaito person, whoever he was, seemed widely adored. The man looked a little annoyed at all the children hounding him to recount the tale.

“No no, you all know as much as I do about all that. It’s just that Tigaro doesn’t know about Kaito. I’m filling her in.”

“You don’t know about Kaito, miss?” one of the children asked. They were looking at Tigaro like one might examine a curious, unknown object. It was clear that this was supposed to be common knowledge.

“Until just recently, I lived far away,” she told the children. “This ‘Kaito’ saved everyone, is that right?”

“Yeah! There was a huge *ka-boom* in the sky!”

“And then, like, a huuuge flash of light!”

“A ‘ka-boom’ and then a bright light, huh?”

The children were gesturing as they spoke. They tried their best, but their explanation was just about useless to her.

Seeing that she was lost, the man jumped in to supplement their story with some detail. “In other words, Kaito defeated the monster and then used magic to heal everyone who had been injured.”

“Magic, huh...” She had already realized it once the man said Kaito had defeated an A level monster, but hearing that he’d used magic to heal people afterward confirmed it: Kaito was a human. A human would never go out of his way to defend Hybrid Town. In endeavoring to save the city itself from destruction, Kaito had protected Hybrid Town as an incidental side effect, surely.

Still, I guess protecting everyone merits some gratitude, she thought, conflicted about feeling anything of the sort for a human.

“And, and Kaito also gave us all food!”

“A whooole bunch of it, like this!” said one of the kids, widely gesturing with a huge smile on his face.

The information had Tigaro befuddled. “Gave you...food?”

“The rationing system!” said the man. “Kaito became the Sword Saint and negotiated on our behalf. Now, for the sake of all the hungry hybrids, periodic deliveries of food and supplies are made!”

“For the hybrids...?” That certainly explained the livening up Tigaro had noticed. Without the pressure of a Sword Saint’s request, the crown would never implement something like a food distribution system. It was probably true that Kaito was responsible for the change.

What she could not understand, however, were his intentions. She could not imagine that a human would go out of his way to help the hybrids just because. There must have been something that he was seeking in return for his assistance... She couldn’t arrive at any guesses, but she knew there had to be some kind of string attached.

She was racking her brain for answers when, suddenly, joyful shouting from the direction of the main street interrupted her thoughts. They were cheering Kaito’s name. The children’s faces lit up the moment they heard.

“Kaito came back!”

“We have to go say hi!”

Immediately, everyone in the area started dashing off toward the avenue. Tigaro followed along.

There, amid a throng of onlookers which strained the narrow street’s capacity, stood a single human surrounded by hybrids. Having heard that he was the Sword Saint, Tigaro had expected a more muscular, robust figure, but the man she saw was young and slender in build.

He had black hair—something she had rarely seen before—and wore a white T-shirt underneath a black long coat. A silver badge affixed to his collar sparkled in the sun.

Despite his complete encirclement by the crowd of hybrids, his face betrayed no hint of annoyance. On the contrary, he was greeting everyone in turn with a bright smile.

So that's...Kaito.

At first glance, he seemed like a genuinely kind young man. For exactly that reason, Tigaro knew that his persona was affected. Young, fresh-faced, high of status due to an appointment as Sword Saint, widely lauded as a hero for saving the city... It made no sense for a human with his looks, standing, fame, and power to be so kind to the hybrids of the city. There would simply be no benefit to him. He must, Tigaro thought, be trying to win the people over for some as yet unknown purpose.

As if he'd sensed her eyes, Kaito turned and met her gaze. He continued to stare straight at her without once diverting his attention elsewhere.

What the...? What is he looking at? Can he tell that I'm suspicious of him? she thought to herself. She couldn't be sure, but it would be best nonetheless to avoid doing anything conspicuous. She hid herself behind the man next to her—the same one she'd been speaking to earlier—and pretended to have been pushed by someone so as not to make the motion stand out.

"Kaito! What brings you back here today?" the man asked.

"To be honest, I came to look for someone who might work as a live-in maid back at my place."

"Ooh! In that case, you ought to meet Tigaro. She was a maid until just recently!"

H-He said my name!

With the callout, staying hidden had become more suspicious than showing herself. She nervously stepped out from behind the man.

"Hello, my name is Tigaro."

"Good afternoon, Miss Tigaro. Is it true that you were working as a maid until just recently?"

"Wh-Why are you speaking like that?" she asked. It was the first time a human had addressed her with respect. It was so off-putting that she couldn't help but ask.

"Because it's our first meeting. If the formalities bother you, I can always cut

it out, but...”

“Please do.”

“All right, then. So you were a maid, right?”

“Until last week.”

“In that case, if it’s all right with you, would you like to come work at my place?” he asked. Many of the people who’d gathered around chimed in, encouraging her to take him up on the offer: “You should really do it!”

It was only yesterday that Tigaro had decided that she would never again work for a human. She’d been determined to seek out Frieze and begin a new life as an adventurer.

It was clear, however, that Kaito was up to something and nobody here had picked up on it but Tigaro. Everyone else had already fallen under his spell. Perhaps, she thought, it was better to take the opportunity to observe his movements up close in order to ascertain his plan.

“All right, then,” she said after a pause. “I’ll be your maid.”

“Thank you. You’ll really be doing me a huge favor! Walking would take a while, so I was thinking we could fly back to the house, but...Tigaro, are you all right with holding on to me while we fly?” he asked.

Tigaro was opposed to any human touching her, let alone a man. Still, for the purpose of ensuring a smooth infiltration, she knew it was necessary to set such qualms aside and avoid any conduct that would rub him the wrong way. She nodded pleasantly and gestured, like a princess being helped atop a horse, for him to lift her.

Though it had been the case for a while, she became suddenly aware of how many people were intently watching their interaction and found herself feeling a little embarrassed. Bit by bit, her face flushed red.

“Well, see you next time, everyone,” Kaito said with a warm smile. The two of them began to ascend. In no time at all, the people below looked as small as ants.

“Y-You’re flying pretty high,” Tigaro said.

“Flying at about this altitude makes it easiest to find the house. It’s a little safer if you put your arms around my neck, just in case...”

“Th-That’s all right. At this height, at least.” She wasn’t comfortable clinging to a man so closely. To avoid it, she put on a brave front despite the fact that it did not feel remotely “all right.” She was petrified. Without a conversation to distract her, she felt she might start to cry, and crying in front of a human would be too great a humiliation to bear. “I, uh, don’t think I asked about payment yet.”

“Now that you mention it, that’s true. If you’ve got an expected salary, let me know.”

“How about five gold coins?” she said after a moment’s thought. Of course, she hadn’t lost her sense for money. Knowing it was far too much to ask, she had intentionally gone high in order to test his supposed good nature.

In her previous position, she had received two gold coins a month in addition to room and board. Even that had been exceptional. Hearing her ask for *five* gold coins, Kaito was sure to snap back with something like “You’re damn greedy for a stupid hybrid! How about I drop you, huh?!” Pushing him to the limit would force him to reveal his true character.

“Sure, sounds good,” he said.

His prompt reply had completely taken Tigaro aback. “It...it does? Five gold a month?”

“Yeah, that’ll be fine.”

“What about...room and board?” she asked. Perhaps he planned to charge her exorbitantly for living expenses to balance things out.

That must be it! she thought, though barely for a moment before he replied.

“Oh, you don’t have to pay for that.”

“Huh? B-But then...I’ll really be getting paid five gold?”

“Yep!” Kaito said, putting an end to the negotiation with a smile.

It’s too good to be true... she thought. It was unthinkable that he would pay an unknown hybrid so well just because she said that she’d been a maid before.

There was, she was sure, *some* kind of catch.

She kept her doubts to herself and settled in as they continued to fly along through the sky.

We arrived in front of the house, Tigaro still safely wrapped in my arms. Though she had insisted it was fine, the flight had seemed to scare her, and the moment she set her feet down on solid ground once more, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“This is my house,” I said.

“I see. This place is...”

Tigaro looked up at the two-story property. Her ears flopped down until they were parallel to the ground, reminding me of a stray alley cat I’d once chanced upon with similar ears. That cat had been on guard and cautious toward me. Perhaps Tigaro was as well, in which case it would likely be a while before I could satisfy my urge to feel her ears. Desire welled up inside me each time I so much as glanced at them, so I did everything I could to look away and keep it in check.

Orange hair down to her shoulders... Almond-shaped eyes with huge pupils... Classically styled maid outfit... A striped tail poking out through a hole in her skirt...

“...Hey.”

The sound of Tigaro’s voice brought my gaze back upward. The instant my eyes once again fell upon the tigerlike ears atop her head, I was filled with a fierce, driving need to pet them. Tigaro, though, was about seventeen years old. Eighteen at the most. To have a man ten years her senior abruptly ask to touch her ears would undoubtedly be scary for her. For Tigaro to say yes to a request like that, we’d need to have a closer relationship first.

“This is a huge house. Does anyone live here besides you?” Tigaro asked in an uneasy voice. Back in Hybrid Town, she had accepted the position without so much as hesitating, but not because she found me agreeable. She was here because she had wanted a job. It was natural that she would have misgivings

about living alone with a man.

“There are two hybrid girls who live here with me too.”

“I see. So I won’t be the only hybrid, then.”

“They’re both bright, happy people around your age. I think you’ll get along really well. I’ll introduce you right away,” I said. As we entered, Oltea was sweeping the entrance. She’d clearly been putting herself into the work, as the whole area was already quite clean.

“Ah, that was fast!” she said.

“That’s because I found someone so quickly. This is her,” I said, looking back at Tigaro. She smiled at Oltea. It didn’t seem like her personality was too reserved. She and Oltea would probably loosen up around each other in no time.

“I’m Tigaro. I think I’m about two years older than you but, please, no need for formalities. I’d love it if you were just yourself around me.”

“Nice to meet you, Tigaro. I’m Oltea. So, you used to be a maid? Or is the outfit just for fun?”

“The former. I quit just the other day and came back to Hybrid Town. I’m not particularly fond of the maid uniform or anything, but it’s remarkably comfortable, so I spend a lot of time looking like this.”

“That makes sense. By the way, you said ‘came back to Hybrid Town’—is that where you’re from?”

“It is.”

“Oh, then are you familiar with Frieze?”

“Frieze? Is she here?!” Tigaro asked in bewilderment, her eyes opening wide. The way she’d jumped at the name caused Oltea to flinch and shrink back a bit as she nodded.

“S-She is... You know her?”

“I do, but... It’s possible we’re just talking about two people with the same name. The Frieze I knew was determined to become an adventurer, so...”

“The Frieze we know was also an adventurer, though...”

“Huh? Then...could it really be the same Frieze? Here?”

“I don’t know for sure that it’s the same Frieze, but if you just meet her in person, we can find out.”

I asked Oltea where Frieze was, and upon receiving her answer, we all went upstairs. I opened the door to the girls’ room and found Frieze using a broom to dislodge spiderwebs from the ceiling. She craned her neck to look at us, and the moment she saw Tigaro, her eyes immediately widened with shock.

“Oh! Oh my god, Tiga! Tiga, is that really you?” she shouted as a massive smile spread across her entire face. She ran over to her old friend. “Oh, Tiga is the maid who’s going to live here and work with us, isn’t she? You came in a maid uniform and everything like you’re all ready to go!”

“No, these are just the clothes I wore at my last job; they have nothing to do with my motivation to... Wait, speaking of that, what happened to your maid uniform, Frieze?”

“Hm? Why would I have to wear one?”

“What do you mean, why? Because you’re a maid too, right?”

“Actually, I’m not a maid...”

“You’re not? Then what are you doing here?”

“These two are my friends; we work together as adventurers. Working at rank B and above requires a party, so they asked me if I’d join up with them.”

“I see. So that’s why Oltea wasn’t wearing a maid uniform either,” Tigaro said. “But... Friends, huh?” she added after a pause, looking confused at the idea of such a thing. She seemed to have difficulty believing that hybrids could live together with a human on those terms.

Many hybrids, looked down upon as lesser due to their inability to use magic, found themselves taken advantage of by humans. Indeed, it was for that reason that Frieze had initially been hesitant to join my adventuring party, saying that she would never work with a human again.

In the end, she and I had become close companions anyway. Like Frieze had

been, Tigaro was prejudiced toward humans after the incident that had led to her firing, but I still believed that we would eventually come to good terms. She would clean the place and make it easier to move around, and I'd ensure she was able to live a comfortable, pleasant life here. Surely she would come to trust me over time.

"Hey, a minute ago you called her 'Tiga' so casually... Are you two siblings?" Oltea asked, looking a bit uneasy for some reason.

Frieze shook her head. "Remember what I told you a while back? I owe my life to the people of Hybrid Town."

"Of course I remember," Oltea said.

I remembered too. Frieze had shared the story of her upbringing with Oltea and me the first day that we had gone to Hybrid Town together. Her parents, both baggage carriers for adventuring parties by trade, had died before she was even old enough to understand what was happening around her. The people of Hybrid Town had become Frieze's new guardians and raised her in their stead.

"Everyone pitched in to take care of me, but it was Tiga's parents who actually took me in. I'm two years younger than Tiga, and she always treated me like a little sister. She did all kinds of things for me—kept me fed even if it meant going hungry herself."

"I see. That's so kind of you, Tigaro," Oltea said.

"It... It was nothing. Younger kids just won't leave you alone when they're hungry is all," Tigaro muttered, turning her face away in embarrassment.

"It got real lonely after you went away to become a maid, but in the end, that choice led to you coming back to live with me again! Thank you so much for finding her, Kaito!"

"Of course," I said. And then, after a pause: "Well, it seems like you two have a lot of catching up to do, so I'll get out of your hair and leave you to clean up in here."

"Mm-hmm! Show me all the expert techniques you've been perfecting these past two years!" Frieze said. She looked at Tigaro with eyes full of expectation, embarrassing her again.

“Uh,” Tigaro started, her eyes flitting over toward me as she spoke timidly, “I’m...actually not that good at cleaning.”

“You aren’t? But you were a maid, right?”

“At my last job, the work was divided into very specific roles. I was tasked with serving food. I don’t think I ever once held a broom.”

“Hmm. Well then, I’ll teach you the basics!” Frieze said.

“I appreciate that, but since he wanted someone to be in charge of the cleaning, I’ll probably just get fired anyways...”

“I won’t fire you. True, I hired you to clean, but I hadn’t planned on saddling you with *all* of the cleaning. Just having an extra pair of hands is a huge help,” I said.

“He’s right; with another person helping out, it’ll go much faster!” Frieze said, clearly overjoyed to be reunited with her old friend. She had much more energy than usual.

Oltea, on the other hand, didn’t look so upbeat. She’d welcomed our new maid in through a sparkling clean entryway that she’d worked herself to the bone on. She was probably exhausted after all the effort. Knowing that she’d want to keep working even if I recommended a break, I resolved to keep a close eye on her and make sure she didn’t push herself too hard.

“Shall we head back to the entrance?” I said to Oltea. We left the room and, picking up some rags on the way, went to wipe down the entryway.

“If there’s something wrong, you can tell me, you know,” I said.

Oltea was quiet for a moment. “If I do, you promise you won’t tell Frieze?”

“I promise. Be honest if something has you worried and I’ll be happy to help in any way I can. Besides, talking about whatever’s got you anxious usually makes things feel a little better.”

“Thanks, Kaito...” Oltea said, smiling slightly. She began to confide in me. “I’m worried that Frieze might neglect me and just talk to Tigaro now.”

So that’s what it was, I thought. Now I understood why she had looked anxious when asking if they were sisters. She was afraid that her friend would

become close to someone else and begin to exclude her. The fact that she was scared of such a thing proved that she'd grown quite fond of Frieze. Surely Frieze herself would be delighted to know it, but asking someone face-to-face to be *your* close friend too was probably a little humiliating.

"Don't worry, things won't change between you two," I said.

After a slight pause, she asked, "Really?"

"Really. Frieze adores you. Imagine yourself in Frieze's position. What would you do?"

"Obviously I'd stay just as close to her as I had been. She's a really important friend to me... You think she'll do the same?"

"She will," I said, nodding, and a smile spread over her face.

Her worries dispelled, Oltea seemed so unburdened that it was as if her body itself became lighter. A zeal returned to her movements, and the cleaning was done in no time at all. Our task complete, we returned to the room on the second floor. Inside, Frieze was beaming.

"Oh, it's Oltea! You've come at just the right time," she said. "Help me scare away this spider! For Tiga's sake!"

"Help you with a *spider*?!"

"Tiga has always been terrible with them. I told her that one had run under the bed when I swept away its web and she just ran off to hide in the corner over there. 'Cause of that, our cleaning progress has slowed way down."

"That's 'cause y-you said, 'Wow, that thing is massive!' and scared the heck out of me!" Tigaro said while pressed up against the far wall in protest.

Oltea let out an amused chuckle. "It's kinda cute that you're so spooked by a spider."

"Hey! It-It isn't 'cute'!" a red-faced Tigaro shot back, making Oltea laugh even harder. Oltea's anxieties had been cleared away, and now she was teasing Tigaro. They'd warmed up to each other so quickly.

I decided to leave the rest of the cleaning there to the three girls and focus instead on tidying up my own room. I could still hear the commotion after I left.

“I-It came over here, it came over to me!”

“Aww, the spider must have missed you!”

“You’ve always been popular, haven’t you, Tiga!”

“It’s not like I ever wanted to be!”

I began diligently sweeping away the dust that had gathered in my own room, the sound of their lively conversation backgrounding my work.

The sky had grown red with evening light. After having finished all of the cleaning, we were gathered in the parlor. I had just passed out water to everyone and was sitting on the sofa to catch my breath.

“I worked up quite the sweat today,” Oltea said.

“Me too. I’m sweating terribly... There were too many spiders in all your rooms!” Tigaro said.

“We hadn’t even cleaned once yet. It was probably like paradise for spiders,” Frieze said.

“Well, now we’ve chased them all away and cleaned everything up,” said Oltea. “They won’t be coming back.”

“True. You all really put in the elbow grease. The house looks great now. Not as a reward or anything, but I’m sure everyone’s hungry, so eat as much as you like tonight,” I said.

All three of their faces lit up at my words.

“Let’s eat!”

“Absolutely. I’m totally famished,” said Oltea. “You too, right, Tigaro?”

“How could you tell?” Tigaro asked curiously.

“Because your stomach was going, ‘Grrrr’ while we cleaned,” Oltea teased, smiling mischievously at Tigaro.

“It-It doesn’t go, ‘Grrrrrr...’ But, yeah, my stomach is pretty empty.”

“Well then, shall we?” I said. The girls, any lingering tension relaxed by the

day's shared efforts, followed along as I stepped outside. We went, as usual, to the neighborhood eatery we'd become familiar with.

Inside the shop—amid fragrant smoke wafting through the air like a yakitori house back home—locals sharing their after-work drinks chatted in loud, lively voices. Oltea and I sat down next to each other with Tigaro and Frieze opposite us.

"How does starting with some skewers and beer sound?" I said.

"Perfect. Let's do that," Oltea replied.

"I bet the beer will taste even more delicious than usual today..." Frieze said to herself in a low, raspy voice. Oltea and Tigaro had already begun drinking water, but Frieze was holding out for the alcohol. "There's nothing like that first taste of a cold beer hitting your dry throat. It's unimaginable."

"I think you're a little addicted... I mean, is beer really that good?" asked Tigaro.

"Give it a try. You'll understand," said Oltea.

"If it doesn't suit your tastes, I'll gladly drink whatever you have left over..." Frieze added.

After we'd placed our orders, everyone chatted away, and before long, the beer arrived at our table. We lifted our mugs, tapped them together to share a "Cheers," and congratulated one another on a hard day's work well done. We downed the first round in one gulp each. The lightly bitter drink went down easily and left a pleasant, fruity aroma in its wake. At first, I'd been skeptical of drinking beer lukewarm, but in my previous life, I had taken little interest in alcohol outside of the customary end-of-year and New Year's parties, where I had drunk my expected share. It hadn't been long before I'd had more beer here than I ever had in Japan, and as such, I had come to think of room-temperature beer as the default.

"Ahhh! I feel like I'm coming back to life!" Frieze said.

"There's absolutely nothing like a beer after a long day of work! What do you think, Tigaro? Do you like it?" I asked.

“Hmm... I’ve only had a bit, but it’s not bad. A little bitter, though...”

“You acquire a taste for the bitterness after a while. It gets addictive. I’m sure you’ll come around to it too, Tigaro!” Oltea said.

“It’s tasty on its own, but what’s really good is— Oh, it’s here! If you have a sip together with this, it’s absolutely fantastic!” Frieze said, and bit heartily into one of the skewers that had just arrived. She stuffed her cheeks, juices dripping off the tender meat, and gulped down more of her beer between bites.

“Mmmmm!” Frieze squealed. “It’s so good! The salty meat gets you thirsty and makes the next sip of beer even better.”

“You’ve...changed since I last saw you. You’re acting like a middle-aged man, Frieze.”

“I wish I could say that means I’ve grown up and gotten all mature, but—”

“You wanna try combining them too, Tigaro? Trust me, you won’t wanna stop once you do!” Oltea said.

“I’ll try it,” she replied hesitantly. “Hmm... Really salty, but quite good.”

She continued to bite into the meat with a certain polite reserve. As she did, the stiffness in her expression began to relax.

“Money is no object tonight, so please, eat and drink as much as you like!” I said.

“Will do!” shouted Frieze.

“Thank you, Kaito! As thanks, you can touch my ears as much as *you* like!” Oltea said.

“Your ears?!” Tigaro said, dropping her skewer in shock.

Oltea looked at our flustered newcomer and spoke with elated pride. “Kaito, see, he adores my ears. He’s always praising me and saying how pretty they are.”

“Mine too. He’s always praising mine, saying they’re so cute!”

“Well, you both do have great ears,” I said. My compliment made both of them blush happily. I wanted to round things out and say something about

Tigaro's as well, but for hybrids, a compliment directed at one's ears was analogous to a confession of love and, as I had been warned, even had the connotation of proposal. Tigaro knew that I wasn't married to anyone at the table and probably understood that my compliments were not euphemistic but just that: compliments. Still, she was clearly a bit bewildered. It would be best, I figured, if I waited until we were closer to say anything about her ears.

In the meantime, though:

"Is it okay for me to pet them here?" I asked. The conversation had roused my desire. Oltea and Frieze nodded cheerfully. I reached over to Oltea, who was seated next to me, and began to rub her ears. Frieze leaned over the table to present her own. Tigaro watched the spectacle, her face flushing red.

By the time Tigaro left the eatery with everyone, the curtain of night had fallen completely over the city. The district had no shortage of drinking establishments, and the street was packed with drunks. The din of conversation and merry voices filled the air the entire walk home and could still be heard after they turned off the main road to enter the house. Even on the quiet side road, the voices—present company included—were still loud.

"Tiga, welcome to our home! *Your* home!" Frieze said.

"I'm so grateful you've come to join us!" said Oltea.

"I feel like opening one of those bottles of wine! We ought to have a toast!"

"Ahh, that's such a good idea! Let's open it!"

"Let's keep drinking all night!"

"Woo!"

Oltea and Frieze went back and forth like that, spirits soaring. They were drunk out of their minds, their gaits unstable and chaotic. If Kaito withdrew the shoulders he'd leant them to lean on for even a moment, they would both have toppled to the ground.

"So...do these two always get like this when they drink?" Tigaro asked Kaito.

"Not every time," Kaito started. "They're usually able to get home on their

own two feet. I think they just went a little overboard this time because they're happy to have you around to live with us."

"I-I see..." she said, pleased to hear it. If their current level of drunkenness was normal, she'd have been concerned and maybe even compelled to scold them. It being out of the ordinary, though, meant that she didn't need to worry. Still...

"These two don't bother you, Kaito?" she asked. Even if they didn't get completely plastered every time, they were still drunk. The humans Tigaro had served up until now would probably have tried to beat them sober.

"Not at all. On the contrary, I really enjoy their company," Kaito said, smiling widely despite the situation. His face betrayed no hint of annoyance or anger. As she observed his carefree expression, Tigaro began to feel that even though she had only known Kaito for half of a day, she might be able to come around to trusting him. The fact that Oltea and Frieze had let him rub their ears was proof that they felt safe relaxing their guard in his presence. That alone was evidence that they were treated with care. If one is shown respect and made to feel one's value every day, it is bound to build trust.

Still...there has to be some kind of catch, she thought to herself. To doubt a man whom Frieze so clearly held in high esteem made her feel uncomfortable, but there had to be some kind of end goal that would explain his facade of kindness. To ascertain Kaito's intentions, she'd just have to continue observing him.

"It feels so good to have a clean home!"

"Hey, Kaito, I wanna drink wine!"

"Sure. I'll grab the wine. You two wait in bed, yeah? Tigaro, can you help them up there?" Kaito asked.

"Leave it to me," Tigaro said, and he passed Oltea and Frieze off to lean on her shoulders. She supported them up the stairs and brought them to the bedroom.

"I can't wait to drink that wine!"

"I want it now!"

While the two of them merrily chatted back and forth, Tigaro did as Kaito had instructed and brought them to their beds. They each lay down and crawled under the covers. At first, they lay there looking excited and energetic, but little by little, their eyelids grew heavier until they shut completely. Finally, they went still and drifted off to sleep, breathing softly.

They fell asleep...

Tigaro was watching their happy, resting faces when Kaito entered the room.

“They both passed out?”

“Yeah, just a moment ago... Where’s the wine?”

“That was just a way of getting them to bed. Drinking too much is bad for you, after all.”

“You seem pretty experienced at taking care of them...”

“Sure, they’re my friends,” he said. It had been the same during the day: when Kaito talked about his friends, his face assumed an incredibly happy expression. A man of his status could have anyone he liked for a friend, so why had he chosen to befriend hybrids?

Does it have something to do with animal ears?

At the eatery, he had rubbed both of their ears. When he did, his face had reflected a genuine happiness that would have been almost impossible to fake. To love animal ears that much was to love hybrids. If that were the case, then his kindness toward her kind was, perhaps, for the purpose of satisfying a kind of craving.

A sexual craving.

No, it couldn’t be... Is Kaito...d-doing dirty things to them at night?!

Oltea and Frieze hadn’t said a single thing about having physical relations with the man. There were two potential reasons for that. One could be that it was an embarrassing topic and thus neither had wanted to bring it up. Another could be that they were not even aware of what was happening. If it was the former, then that was their prerogative, but if it was the latter, then it was a major problem. It would mean that Kaito was getting Oltea and Frieze drunk so that

they would have no memory of his repeated assaults.

It would explain not only his warm behavior toward hybrids but also why he hadn't fired Tigaro despite her lack of cleaning ability. For him, Hybrid Town must have been like a buffet. Having grown tired of Oltea and Frieze, he had gone there on the pretext of hiring a cleaner just to find a new animal-eared girl. Then, it seemed, he had laid eyes on Tigaro.

In other words—

Does that mean he's going to target me tonight instead?!

That must have been why he had treated Tigaro, who had hardly been helpful with the cleaning, to so much alcohol. He hadn't accounted for the possibility that she would not get drunk. If he tried to assault someone who was fully lucid, he would be prosecuted, dishonor the title of Sword Saint, and see his reputation plummet. In the interest of protecting his standing as Sword Saint, he probably wouldn't do anything to her tonight...but that just meant that Frieze and Oltea might once again fall victim.

I need to protect them, but I also need evidence...

It was all still nothing more than Tigaro's speculation. Unless she caught him red-handed and obtained definite evidence, she would be powerless to unmask Kaito. For that reason...

"Ugh... Ahh," Tigaro groaned, leaning on Kaito's shoulder.

"What's wrong, Tigaro?"

"I... I suddenly feel quite drunk..." she said, tactically pretending. If she faked being drunk, Kaito was likely to forget his caution and make a move on her.

"U-Ugh... I'm feeling really dizzy...and sleepy..."

"Wait just a moment," Kaito said. Suddenly, he picked her up and carried her over his shoulder, nearly causing her to raise her voice without thinking. It was embarrassing to be scooped up by a man like that, but if she showed her emotions, it would reveal her sobriety and give the game away. Tigaro began to pray—the only thing she could think of—to keep her face from flushing red and revealing her ruse as Kaito carried her to his room.

He laid her gently down on a bed and covered her with a warm, soft blanket.

Come on, then. Bring it on! Anytime now!

Tigaro held her eyes tightly shut and waited to feel Kaito's hands on her body, but not a single touch came. She heard some kind of noise—though she wasn't sure what—mixed with the beating of her heart.

Slowly, Tigaro opened her eyes. Kaito was nowhere to be seen. She looked up and saw a ladder extending downward from the ceiling. After it, a mattress fell to the floor with a thud. Seeing Kaito come down next, she hastily shut her eyes once more. She heard the rustling sound of the mattress being spread out on the floor, and then, suddenly, the light shining through her eyelids was extinguished and the room became dark. Before much time had passed at all, she began to hear the sound of snoring.

She waited in silence. She got up carefully so as not to make a sound and looked around at the room, illuminated by moonlight flowing in through the windows. There, on the floor, Kaito was sleeping atop the mattress. Wary of the possibility that he could just be pretending, Tigaro lay back down and pretended to sleep herself, but even after she'd spent a long time waiting, Kaito still hadn't opened his eyes even once.

He really had fallen asleep.

What's going on? Did he see through my fake-drunk act? Or maybe...was I misunderstanding when I thought he had sexual intentions?

If so, she would need to reconsider Kaito's reasons for being so kind to hybrids. The question of his motive weighed on her mind, but...she would have to think about it tomorrow.

Bit by bit, her fake tiredness was becoming genuine. She decided that for now, she would get some sleep.

It was just past noon, one week to the day since Tigaro had moved in with us. We had just finished a request, received our reward at the guild, and were stepping outside of the hall to be greeted by a clear, blue sky.

“Tiga is probably starting to feel lonely right about now,” Frieze said.

“True, considering we had to stay somewhere else last night,” I said.

The previous morning, the three of us had accepted a request to slay a wyvern, which had required journeying to a rocky mountain far away from the city. Despite our best efforts, we had been unable to find our mark before the sun set and thus had been forced to spend the evening in the nearest town. It wasn’t until this morning that we had been able to complete our task. Although we had been able to take a few trips lately, it was the first overnight job we’d had since Tigaro’s hiring. Just in case, I had told her that there was a possibility we’d have to spend the night somewhere, but she was probably still getting worried.

We considered taking the usual route home but thought that we ought to invite Tigaro along if we were going to go shopping and, as such, decided to head straight home first. As we approached our quiet neighborhood, Oltea suddenly spoke up as if remembering something.

“Oh, right. Hey Kaito, do we have any cheese at the house?”

“Cheese? I don’t remember buying any... How come?”

“I wanted to eat some with wine,” she said. “Actually, come to think of it, we still haven’t had a welcome party or anything for Tigaro. I think that having some delicious cheese on hand would go a long way to liven up something like that.”

“That’s a great idea! The wine we’ve let sit for a week has almost definitely aged nicely by now,” Frieze said.

“I’m sure Tigaro would love that too! In that case, we definitely need cheese,” Oltea said, looking quite excited at the prospect of drinking our wine with some nice cheese in her hands. When she’d gotten a chance to try some at Clié’s house, Oltea had devoured it, saying, “It’s so good!” repeatedly throughout.

Tigaro would almost certainly be delighted to have us throw her a welcome party. There was no reason for me to refuse.

That being said, I had my concerns. I didn’t want to rain on their parade, but...

“That welcome party—will it be all right if I come too?” I said.

“What do you mean?” Frieze asked.

“There’s no reason you wouldn’t be able to,” Oltea said, confused. Neither of them seemed to have any idea what I meant.

“Well, Tigaro seems cautious around me,” I said. When speaking to Oltea and Frieze, she smiled naturally, but when she interacted with me, her expression stiffened. Even though she replied, she would avoid eye contact. Other times, I would sense her gaze and turn around to meet it. When she saw me looking, she always quickly averted her eyes.

Perhaps it was overstating things to say she was cautious of me, but she certainly didn’t seem all that fond of dealing with me. She might enjoy the party more without my presence. I would, of course, have to think of an excuse for not attending so that she wouldn’t feel uncomfortable.

“You’re overthinking things. You’re always kind to her, aren’t you? Nobody could hate someone like that. I’m sure Frieze would agree, right?”

“I’m sure she doesn’t ‘hate’ him, but I also think he might not be her favorite. TIGA doesn’t really do well with men.”

“Did something happen with a man in her past?”

“The opposite, actually. She’s barely interacted with them, so it’s become a weak point. She’s always been cute, and a lot of men have tried to hit on her, but she always put taking care of me first and never went on dates or anything.”

“So you’re basically saying that she’s shy, then,” Oltea said.

“Basically, yeah,” Frieze said. “But, well,” she continued, as if trying to ease my worries, “she’s been able to talk to the men around the neighborhood, and her discomfort around men is just something from the past. She’s not a kid anymore, you know. I think if the two of you spent some time together, she could get used to you.”

She was suggesting something akin to shock therapy. I felt awkward about the prospect of forcing someone to get familiar with me, but if nothing was done,

then Tigaro wouldn't be able to live her life feeling safe and secure. It would be better for her to get accustomed to me soon.

"In that case, we'll have to come up with some kind of pretext to get the two of us alone," I said. We had slept in the same room on her first night, but the very next day, I had gone and bought another bed for her, which I'd moved into Oltea and Frieze's room. That first day was the last time the two of us were alone together.

"How about this: we use the party as an excuse," Oltea said.

"You mean the welcome party we were discussing just now?" I asked.

She nodded. "We tell Tigaro, 'We want to throw a surprise party for Kaito since he's always taking such good care of us,' and then ask her to keep you busy while Frieze and I go out to buy the cheese."

"Oh, I see! That way we're able to make it a surprise for Tigaro too!" said Frieze.

"That's a great idea!" I said.

Oltea looked shy as both of us praised her idea. With our plan decided on, we headed back home.

"Welcome back!" Given that we hadn't come home at all last night, Tigaro was probably concerned. She came running excitedly down the stairs to greet us.

"We're back, Tiga! And, actually, there's something I wanted to talk to you about," Frieze said.

"What's this all out of the blue?"

"Oh, don't worry, nothing bad. Let's go talk over there!"

"I'll be in my room," I said before turning away from the three girls standing in the entrance hall and heading upstairs to my bedroom.

I was sitting on my bed mindlessly killing time when a knock sounded on the door. Tigaro came in, looking much more nervous than usual. Understandable, I thought, given that it was just the two of us alone on top of the fact that she had been tasked with keeping me occupied.

“Hey, a-are you...free right now...?”

“Sure, I’m free. How come?”

“Umm, well... I was feeling like a stroll around the neighborhood might be nice! I already tried asking Frieze and Oltea too, of course, but they said they seemed to just want to rest for now.”

“I see. Sure, I’ll go with you.”

“O-Okay! Thanks!” She exhaled, relieved to not have been rejected. Despite her characteristic nervousness, she always tried her best for the sake of the party’s success and was a truly kind person. It was because of exactly those qualities that I wanted to become her friend. Taking the opportunity to deepen our connection was the right move. Still, as we left the house together, anticipation mixed with anxiety until the two emotions filled me in equal measure.

“Is there any place in particular you’d like to go, Tigaro?”

“I mostly just want to be able to go for a walk, but... Oh, right. Hey, where could we find cheese for sale?”

“The closest shop for cheese is probably going to be on the main street—the one with the guild.”

“Ah, well...um, in that case, I feel like going that way,” Tigaro said, pointing in the opposite direction of the guild as though she was wary of the possibility I might run into Frieze and Oltea.

“Let’s go that way, then,” I said, and we set off down the tranquil residential avenue. Before long, we arrived at a stretch of road lined with storefronts.

“Oh,” I started, getting my companion’s attention. “Did you want any new clothes, Tigaro?”

“I don’t particularly need any at the moment. Besides, I gave all my money to my parents already. Even if I did want to buy something, I wouldn’t be able to,” Tigaro said. While Oltea, Frieze and I were out on a job the other day, Tigaro had gone to Hybrid Town to visit her parents and, it seemed, give them the money she had earned from her previous job. She really was a kind girl for

taking such good care of them.

“It’d be my gift to you,” I said. It might not be the cheapest method, but gift giving was perfect for strengthening a bond. Tigaro had told us that she always wore her maid uniform just because it felt nice. Surely she’d appreciate being given a new set of clothes if they were similarly comfortable.

“I’m good for clothes, really. Thanks to your...‘Clean Beam,’ was it? With that keeping my uniform fresh, I don’t even have to worry about it getting damaged in the laundry. I’ve even got some spares to swap out,” she said.

“Sure...” I said. She did not seem to be holding back, just genuinely uninterested in clothing. If I was going to get her a gift, I wanted it to be something that would please her, so...

“Tigaro, do you like flowers at all?” I asked. Nothing was more emblematic of gifts for women than a nice bunch of flowers.

“Well, sure, as much as anyone does, I guess. At the mansion where I was staying before coming here, there was a flower bed that I used to like looking at now and then after I finished my work for the day.”

“In that case, why don’t we go to a florist? I was thinking of decorating my room with some flowers, and I’d love it if you could pick some out for me,” I said. I actually intended to buy them for her, of course, but I feared that she would modestly decline if I said so outright. I decided to give them to her as a surprise.

“It’d really be okay if I chose them?”

“Sure, it’s not as if I know the first thing about flowers. Pick some that you like! Enough to make a bouquet would be perfect.”

“You got it. Show me the way and I’ll choose some,” she said. We continued down the street until we arrived at the flower peddler. A diverse assortment of flowers adorned the storefront and filled the air with a pleasant scent. Tigaro examined the offerings with a careful thoroughness as her expression softened into a smile. I was watching her when someone called my name.

“Kaito!” came a happy-sounding woman’s voice from within the shop. A hybrid girl with floppy ears like those of a lop rabbit came out to greet me, a

bouquet clutched in her hands.

“Good afternoon, uh...”

“I’m Lulina’s mom! A while back you bought some flowers from my daughter for a whole gold coin, and I’ve been hoping for a chance to say thank you ever since!”

“Ah, so you’re that little girl’s mother,” I said, realizing I was speaking to the parent of the child who had been selling flowers in front of the guild hall. That was the day that we had met Frieze.

The flowers Lulina had worked so hard to gather had been scattered to the wind by Vlad, leaving her terribly upset. To lift her spirits, I had bought what was left for one gold. Then, to ease the guilt that she might have felt at accepting such an obviously uneven trade, I had requested that she make a one-of-a-kind bouquet to give me in return. Then, some days later, I’d gone and picked it up in front of the guild hall. The flowers had already begun to wilt, but the bouquet had still brightened up my room, even if only for a little while.

“How is your daughter? Is she well?” I asked.

“Very! Thanks to you, she’s been able to keep her belly nice and full. Lulina and her little sister spend every day happily playing together now.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Helping one’s family is important, but what a child really ought to be doing is playing, after all.”

“Couldn’t agree more. Being able to watch kids enjoy themselves fills me with joy too! I’m sorry to be rude, but I’m in the middle of work and I really should be getting back to it. It was such a pleasure being able to finally meet you!” she said and stepped out of the shop. Seeing her leave the building, I figured the work in question must have been a delivery of some sort. She offered a quick, polite bow as she passed us before continuing to the main road in a hurry.

“Hey,” Tigaro said hesitantly, her expression meek, “can I...ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Kaito,” she began slowly, as if carefully probing, “why are you so kind to

hybrids?”

“Why am I kind to hybrids? Well... No particular reason. I don’t think one needs a reason to treat anyone with kindness, let alone hybrids, but...”

Tigaro’s features seemed to withdraw into a solemn expression.

“You...really don’t have a reason?” she asked. Her manner made me wonder if she had been sitting on the thought for some time now. There’s a saying that goes something like “Nothing’s quite as expensive as getting something for free.” Perhaps Tigaro felt that way and had gotten anxious searching for some kind of catch to my behavior. If that was the case, I figured I’d better come up with a reason just to ease her worries. And, honestly, if pressed to specify, I knew what I would say despite my answer only being on the “if I have to choose” level of certainty.

“These days, I enjoy every moment, but it wasn’t so long ago that life had me filled with despair.”

“Despair? What changed? Were you hurting for money?”

“Not at all. Actually, at my lowest, I was living in affluence. But what I found was that no matter how much money I had, I still couldn’t enjoy my time. Back then, no matter what I tried, nothing captivated me. Nothing was fun or interesting at all... I hadn’t yet discovered the joy of being alive.”

“But you’re so different now. To my eyes, you seem like someone who loves being alive.”

“That’s because I met hybrids!” I said, my voice rising in excitement.

Tigaro looked at me with puzzlement. “What do you mean ‘met hybrids’? We’re all over the place,” she said. It was an appropriate question, but I couldn’t really answer it. If I talked about Japan or my transmigration, I’d just confuse her. I had no option but to evade the query.

“Not where I’m from, they aren’t. Meeting Oltea was a real shock to my system, actually. The moment I saw her, it was like color finally came into my world. I had never thought such wonderful things existed on this earth... In other words, I guess what I am trying to say is that I love hybrids. I want to make the people I care about smile, you know?” I said.

Tigaro paused, taking it in. “So you’re not...looking for something in return?”

“No, nothing like that. When you send money to your parents, you’re not looking to get something back, are you?”

“Of course not. I’m satisfied just being able to help them live a little more happily.”

“It’s the same for me. If I can contribute to the happiness of the hybrids who live here, that’s enough for me. That’s why, if you really pressed me, I’d say that for me, seeing everyone smile *is* getting something in return.”

“I see,” she said after a pause. “So that’s your reason... And still, I...” Trailing off and muttering to herself, she—*SLAP!*—struck me across the face out of nowhere.

She really had just slapped me! I stood there, shaken up by the impact. “Wh-What are you doing?! That made such a loud sound!”

“I just whacked you without even thinking,” she said with a relieved-sounding laugh. A relaxed smile—the kind I only saw her wear when dealing with Oltea and Frieze—spread across her face. She looked happy, the way one does after finally listening to one’s heart. But then...concern for me set in, overtaking her satisfaction.

“My cheek is turning red... That really hurt, you know!”

“Of course it did. It hurts just as much as it’s supposed to. It’s not a big deal,” Tigaro said. “You’re really a kind man, Kaito. Nothing at all like Monstro.”

Monstro?

“Was that your previous boss?” I asked.

“Yeah. He was town mayor, a real upstanding and well-regarded guy as far as the public was concerned. With us maids, though, he had a short temper. He only employed hybrids, and when the stress got to him, he took it out on us. He figured that if he did anything to a human, there’d be an uproar, but hybrids would just take it no problem.”

“I see,” I said, then paused. “I will never do anything like that. You have my word. On those grounds, I’d be delighted if you’d continue to live in my home

with me.”

“Of course I will! As long as you continue to let me stay around!” Tigaro said, smiling with her whole face. We had successfully deepened our bond and, in the process, killed some time. Oltea and Frieze would be returning home about now.

“So, have you picked any flowers?” I asked.

“I have!” Tigaro said. We had the florist make them up into a bouquet for us and stepped out to head back home.

“We’re home!” I said as we entered the house. Inside, it was dead silent. I wondered if the two were not yet home or if they were quietly hidden away somewhere within...which begged the question: where were we going to hold the welcome party anyways?

“Hmm. I think those two are in the parlor,” Tigaro said, as though the three of them had discussed a meeting place. Perhaps waiting to see my surprised face, she was smiling like a mischievous child pulling a trick.

I opened the door to the parlor, and—

“Welcome, Tigaro!” shouted Frieze.

“From the bottom of our hearts, welcome!” Oltea said. At the sight of the two girls receiving her with applause, Tigaro looked absolutely dumbfounded.

“Wh-Why me? It’s Kaito’s par— Wait: ‘welcome’?”

“I know it’s a little late, but we got to talking and thought that we ought to throw you a welcome party! Here, this is for you,” I said and handed the bouquet of flowers to Tigaro, who still seemed to have a giant question mark floating above her head.

“But this was for decorating your—”

“It was a surprise. For you. Are you surprised?”

“Of course I’m surprised... Thank you so much. Oltea, Frieze, you too! Thank you all so much!” Tigaro said. All traces of confusion had disappeared from her face, leaving only joy.

Now fully confident in the success of their welcome party, Frieze and Oltea shared a high five.

“I’d say our surprise was a huge success!”

“Now let’s make sure the party is too!”

I had to wonder if Oltea and Frieze had only just gotten home before us: the cheese, wrapped in a paper bag, was sitting atop the table but the wine had not yet been prepared. With a spring in their steps, the two went off to retrieve it.

As soon as Tigaro and I were alone, she lost her composure. Though she had opened up to me, it seemed that she was still nervous when it was just the two of us. As I was thinking about how she might feel, she suddenly spoke up with resolve in her voice.

“H-Hey, Kaito? You like ears, right?”

“I love them. Yours too, Tigaro.”

“R-Really? Mine are so short and stubby. They’ve got this splotchy pattern too. To be honest, I don’t really like them that much, but...”

“Nonsense!” I said, raising my voice. She’d only barely begun to feel at ease with me and under normal circumstances, we’d still have needed to get a little closer before I could praise her ears, but if Tigaro lacked confidence in herself, that was another story entirely. “Your ears are fantastic. You should have more confidence in yourself. I love the way they’re short and stout and I think their splotchy pattern is stylish! Their fur has that nice shine too—they’re absolutely adorable!” I said.

“O-Okay, I get it! You don’t have to say any more!” she said as her face flushed bright red. I didn’t think I had praised them enough yet, but her blush was proof that my words up to that point had made their impression. I’d be happy if my compliments could make her like her ears even just a little bit more.

“Anyways...I know you like animal ears, so...I was thinking...” she began. She took a deep breath and looked at me with upturned eyes. “As thanks for giving me flowers, I’ll let you touch my ears.”

“Really?!”

“Y-Yeah. But... I don’t want those two to see, so please be quick about it!”

“Thank you! I’ll take you up on it!” I said. To be touching Tigaro’s ears so soon was like a dream come true! I reached for them right away. They had a firm, fleshy texture, though it would have been inaccurate to say that they felt “hard.” On the contrary, there was a suppleness to them. A coat of soft fur, the surface of which was smooth to the touch, gave them a fluffy, pleasant feeling in my hand. With every rub, I felt the tension in my face melt away.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” came Oltea’s voice. As the other two girls entered, Tigaro immediately pulled away, taking that wonderful feeling with her...

“Let’s get this welcome party going... Hmm? What’s wrong, Tiga? Your face is as red as a tomato,” Frieze said.

“You haven’t even had anything to drink yet, but your face looks like you’re three rounds in!” said Oltea.

“It-It’s just a little hot in here, that’s all. But anyways, let’s hurry up and get drinking!” Tigaro said.

“Mm-hmm. Tonight’s all about you, Tiga, so drink as much as you like!” said Frieze.

“Even if you get a hangover tomorrow, Kaito can just fix you up with his beam!” Oltea said.

“Oh! You really pulled out all the stops for this, huh? In that case, I’ll make the most of it and drink to the bitter end!” Tigaro said. Her bright, cheerful declaration served as our cue: the curtain rose on the welcome party for our newest member, one week late though it was.

Evening, the same day.

Dinner had been served, but Monstro still lingered in the kitchen. Even with cooking duties done for the day, it was not as though he was afforded the chance to rest. There was prep work to do for the coming day, and beyond that,

he still had to consider the menu for the Moonlight Feast.

Beelzé was fond of the light that shone from the lunar surface and had a “Moonlight Feast” once a month on the night the moon was at its fullest. Of course, given that he desired a quiet, undisturbed life, the festivities hardly qualified as exciting. The only thing separating the occasion from any other day was the quality of the evening’s meal. It had to be special. Monstro had been able to satisfy the man so far, but serving a unique dish once a month was taxing. After thirty years, he was beginning to run out of ideas.

Still, across three decades, Monstro had managed to serve nothing but delicious gourmet food each time. Not once had he cut any corners. In ensuring that Beelzé’s life lived up to his wishes, he had not rested for even one day. It was just as the man had said: he wanted a tranquil life spent enjoying excellent food. That was Monstro’s charge.

Monstro had grown quite confident in his ability to fulfill the latter condition, but the matter of preserving Beelzé’s peace had presented a problem. When the money began to dry up, it became increasingly difficult to provide for the man’s lifestyle. It was then that Monstro had devised a plan: he asked Beelzé to release devil flies to attack a suitable town. He had figured that, were he able to protect the township before anyone fell victim to the swarm, he would become a hero and then, surely, find the means to continue serving Beelzé.

The plan had been wildly successful. After Monstro displayed dauntless courage in opposing the devil flies, he immediately gained the renown of a hero. The people of the small port town where it all went down quickly entrusted him with the position of mayor. It was the first time in history that the stampede had been held at bay anywhere, and reports of Monstro’s triumph spread across the entire kingdom like wildfire. Soon, immigrants from all over poured in seeking a safe refuge, and the town, once no more than a small village, developed into the greatest entrepôt in all the country.

Still, though fame, fortune, and status had fallen into his lap, Monstro had been afforded no room to enjoy any of it. The knowledge that Beelzé was ready to kill him should he ever offend or fail hung over everything and denied his heart even a moment’s repose.

“Excuse me,” someone said. He had finished his prep work and was considering the menu for the feast when a hybrid maid entered the room to speak with him. It was the server he had hired to replace Tigaro, whom he’d dismissed just the other day. She, too, was a beautiful server—an asset which, along with attractive tableware, was indispensable to creating a gourmet dining experience for Beelzé—but not like Tigaro had been.

“I brought back the plates. Additionally, Beelzé asked me to bring you a message,” she said.

“Beelzé did? Did he have something to say about the food?”

“No, he did not have any words to share in relation to the meal. He has requested a meeting with you, Mr. Monstro.”

“He wants to...meet with me?” Monstro asked. The notion assaulted him with an indescribable discomfort. Beelzé had not once summoned him in thirty years. Far from it: they had not even met face-to-face in decades. Suddenly, the same Beelzé who had been content with that distance all this time had said he wanted to see Monstro. There was no world in which the man intended to make small talk. Monstro could think of no possible reason Beelzé would call on him unless it had to do with his cooking.

His food, though, had been perfect. Not even once in all those years had he incurred a poor reception. That being the case—

“You! You disrespected him somehow, didn’t you?” he shouted.

“N-No, I only served the meal as per your instructions! I did as you asked and did not open my mouth to speak even once!” the server girl said. Though it was undeniably possible that she’d messed up in some way or another, her easily frightened disposition didn’t square with the type of insolence that would lead one to disturb a meal with one’s words or behavior. She was too passive. And so the reason for his summoning *had* to be related to the food.

In any case, it would not do to keep Beelzé waiting.

“I understand. Get out of here and back to your room.”

“Certainly, Mr. Monstro,” she said and bowed deeply. She placed the dishes in the sink and promptly exited. A feeling of dejection settled over Monstro as

he grabbed a light and left the mansion. Outside, the sun had already fallen below the horizon. The wind blew over the manor grounds with an eerie noise as he made his way toward the lighthouse, perched as it was on the edge of its precipitous cliff. When no response came after Monstro knocked on the timeworn door, he stepped cautiously inside.

“Master Beelzé... Master Beelzé, where are you...?” he called in a trembling voice. The droning sound of an insect near his ear assaulted his senses. A fly was zipping back and forth before his face. Once he noticed it, it flew off toward the hallway as if guiding him onward.

He followed the insect and found himself in the dining room. Moonlight poured in through a huge window. In the lunar glow was an elderly man wrapped in a tailcoat and sitting upon a single chair.

Monstro had not seen him in thirty years, but Beelzé’s appearance had hardly changed at all. Though he wished the man’s life would come to an end, Beelzé was no mere man. He was a monster. Monstro hadn’t the faintest idea how many more years Beelzé might last.

“S-Sorry to have kept you waiting, Master. What can I do for you today...?” Monstro asked, seized by a sense of unease. Beelzé met his question with ice-cold eyes.

“What do you plan to make for the next Moonlight Feast?” he asked. The moment he heard the words, Monstro felt as though he had been rescued. He had not, he realized, incurred Beelzé’s displeasure with the meal. He had simply been called so that the man could ask a question.

“Well, the Moonlight Feast is an occasion of great import, of course... Rest assured I endeavor to satisfy your standards, but to do so, I need time to carefully consider every option, and... Well, should you have any requests, I would be glad to hear them, Master,” Monstro said.

Beelzé was silent for a time.

“I’ve been thinking as of late...that your cooking could use a touch of improvement. This Moonlight Feast, you’ll use ingredients of my choosing,” he said. Monstro’s heart tightened into a knot at the criticism.

“I-I understand, Master. I’ve no doubt that I can obtain whatever ingredients you like and use them in the dish. So, wh-what might these...ingredients be, Master?”

“Human flesh.”

Monstro didn’t understand.

“I’m sorry, wh-what was that just now?” he asked.

Beelzé furrowed his brows, evidently not happy to have to repeat himself. “Human flesh. It’s been quite some time since I’ve eaten human flesh. Of course, I’m particular about the selection of stock: I prefer the meat of a beautiful girl, so... Ah, yes. That hybrid girl—the one who brought my food until a few days ago—would be quite suitable.”

“Y-You mean—”

“What is it? If you’ve some objection, voice it now.” Beelzé looked at Monstro with a cruel gaze that seemed to prohibit him from replying regardless of what he might say. He immediately shook his head.

“N-No, no. I have no objections! I promise to put my all into making a dish suited to your preferences, Master Beelzé!”

“Then there is nothing more to say. Be gone.”

“Right away, Master,” Monstro said and exited the lighthouse as his heart pounded in his chest.

It’s just awful... This is awful. Awful, awful, awful!

He left the scene as if he were running away, roughly scratching at his head all the while. Dread and apprehension welled up in his chest and threatened to burst him open from within.

Tigaro was no longer there. She’d treated him with impudence and he had fired her on the spot. He could fake the ingredients, but if Beelzé saw through the deception, Monstro would be killed.

No matter what it took, he had to bring Tigaro back. He’d kill her with his own two hands and cook her into Beelzé’s feast. There was no other way.

Tigaro... She comes from Hybrid Town, doesn't she?

The Moonlight Feast was his first priority, but he still couldn't neglect his daily culinary duties. He'd have to send an idle maid to find and retrieve Tigaro.

Spurred forward by an unspeakable, impatient unease, Monstro retraced his steps to the mansion.

Act 3: Port Town Hospitality

It was early afternoon; three days had passed since Tigaro's welcome party. After enjoying a meal out together, Oltea, Frieze, and I parted ways with Tigaro and headed to the guild to pick up a request.

Upon arrival, I went to the reception window without delay. When the receptionist noticed me approaching, she greeted me with a bright, cheerful voice.

"Welcome back, Mr. Kaito. I've been expecting you! I have an important announcement to share with you!"

"An important announcement?"

"Correct. It concerns your promotion to rank A!"

"Oh, you finally made rank A!" Frieze said.

"That's amazing, Kaito! That's the absolute apex for an adventurer!" Oltea said. The two of them were excitedly shaking me by the shoulders while they praised my accomplishment, but truth be told, I didn't feel much like I'd achieved anything. If anything, I had just satisfied my desire to fire beams.

Even so, I was pleased to be celebrated by my friends like that. I thanked each of them and turned back to face the receptionist.

"So, is there a promotion test for this rank too?" I said. As soon as the question left my mouth, Frieze and Oltea's enthusiasm dampened. Uncertain expressions spread across their faces to replace the overflowing joy that had been there but a moment prior.

"Oh, right... There's a test, huh?"

"The A rank promotional exam is almost definitely something terrible too..."

The promotional exam for rank B had tasked us with completing a contract to slay the ophidian, a danger level B monster. If the pattern held true, then the next test would have us killing an A level monster.

When one spoke of an A level monster, things like Vlad came to mind, and Vlad had manipulated the minds of countless adventurers in an attempt to take over the entire country... Oltea and Frieze's fear was only natural if we were going to have to face another foe of that caliber. Even I wouldn't be able to treat the challenge lightly.

The receptionist fished around in her cabinet for a while before withdrawing a paper, which she handed to me, saying, "First, take a look at this." It was a monster hunt bulletin reading "Devil Flies." The insects depicted resembled ordinary flies but with the addition of large mandibles like those of a stag beetle. Beneath the rendition was information pertaining to the monster's danger level, reward, and so on. But this was...

"Is this the right one?" Oltea voiced the question on both of our minds before I was able to.

Frieze, too, nodded and pointed at the bill. "It says here that the monster is...danger level C."

"It's as you say: this bulletin is for rank C adventurers. I don't believe Mr. Kaito has ever taken a request to slay devil flies in the past, so please allow me to begin by first explaining a bit about these monsters," the receptionist said. While I listened to her, the words of the King returned to me.

On the day of the Spirit Festival, when I was visiting the castle, the King had told me about the stampede: a destructive phenomenon so powerful that in just one night, its advance had reduced an entire town to rubble. Not one inhabitant had survived. The sovereign had explained to me that the stampede's true form was a mass migration of devil flies, but...

"Does the promotional exam have anything to do with the stampede?" I asked. As soon as I did, Oltea and Frieze screamed.

"The stampede?! *That* stampede?!"

"You don't mean that...there are devil flies inside the royal capital?"

Their shouting rang out through the guildhall, drawing the attention of the other adventurers inside and causing a stir among them. In an instant, dread and fear began to spread through the building. The whole place was on the

verge of panic. People began to fall from their chairs as they scrambled to flee the cafeteria.

The receptionist raised her voice in a mad rush to contain them.

“No, no, it isn’t true! No stampede has started! If we’d gotten word of any such thing, I wouldn’t even be here right now! I wouldn’t just be casually going about my reception work!” she shouted in order to calm the crowd down. If I were in her shoes, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. Her words had a persuasive power, and soon, the people in the guildhall calmed down and returned to whatever they’d previously been occupied by.

The receptionist sighed. “Well, that was a chilling experience... If even one person had made it out of the guildhall, the entire city would have descended into a panic...”

“I’m sorry. I feel ashamed...” Oltea said.

“Oh no, please don’t. I wasn’t blaming you at all—”

“B-But... I’m sorry to seem like I’m doubting you, but is it really true that the stampede *isn’t* breaking out? I know the capital isn’t in danger, but it’s not...coming down on other towns, is it?” Oltea asked. She wasn’t originally from the royal capital. Perhaps she was worried that her hometown was at risk.

As if trying to ease her anxieties, the receptionist smiled and laughed at the question. “There’s no need to worry. There’s been no word of anything like that,” she said. It wasn’t quite a phone, but this world was equipped with its own means of communicating over long distances. Using devil stones with the power to communicate telepathically through magic, conversations akin to those held over telephones were possible within a certain range.

In the case of a monster attack or the like, emergency messages could be sent from town to town in a chain, extending the range information could travel. If a mass migration of devil flies had been confirmed anywhere, a report would surely have arrived immediately.

“That’s good... So the stampede isn’t happening after all...”

“But in that case, why are we talking about devil flies?” I asked.

“Because this promotional examination is called the ‘Deep Forest Investigation.’”

“As in the dense woods on the national border?” I asked, remembering what the King had said about ten thousand devil flies gathering in the woods around there. The receptionist nodded.

“Word is that back in the day, it was a massive woodland region, expansive enough to stretch far beyond the horizon. These past thirty years, though, nature in the area has been disappearing more and more. It has been observed that when the devil flies finish consuming all of the plants and animals in a region, they migrate to a new feeding ground,” she said.

It would be fine if they moved to another place detached from human civilization, but in the worst-case scenario, the swarm would fall upon an inhabited area. What concerned me was exactly when the next mass migration would occur.

“So wait, has the forest already been all eaten up...?” Oltea asked.

“No. An inquiry into the situation made several months ago estimated roughly ten more years before that point... That being said, the surveyor that time was Vlad.”

“So what you’re saying is...you’re worried that he supplied false information?”

“The possibility cannot be discounted. Be that as it may, Vlad was aiming to become the Sword Saint, and I have my doubts that he would submit misinformation that could ultimately have discredited him and hurt his chances. Even so, we can’t afford not to conduct another investigation just in case. We had originally planned to assign the job to an A rank adventurer, but Verrick has long since departed for foreign lands, so...”

I remembered hearing some time ago that Verrick and Vlad were the only two rank A adventurers in the kingdom. With those two out of the picture, it seemed that there was nobody but me who was capable of conducting the survey.

Of course, if it were just a normal investigation, then anyone could have done it, but the region in question was home to more than ten thousand devil flies.

Based on the panic I had just witnessed, it was likely that nobody else wanted to go there. Even though the job was just reconnaissance, there was no guaranteeing that we wouldn't be attacked. The job was perfectly suited to an A rank adventurer.

"The reward for this job is thirty gold coins," the receptionist said. "Will you take it on?"

"Of course," I said.

I was no man of great ambition, but I did want to see everyone's lives made safe. For that reason, it was only right that I should step up and investigate the movements of the devil fly swarm.

"Thank you! I would add that, while I will leave the method of investigation up to you, Mr. Kaito, I would advise against working at night."

Our objective was to make an inquiry into the state of the great forest. It was only natural to note that at nighttime it became immensely difficult to see anything in the woods. With the use of Light Beam, we would be able to continue regardless, but if the devil flies flew at us, we wouldn't know where they were coming from. As the receptionist said, it would be best to conduct the investigation by the light of day.

"Understood. Also, just to confirm, this being A rank means that I have to bring along four companions, right?"

For safety purposes, B rank adventurers were required to work in parties of three or more and A rank adventurers in parties of five or more. Even though we had invited Tigaro into our fold, we would need to search for one more.

"No, it is not necessary for parties to increase their numbers for the A Rank promotional examination. The job is only a survey, after all. Since combat is not necessary, it is, quite to the contrary, more dangerous to travel in larger numbers, as it makes the party conspicuous. There's no problem with you going as a trio," the receptionist said.

"Understood," I said. I did what was necessary to officially begin undertaking the promotional exam and then we departed the guildhall.

"Should we set right off, then? Or should we go back and let Tigaro know

what's going on?" I asked. Our destination was the thick forest on the kingdom's border. If we traveled there at our normal speed, we would arrive in the middle of the night. Because we'd want to conduct the investigation by the light of day, we'd have to spend the night in the nearest town with an inn. Given that we already knew we would be out overnight, telling Tigaro in advance so that she wouldn't have to worry was probably for the best.

"There's no hurry. It's not too late for us to go back and tell TIGA first," Frieze said. With Oltea seeming to feel the same, we made the decision to head back home before the journey.

We returned home to find Tigaro sweeping the entryway.

"Aww, you cleaned up for us!" said Oltea.

"Sure, I guess so. I wouldn't really be earning my five gold if I did *nothing*, right?" Tigaro replied. In truth, none of us would have minded much, but it would also have been boring for her to wait around doing nothing while the three of us were out working. Tigaro seemed to prefer staying active, and we preferred to spend our days in a clean home: it was a win-win situation.

"Thanks. You cleaning up around here is a huge help," I said.

"No need to thank me for doing my job. Makes me feel weird about it," Tigaro said, awkwardly scratching at her cheek. "By the way," she continued, glancing from face to face, "you're home pretty early. Did something go wrong?"

"We have important information to share with you, TIGA," Frieze said with an earnest expression. Tigaro's own expression grew nervous at the unexpected tonal shift. Frieze looked at her and began to explain in a somber voice. "We're going to the *Great Forest*."

"To the Great Forest?"

"That's right. Now listen, don't get too scared or anything, but there's a swarm of devil flies up there!" said Oltea.

"We'll be going there to observe the movements of the devil flies as our A rank promotional examination!" said Frieze.

The two of them were making an exaggerated effort to hype the whole thing up. Tigaro smiled and let out a little laugh at their ostentatious display.

“Wow, for real? Rank A is the highest an adventurer can go, right? Reaching the apex at your age is seriously impressive!” she said.

“Thanks. To be honest, it doesn’t really feel that way,” I said.

“I’m sure that once you actually become A rank, the feeling will come naturally. In any case, this means now you can take on danger level A contracts, right?”

“It does. We’ll be earning more money too. Should I raise your salary, Tigaro?”

“Oh, it’s fine. Don’t worry about me. It’s already more than I even know what to do with. Is there a balance left on your loan? If so, it’d be better to set the money aside and pay that off first,” Tigaro said.

“Understood,” I said. “But if you *do* want a raise, don’t be modest about asking, okay?”

“I’ll take you up on that if I do. But more importantly—A rank! That really is just absolutely incredible!”

“N-No, no, no! Why are you smiling?” Frieze said.

“Tigaro, do you not know about devil flies?” Oltea asked. Mystified, they looked at Tigaro, who had just been making friendly chatter. Oltea and Frieze seemed puzzled that Tigaro was unfazed; evidently, they’d been hoping that she would be trembling in fear by now. Frankly, I was a little curious too.

Anyone who had heard of the devil flies had heard of the stampede. The whole thing seemed to be common knowledge in this world. Even the big, brawny adventurers at the guild had nearly gone into a panic at the mere mention of it, but Tigaro remained completely unfrightened. It was as Oltea’s question implied: it was a perfectly understandable reaction *if* she just hadn’t heard of the things, but...

“How could anyone not know about devil flies? Of course I know about them,” Tigaro said.

“Then why aren’t you scared?”

“It’s not quite right to say I’m not scared at *all*, but...I lived in Port City for two years, so I guess I just got used to them.”

“Port City...” I said. A map of the kingdom unfolded in my mind. Because consulting a chart mid-flight was bound to end in an accident, I had committed the geography of the nation perfectly to memory. My mental image lacked the finer detail of, say, a satellite image, but it was accurate enough for general locational information. In any case, the countries on my imagined map had borders drawn between them.

The kingdom we stood in was on the southernmost end of a great continent that was home to two other nations. The country to the northeast was separated from this one by a range of mountains, and the one to the northwest by a forest: the very same forest that was now the habitat of the devil flies. The existence of a port town not far from there—around one hundred kilometers—was reflected in my mental map.

Oltea and Frieze were in disbelief after hearing Tigaro’s story.

“Tigaro, you lived in a dangerous place like that...?” asked Oltea.

“No wonder you stayed so calm and composed,” said Frieze.

“It’s not like I feel entirely calm about it, though. You’ll be with Kaito, so I’m sure you’ll be safe, but I’m still worried for you guys. In terms of danger, Port City’s nothing compared to the Great Forest.”

“True, Port City isn’t quite as dangerous, but it’s still not *safe*, right...?” Oltea said. If the stampede began again, its first target would be the nearest center of human habitation—the nearest town, in other words: Port City. Abandoning the city would be no small decision. That kind of thing was never done easily, but one’s life was irreplaceable.

It had been roughly estimated that ten years remained before the Great Forest became a wasteland, but there was no guarantee that the swarm would stay until every single plant and animal had been consumed. *Shouldn’t we hurry up and get the investigation started as soon as possible?* I found myself thinking.

“I spent all my time holed up in the mansion, so I didn’t interact with the townspeople much at all, but it was the same when I got there two years ago as it was when I left: nobody ever seemed scared,” Tigaro said. Despite the fact that not much distance separated it from the Great Forest, Port City was apparently a lively, thriving township.

“The people of Port City must be tenacious. They’ve got strong hearts,” Frieze said.

“That’s not why.” In contrast with Frieze’s expression of admiration, Tigaro’s tone was rife with complex feeling. “Thanks to Monstro, the people there are able to lead safe lives.”

“Wasn’t he your last employer, Tigaro? Is he also the mayor?” I asked.

“Yep. Thirty years ago, Monstro stopped the stampede dead in its tracks and became a hero.”

“Oh? Monstro was the one who stopped the stampede?” I asked. On the day of the Spirit Festival, the King had talked about the event in question. He had told me of the stampede’s last appearance thirty years back, and of the young man who’d driven away the swarm. Since then, the devil flies had taken up residence in the Great Forest. The man who had accomplished that incredible feat was, it seemed, none other than this “Monstro.” In that case, he must have been appointed mayor in recognition of that meritorious deed.

“Now that you mention it, my grandpa used to talk about that guy. When I told him I was moving to the royal capital, he told me that if I was set on leaving home, I ought to go to Port City since at least there I’d be safe even if the stampede happened again,” Oltea said.

“Geographically speaking, it’d probably be the first place targeted, but...I suppose nothing could be more reassuring than living in the same town as someone who has already stopped the stampede once,” Frieze said.

“Plenty of people clearly felt the same way as Frieze, because Port City used to just be a small village, but a flood of refugees turned it into the big town it is now. That’s what I’ve been told, at least,” Tigaro said.

Ever since Monstro’s success, not only had the town been spared from further

attacks, but the stampede itself had never since reoccurred anywhere. It was difficult to be sure whether or not the stampede's long absence was related to Monstro, but there were many who gratefully attributed the ensuing peace to his efforts.

"Personally, though, I despise him. Getting the hell away has been nothing but a relief."

"Why's that, Tigaro? He sounds like a pretty great guy from everything I've heard," Oltea said.

"He's awful about discriminating against hybrids, for one. He's got a short temper, and he's always finding something to complain about. I didn't think he'd ever go so far as to get really violent, but looking back, it's probably just that I never noticed it happening. He had the nerve to grab my coworker's ears and yank them around, and it didn't look like it was his first time either—his hands moved like he had some experience doing it."

"Their ears?!"

"Unbelievable, right? He pulled on them even though he knew how much she hated that. I snapped and shouted at him for it. After that, he said he'd fire me."

"Quitting was the right thing to do," I said. Complementing a hybrid's ears was like confessing your love to them. One would hesitate to even touch them without first asking permission. To aggressively grab and pull at them was absolutely unthinkable. Put more succinctly, violence of any sort was unthinkable.

Anything a young man like myself said to Monstro was likely to go in one ear and out the other, but I wasn't just any young man. I was the presiding Sword Saint. If I were to give him a warning in that capacity, he might refrain from getting violent with his maids in the future.

Wanting also to know how he'd managed to disperse an advancing devil fly swarm more than ten thousand strong, I decided to go and meet Monstro myself.

"Is Monstro's house an easy place to find?" I asked.

“It’s up on high ground, so it’s pretty easy to spot, but... You’re not thinking of going to see him, are you?” Tigaro said.

“I’d like to have a word or two with him. I’m not going to ask you to show me the way or anything, obviously,” I said. Praiseworthy though his accomplishments may have been, Tigaro had no fondness for the man’s character. Surely she wouldn’t want to see him again.

“I’d rather not go anywhere near that guy,” Tigaro started, “but if it’s just to show you the way to his house, then—”

That’s when it happened. Suddenly, there was a knocking sound from behind us. The interruption stopped Tigaro mid-sentence. I opened the door, and there on the other side of the threshold stood a hybrid girl about sixteen or seventeen years of age and dressed in a maid uniform.

She had rounded ears like those of a squirrel, a big, fluffy tail, and something of a timid manner. After one look at her, Tigaro’s eyes immediately went wide.

“No way—Chestnut?”

“Tiga, you know this girl?” asked Frieze.

“We used to work together. What are you doing here... Wait, you didn’t get fired too, did you?” Tigaro asked, looking the girl over with worry in her eyes.

Chestnut shook her head.

“No. Actually, the only reason I’m still able to work is that you stood up for me, Tigaro.”

“Oh, I see...” Tigaro said, not seeming all too happy.

It was particularly difficult for hybrids to find good, honest work. There was already stiff competition for what little well-paying work there was to go around, let alone for anything as lucrative as maid work at Monstro’s mansion. Still, even if it was best to hold on to work when one’s livelihood was at risk, it was also understandable that the fear of being hit again would take precedence.

“Well, in any case, you seem to be doing well. That’s what matters,” Tigaro said.

“That’s thanks to you, Tigaro. If I got fired, I’d probably end up tossed out on the streets and... Well, you look good too, Tigaro.”

“That’s because getting fired from that job led me to this: the best living situation I could hope for. Hard not to be happy in my shoes.”

“Yeah, I heard all about it in Hybrid Town. You became the Sword Saint’s maid.”

“Right. Oh, that’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” Tigaro said, signaling Chestnut with her eyes.

Taking the cue, Chestnut turned to me and bowed her head in deference. “Ah, please forgive my rudeness, sir. I’ve neglected to introduce myself. My name is Chestnut. I apologize for my sudden intrusion,” she said. Quite the polite greeting, I noted. For a moment, I considered matching her formality, but...being spoken to in deference by the Sword Saint would likely just make her uneasy.

“No need to worry. More importantly, am I correct in assuming you came here to speak with Tigaro about something?” I asked. Based on what she’d said so far, it seemed that she had first gone to Hybrid Town. There, she must have heard about Tigaro becoming my maid and decided to come here.

“There’s no way Monstro gave you a day off. Did you come here to meet me on his instructions? He didn’t seriously send you all the way out here to shout at me or something, did he?” Tigaro asked. To send one maid out of her way just to come scold another who’d already been fired... It was the kind of thing only a truly malicious and petty person would think to do. Even so, Tigaro seemed not to think it was beneath him.

Chestnut shook her head, dispelling Tigaro’s suspicion.

“Quite the opposite, actually. I was sent not to reprimand you on Mr. Monstro’s behalf but to convey his apologies,” Chestnut said.

The information left Tigaro blank-faced and taken aback. “Monstro is...apologizing? To me?”

Chestnut nodded. “It would appear that Mr. Monstro has come to greatly lament the events of that day... He says he’d like you to return to work at the

mansion,” she said. She didn’t seem to have confidence in her own words. Just a few moments ago, Tigaro had said that she now enjoyed “the best living situation she could hope for,” with a smile to back up the sentiment. Chestnut was probably expecting to be refused.

“Sorry, but I don’t plan on going back,” Tigaro said, turning the offer down without hesitation, exactly as Chestnut must have expected she would. It was good news for us, but Chestnut couldn’t have been happy given that Tigaro’s decision finalized their parting. That would have been the end of it, but...

“I— Of course. I understand... Tigaro, you seem to be exceedingly happy here. If only I could work here by your side,” she said, backing down with no resistance. A dark cloud seemed to settle over her features.

From what I had heard, Monstro was a very cruel man to the hybrids in his employ. Who knew what he might do to Chestnut were she to return empty-handed? She could be fired or, worse, suffer one of his violent outbursts. That being said, I had to prioritize Tigaro’s happiness as well. I certainly couldn’t force her to let Chestnut take her back.

Chestnut apologized once more for her unexpected visit before moving to take her leave.

“Wait. Tigaro, why don’t we go to Monstro’s estate with her?” I asked. Perhaps she was concerned for Chestnut’s well-being, just as I was; Tigaro’s determination seemed to waver. She did not shake her head in refusal, but neither did she show any interest in the idea.

“Of course I’m worried for Chestnut, but I’d rather not leave your side, Kaito...” Tigaro said. I realized that she may have thought I was using Chestnut’s situation as a pretext for sending her away. Her voice was choked with anxious hesitation.

“Of course not,” I said, facing her with a smile. “If you’d prefer, you could even stay here. I’m only suggesting that we go to Monstro’s house for the sake of expressing those feelings to him as well.”

“You mean to tell him that I don’t want to come back to the mansion?”

“Yeah. That way you can get Monstro to give up and get off your back while at

the same time making it so that Chestnut can truthfully say she did the job she set out to and brought you back.”

“I see what you mean. Well, if it’s for that, then I’ll go with you,” Tigaro said. The enthusiasm she’d mustered seemed to relieve Chestnut, whose face brightened in the manner of someone just rescued.

“Oh thank you so much, Tigaro...and thank you as well, Mr. Kaito. Truly.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s a little too late to head out today. We could leave tomorrow, but how about traveling together, Chestnut? We could take a boat, but flying would get us there quite a bit faster,” I said.

“And it would be all right for me to accompany you in that manner?” Chestnut asked politely.

“Of course,” I said. If we successfully completed our request, I would be promoted to rank A. From then on, we would have to start flying with a fifth party member. Taking to the skies tomorrow with five people would be good practice for that eventuality.

“In that case, thank you for having me,” Chestnut said.

With that, it was decided. We would take to the skies as a party of five the next day and make for Port City.

The next day.

We were flying along in the direction of Port City, dazzlingly beautiful sunlight lighting the way, when the vast expanse of the ocean peeked over the horizon and came into view. The sight of its deep blue surface spreading into the distance as far as the eye could see caused Oltea and Frieze to yelp with glee.

“Oh, look, look! Is that the ocean?!” said Frieze.

“I’d always heard it was big, but it’s *huge!*” added Oltea.

“I hear the ocean’s water tastes salty too!”

“Ooh, I wanna try drinking it at least once!”

It must have been their first time seeing the sea. I had, in the past, seen the

ocean out of the window of an airplane while traveling on business, but never before had I seen it while feeling the sea breeze on my skin. I was aware, of course, that ocean water was salty—that much was common knowledge—but, having never played in the ocean water myself, I had never held any in my mouth. The idea hadn't interested me in the slightest back in Japan, but now the thought of swimming in the water with my friends sounded like a lot of fun.

Just like that, I had discovered one more joy in life. I broke out into an involuntary grin. Couldn't be too hasty, though: while I would, of course, love to swim with Oltea and Frieze, for safety's sake, it would probably be better for us first to find a gently flowing river or something where we could accustom ourselves to being in water.

"If that's the ocean, then that must be the town Tigaro lived in, right?" Oltea said.

"Wow, it looks incredible!" Frieze said.

"That place could even hold its own against the royal capital!"

"Mm-hmm! And if it's that huge, it's bound to have some great restaurants too!"

"Maybe they've even got some rare wine!"

"I can't wait to explore it!"

The level ground along the shore had been built up into quite the metropolis. Perhaps in response to the increased flow of immigrants running up against the limited space, houses and buildings had been erected along the slope of an adjacent mountain, giving the skyline a kind of L shape. The city's western side was marked by a steep hill, on top of which was perched a mansion with a clear, sweeping view of the entire townscape.

"Is that Monstro's mansion?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's the one. By boat, it would have taken us a few days to get here, but I feel like that was hardly any time at all..." Tigaro said.

For her, the speed of flight was an impressive novelty, but for me it hadn't felt like "no time at all" by any metric. In fact, I'd flown a good deal slower than our

usual pace in order to avoid scaring Tigaro and Chestnut, who were not used to flying.

Our seating arrangement was also different this time. Because having four people seated behind me would have offset the center of gravity, I had placed myself in the middle and propelled us with Jet Beam from that position. Having five people onboard as opposed to just three made balancing on Stick Beam a fair bit more difficult, but one way or another, I was able to keep us upright and smoothly flying.

From front to back, our order was Oltea, Frieze, myself, Tigaro, and then, lastly, Chestnut. With two of the girls in front of me, there had been animal ears fluttering in the wind within my field of vision for the entire duration of the trip. The sight had me itching to touch some. If possible, I wanted one of them to let me pet her ears once we were finished.

“By the way, Tiga, which way is the Great Forest from here?” Frieze asked.

“It’s in the direction of the hill with the mansion on it,” Tigaro replied.

“I see... So somewhere beyond that horizon there are devil flies, huh?” she wondered aloud.

“Well, you can’t actually see the forest from here,” Tigaro said.

You couldn’t tell it from their faces, but the tension in their voices was revealing. It was as plain as day that they were frightened. For that reason, I planned to carry out the survey of the Great Forest tomorrow on my own. Up against just one monster, I could end a fight in no more than a single attack even if it struck first, but if it came down to facing off against more than ten thousand monsters at once, my usual tactics wouldn’t do much good. In a situation like that, I’d have no choice but to make a fighting retreat. For the sake of being able to focus on combat, I was better off alone.

I knew that the girls wouldn’t approve of me putting myself into danger all alone. In order to prevent them from trying to tag along, I planned to rise early in the morning and leave the inn before they woke up. Because Oltea and Frieze would be worried about me when they realized my absence, I had decided to share my plan with Tigaro in advance.

Anyhow—

“We’ve arrived in Port City,” I said.

“Mm-hmm. With so many buildings, there’s probably plenty of inns to choose from, huh?” Frieze said.

Tigaro suddenly raised her voice as if in a panic. “Oh, damn it!”

The two girls sitting to my fore were shaken by the outburst.

“H-Huh? Why ‘damn it’? What is it?” Oltea asked.

“Did you see devil flies already?!” said Frieze.

“No, no. Nothing like that. I just forgot to bring my money! I’m sorry to ask, Kaito, but could you spot me the fee for lodging?”

“Spot you? I’ll just cover it.”

“But...are you sure?”

“Of course. You’re my friend, Tigaro. There’s no need to be modest about asking for help.”

“I’m happy to hear you say so, but...I’m your friend too, so it wouldn’t be fair for you to be the only one paying everybody else’s way all the time,” Tigaro said.

At those words, Frieze and Oltea both dropped their shoulders a bit.

“Now that she mentions it... I’m sorry about that too, Kaito,” said Frieze.

“I guess I’ve always just been on the receiving end, huh?” said Oltea.

“You aren’t doing anything wrong, Oltea,” said Frieze. “I’m the one who’s getting ten percent of our rewards.”

“There’s no need to worry about that. If it weren’t for you two, I wouldn’t even be able to accept those requests. That’s worthy enough of compensation. Besides, your incredible ears bring a lot to the table too!” I said.

“You think that stuff is worth compensating us for?” Tigaro asked.

“Absolutely. All of your ears—including you, Tigaro—have a value that money can’t replace.”

“I-I see. If you really feel that way, then after this, I’ll let you touch them all you want,” Tigaro said in a slightly embarrassed voice. I’d been allowed to feel them for a bit at the welcome party, but she had never let me touch them in the presence of other people before. It made me happy to be given the opportunity to pet her ears openly, like I did with Oltea’s and Frieze’s.

“And my ears too, of course!” said Frieze.

“You can touch mine a bunch too!” added Oltea.

“Thanks! I look forward to it!” I said excitedly. My list of things to look forward to after all this had just grown by one. As we continued to enjoy our conversation, I lowered our altitude until we touched down in front of the mansion.

“Ahhhh, I missed you, solid ground...” Oltea said.

“I think that’s the longest trip we’ve taken so far,” I said.

“Thanks for the hard work, Kaito. Are you tired after all that?” Frieze asked.

“I feel fine. Any fatigue I might’ve felt got washed away chatting with you all!” I said. Additionally, the long trip had satisfied my desire to use my beams. Compared to firing off Death Beam, Stick Beam and Jet Beam felt a bit short, but it had been a pleasant time nonetheless. I was happy.

“So, Chestnut...did you feel all right with flying?” I asked. She had hardly opened her mouth the entire time we were in the air. Noticing her silence and worrying for her, Tigaro had tried to occupy her with conversation, but she had only responded with the bare minimum.

She was gazing idly upward at the sky as I asked. Hearing my words, she looked back down and smiled in my direction.

“It was a wonderful experience... The scenery is stunning from way up there. I could get lost just staring. Thanks for the fun time, Kaito,” she said, looking genuinely spellbound. She must have been a nature lover. I was worried that she had been so quiet because she was scared, but being stunned into silence by the view was about as good a reaction as one could hope for.

Seeming reluctant to part ways, she continued, “I’ll call upon Mr. Monstro

and meet you back here.”

“Monstro’s probably gonna be surprised to see me back so soon. Takes three days by boat to get here.”

“Probably so, but more than that, I think he’ll be happy. He asked me to have you back in time for the night of the full moon,” Chestnut said. It was three days until the next full moon. Had she traveled by ship, Tigaro would barely have made it.

“Even if he wanted to apologize right away, why before the full moon?”

“In all likelihood, it has something to do with the Moonlight Feast.”

The Moonlight Feast?

Seeing my head tilted in inquiry, Chestnut began to explain. According to her, Monstro prepared food each and every day and had it sent to a man named Beelzé who lived nearby. He lived alone in a house that sat atop a precipitous cliff, and Tigaro’s job had been to bring him his meal each day.

Monstro always took great care in making the man’s dishes, but especially whenever the moon was at its fullest. On those nights, he put in a great deal more effort to make things special. Feeling that gourmet food demanded not only the best ingredients but also the most beautiful server, he always had the most attractive maid on the estate bring the food to Beelzé.

“Because the Moonlight Feast is an exceptional occasion, Monstro wanted Tigaro to come back and serve the food. Tigaro was always the most beautiful maid working at the mansion, you see.”

“Please, I’m not even cute...” Tigaro said, blushing.

“The only person who thinks that is you,” Chestnut said, letting a smile show. “Okay, I’ll be right back.” She gave us a quick bow and headed into the mansion.

Looking at the flower bed in front of the house, we made idle chatter while we waited.

“Pretty flowers, aren’t they?”

“These ones are used as ingredients in the cooking.”

“You can eat flowers?”

“I wonder what they taste like...”

And so forth.

“Ooh, Tigaro! You really came back home,” came the voice of a man from inside the house. As he stepped outside, we got a look at him. The man, perhaps in his mid-fifties, was slender in build and had large, dark circles under his eyes, which only accentuated his general appearance of poor health. I figured that he must have been Monstro, but he looked nothing like I had imagined he would. Having heard he was the mayor, I had pictured someone whose appearance reflected his affluence... Perhaps his role governing such a huge settlement kept him too busy for adequate sleep.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Monstro. My name is Kaito. I know you’re a very busy man—I must apologize for bothering you like this without warning.”

“Nonsense, I heard about why you came here from my maid. You’ve brought Tigaro back to me. I’m truly thankful for that kindness. When I heard about the way the Sword Saint saved the royal capital from certain destruction, I hoped I’d be lucky enough to have the chance to pay my respects to him in person some day, but... Well, to meet you like this is...”

Monstro spoke distractedly, repeatedly glancing over my shoulder with an awkward disquiet in his eyes. The object of his fixation was the woman standing half hidden behind my back: Tigaro. As if discovering her resolve, she stepped out into the open to show her face.

“Is it true that you want to apologize to me?” she asked.

“U-Uh, yes. Of course, it’s true. I was not myself that day... I’ve since sworn that I’ll never again treat any of my maids so cruelly. Which is why... Which is why I’m asking you to come back to the estate! Please, I beg you to return. Like this!” he said, and bowed very deeply. It was an unthinkable move from someone with his personality, and Tigaro’s eyes widened in confusion at the sight.

“I-It’s all right. I understand. You can lift your head now.”

“Then do you...forgive me?”

“Not for raising your hand against me, no. But I don’t blame you for firing me. Thanks to your dismissal, I was able to meet Kaito.”

“...I heard about that from Chestnut. So, you’re an asset of Kaito’s these days,” he said, then paused. “And how much are you paid for your services?”

“Five gold coins...”

“I’ll pay you double that! Please, just come back and work for me again.”

“It’s not a question of money. It’s about your character. I’d still choose Kaito over you even if he weren’t paying me a cent,” Tigaro said, speaking clearly and leaving no room for misinterpretation.

Monstro’s face ran red with impatience. “Th-Then at least let me apologize for being so rude to you!”

“The apology you already gave was plenty. Besides, it isn’t me you need to apologize to now; it’s Chestnut.”

“O-Of course I apologize to Chestnut! But still, even her forgiveness wouldn’t satisfy me. So, so... Ah, right! Let me make it up to you by hosting you for the night. Kaito and the rest are all welcome to join you, of course. That would be no problem at all,” Monstro stammered. His desire to atone must have been overwhelming, for he was frantically bobbing his head. His remorse seemed genuine. There was likely no need to remind him of his promise never to act cruelly toward his maids again. For that reason, we’d probably be fine to stay. Besides, I wanted to ask him about the stampede anyways.

“What do you say, everyone? Should we take him up on it?” I asked.

“Well, we haven’t decided where to stay tonight yet anyways,” Oltea said.

“I’m fine with it,” Frieze said.

Tigaro, seeing our curiosity piqued, let out a sigh.

“All right. If everyone else is fine with it, then I guess we can stay for just one night,” she said.

“Thank you! Oh, thank you all so much! I’ll pull out all the stops and give you nothing but the best hospitality. You won’t regret it, I promise!”

With our night's lodging decided upon, relief set upon Monstro's face. He looked as though we had saved him.

We followed Monstro's lead as he brought us to the rooms we'd be spending the night in. The elegant three-floor home was sufficiently well-appointed for all of us to be assigned our own individual chambers. The spacious rooms, around twelve tatami in size with hardwood floors, were sparsely furnished, with no more than a bed and full-length mirror in each. With nothing in particular on the agenda, I was looking forward to heading into town and shopping a bit. After thinking it over, though, I realized that overburdening myself with extra luggage would make the trip home difficult. There was always the option of returning home via boat, but at this distance, doing so would take up three entire days. Being jostled around on the water for that long would end up wearing everyone out. I would have to endure suppressing my urge to collect for a little while longer.

In the meantime, I decided to sit down on the bed and look out the window. From my room on the third floor, I had an unbroken view of the entirety of Port City. It looked like the kind of town that would be full of life even in the dead of night. This far up on the lofty hill that hosted Monstro's mansion, no lively voices or urban bustle could be heard, but surely a trip down to the city below would reveal streets packed to the brim with activity.

"It's quite the peaceful scene..."

That a horde of more than ten thousand monsters lurked less than a hundred kilometers from this very spot was almost unthinkable. The scene of tranquility that spread in all directions beneath my window was thanks to Monstro's deeds too. Were it not for him, this whole area would have been reduced to nothing but a wasteland thirty years ago.

"So, how *did* you stop the stampede, anyways?" I wondered aloud. To halt the advance of more than ten thousand devil flies was no small feat. To conventional thought, it wasn't even possible. To drive the entire swarm away all at once... The monsters must have had some kind of weak point. The way that some insects, for example, hated smoke. He must have discovered a

weakness in the devil flies, targeted it directly, and cast them all out in one go.

The way the King had told it, Monstro had so thoroughly lost himself in the moment that afterward, he didn't even remember how he'd managed to drive the devil flies out. Maybe, though, if I asked him enough other questions about that time, I would be able to figure out some sort of countermeasure based on the information he could provide.

As I was thinking all of that over, the sound of a reserved knocking on my door snapped me out of it. I turned to see Tigaro enter the room.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing, I was just bored and thought I'd come see what you were up to. Am I interrupting...?"

"No. As you can see, I'm not up to much of anything myself."

"Right..." she said. Tigaro's face was tinged with nervousness as she glanced at my bed. "Can I...sit with you?"

"Of course," I said, smiling to reassure her. She came over and shyly sat down next to me on the mattress. A moment passed as she made fleeting, sidelong glances in my direction and restlessly rubbed her thighs together.

"Uh, um... Do you...remember what we talked about earlier?"

"Earlier?"

"About, uh...about me letting you touch my ears."

"I remember. Do you maybe want me to touch them now?" I asked.

Tigaro's reply was a very small nod. "I wanted to pay you back as soon as I could, and...well, there aren't so many chances for just the two of us to be alone, you know?"

"Having your ears touched in front of other people is a little embarrassing, then?"

"Exactly. It's a man touching a precious part, you know? It's... It's kind of like being kissed, I guess..."

Like being kissed? It didn't seem anything like being kissed. For one thing, the

sensation was entirely dissimilar. For another, Tigaro had never reacted to my touching Oltea's and Frieze's ears as if she were watching me kiss them.

Ultimately, it must have just come down to Tigaro being an exceedingly shy person. I was glad she was willing to endure the embarrassment for the sake of returning the favor, but...

"Don't feel like you have to push yourself if you're uncomfortable with any of this, okay?"

"I'm not pushing my... Okay, I am pushing myself a little bit, but it's okay if it's you touching me. You're not just any guy, Kaito. You're special."

"Thank you, I'm happy to hear it," I said. Tigaro calling me "special" was proof that I had earned her genuine trust.

Shameful is the man who spurns a woman's invitation, I thought to myself, recalling the saying. Tigaro had mustered up the courage to come all the way to my room, so I had no choice but to pet her ears.

"I'm going to start rubbing them, okay?"

"Y-Yeah. As much as you like..." Tigaro said, her face looking bashful. She knelt down on the bed directly opposite me and adjusted her posture for ease of access. I reached out to lay a hand on her tigerlike ears.

As soon as my hand met her fur, it happened:

"Kaitooooo, are you there?"

"We came to hang out!"

Oltea and Frieze entered the room. That same instant, Tigaro stiffened, sitting upright so fast it was like the crack of a whip.

"Ah, Tigaro came too!" said Oltea.

"Maybe she wanted Kaito to pet her ears, eh?" Frieze ventured.

"N-No! This is, I just... Right! There was some trash stuck to my ear and I needed his help to get it off!"

"If that's the case, then why is Kaito grinning like that?" Oltea asked. The two of them knew exactly how my face looked whenever I rubbed their ears. It was

impossible to deceive them about this.

“Poor Tiga is a little bashful, isn’t she?” Frieze said with a smug, know-it-all look on her face. “Why, she’d go stark red in the face just seeing a man and woman hold hands!”

“Oh? She’s so innocent,” said Oltea, smiling at Tigaro with narrow eyes as she teased.

Tigaro’s face was getting redder and redder. “Not true, I’ve known about stuff for years already! I’m already eighteen!”

“Oh? So you’re not embarrassed?”

“I’m not even a little bit embarrassed! Kaito, you can rub them more! Show these two that I’m okay with that!”

“Okay, thanks!” I said. It was clear to see that Tigaro was pushing herself but also wanted to preserve her dignity as their elder. She had to make a show of it. To be touching an ear like hers without also rubbing it a bit was torture, so I took advantage of her permission immediately.



“How is that? Does it feel good?” she asked me.

“Feels amazing... Your ears are so soft and fluffy, Tigaro. They’re appealing enough for me to want to keep petting them forever.”

“P-Pet them forever, huh? Does that mean...that you want to always be together?”

“Of course I’d like to always be together. Wow, Tigaro. Your ears really are the best...”

“R-Really? If... If you say so, Kaito, I wouldn’t mind staying by your side...” Tigaro said. She turned her face, now bright red, downward. Seeing how much I was enjoying her ears, Oltea and Frieze enviously joined us on the bed.

“You can touch my ears however much you want too, you know,” Oltea said.

“You like mine too, right, Kaito?” Frieze asked.

“Yes, I love both of your ears. Can I pet them?”

“Of course,” they each said in turn, happily nodding their heads. I rubbed their ears, alternating between each set now available to me. *Ahh, if only I had three hands*, I thought to myself. If I did, I would be able to touch the ears on all three of their heads at the same time...

As I was enjoying the lovely moment, someone’s stomach made a little growl. Oltea, finding the noise amusing, let out a chuckle.

“That was quite the noise. Who was that?” she said.

“N-Not me, but...?” said Oltea.

“It was me...” An embarrassed Frieze raised her hand. “Actually, to tell the truth, we came in here to ask Kaito if he wanted to get some food with us.”

“Aah, so that’s why you were wandering around in the hallway,” I said. Frieze had been the first one shown to her room, so she didn’t know which chambers the rest of us had been assigned. Oltea must have retrieved her and shown her the way here when she decided to come to my room.

I was pretty hungry myself. We’d prepared for the long trip with a hearty breakfast but hadn’t yet eaten anything for lunch. The sun was sinking in the

sky; we probably had about one hour left before it set. It was too late for lunch and slightly too early for dinner. No matter which way you sliced it, eating right now would be a bit of a half measure. Even so, there could be no abandoning Frieze to her hunger.

“Well, shall we go and eat, then?” I said.

“If we’re having a meal, I think we should have Monstro cook it for us,” Tigaro said as we all stood up from the bed. “He said he’d show us hospitality, right? Food is just about all he’s capable of in that area.”

“Is Monstro’s cooking good?” Frieze asked. Tigaro reacted to her expression of interest with a muddled expression that reflected her mixed feelings.

“I don’t like Monstro at all, but even I’ve got to admit that he’s a good cook. That’s the one thing about him I do like. Sometimes there’s leftovers from the dish he serves to that old man Beelzé, and while it’s not food made for me...it’s really delicious. There were even times when some of the maids cried tasting his food because it’s so good.”

“Food that’s so good it can make you cry...”

“I would absolutely love to try a taste of that...”

Oltea and Frieze were both now desperately curious to try the man’s cooking. Listening to Tigaro’s answer had made me hungrier and hungrier the more she spoke. And then, as if on cue:

Knock, knock came the sound of someone’s knuckles on the door.

“Come in,” I said, and Chestnut opened it.

“Ah, so this is where you all were. Preparations are complete for tonight’s meal. Your presence has been requested in the dining room,” she said.

“Yes, I’ve been waiting to hear that!” said Frieze, her voice buoyant with anticipation. Together, we made for the first-floor dining room.

An appetizing scent was in the air as we entered the dining room to see the night’s meal lined up on a lengthy table. Tender-looking steak, generously garnished salad, vividly green potage, a beautiful arrangement of fruits bursting with color—

“This all looks delicious!”

“It’s incredible!”

Just seeing all the gourmet cuisine on offer, stuff we’d never find in the cheap food halls we frequented, put Oltea and Frieze in high spirits. They immediately took their seats, grabbed their forks and knives, and gazed out at the spread with stars in their eyes.

Monstro was watching them from the corner of the dining room. One would have expected a chef in his position to feel blessed, but, on the contrary, Monstro wore a pained, bitter expression while he took in the scene. It was difficult to understand why he would look the way he did while his work was receiving praise... Was he just tired?

“Monstro, did you make all of this yourself?” I asked.

“Yes, I am responsible for all of the cooking here,” Monstro replied.

“Making so much food every single day must be quite the burden.”

“Even if I had a mind to, preparing food is the one task I am unable to entrust anyone else with.”

Hybrids, unable to use magic, would certainly have a harder time making use of a kitchen. Even so, that obstacle could be overcome by hiring humans. The fact that he was unwilling to do even that suggested an obsessive particularity with the quality of his food.

“Please, enjoy it while it’s hot. I hope it suits your tastes...”

“Well, it certainly looks delicious!” said Frieze.

“Let’s dig right in!” said Oltea.

“Absolutely. Let’s eat!” I said, putting my palms together. I decided to start with the meat. When I slid my knife through the steak, it parted gently, requiring no pressure to cut. I put a piece in my mouth and it melted atop my tongue. It was exquisitely seasoned, and before I even knew it, I was on my second bite.

“This is remarkably delicious...” I said.

“This one is excellent too,” Oltea said. Taking her recommendation, I tried a bite of the potage. *Is this...spinach soup?* I thought. It was creamy, with a velvety smooth texture and none of the bitterness that usually comes with spinach. The rich, mellow flavor filled my mouth as I ate.

“Tiga was eating food like this every single day...” Frieze said.

“She led a life of tremendous luxury, didn’t she?” Oltea said.

“Well...at least as far as food was concerned, sure. You don’t normally get to have food this good,” Tigaro said, savoring a spoonful of potage. She seemed to genuinely enjoy Monstro’s cooking even though she hated him personally. Her mouth curled into a smile and she murmured, “It’s so good...” in a small voice.

Tigaro wouldn’t be convinced to return to the mansion, but Monstro’s hospitality had nonetheless been a great success. One would think seeing it all come together would have him smiling, but his expression remained downcast. His cooking was being praised to no end, so why hadn’t he shown even a hint of pleasure since our arrival? Perhaps, I thought, it had to do with his poor health.

“Is something wrong?” I asked after a pause.

“A-Ah, no. Nothing. Oh, right, there is wine as well,” he said.

“Ooh, there’s wine too? I’d absolutely love to try some!” Oltea said.

“I’ll take you up on that!” said Frieze.

“Don’t you two have your Great Forest survey tomorrow?” Tigaro pressed them. Reminded by her inquiry, they both looked a bit dejected at the thought.

“Monstro went through all this work to prepare everything for us. We ought to enjoy some of the drinks. It’ll be fine,” I said. The only person who would be going out on the survey tomorrow was me. I’d stealthily use Cure Beam on myself before leaving, rendering the potential hangover a nonissue.

“If you say so, Kaito!” said Frieze.

“If I’ve got the okay, then I’m drinking!” said Oltea.

Their voices were buoyant with excitement at the knowledge they’d be allowed to drink.

After devouring Monstro's meal with relish, I was relaxing in bed when a knock sounded at my door. "Come in," I said through the door.

Chestnut opened it and came in. "My apologies for barging in while you are enjoying your downtime. I came to inform you that a bath has been drawn. Will you be taking advantage, Mr. Kaito?"

"A bath, huh? Could be nice..." I said.

Reacting as though my answer was somehow unsatisfactory, Chestnut made a strange face. "Are you...not fond of baths, Mr. Kaito?"

"No, it's just that I usually use Clean Beam—" I said, then caught myself. "I usually use magic to clean myself."

"Magic like that exists?"

"Sure," I said, "like this," and, since she didn't seem to know what to picture, I fired Clean Beam in a small burst. I raised my hand up, partially obscuring the sunbeams that shone into the room, and used the beam on my own body. Soap-like bubbles began to spread around me and washed away all the grime and stickiness left on my face from eating.

"It can take care of any dirt or uncleanness," I said.

"Quite the convenient bit of magic... Still, the mansion's bath is awfully splendid as well if you're interested."

"It's that great, huh?"

"It really is," Chestnut said with a dreamy expression. "Before Mr. Monstro took me on, I'd never seen a bath so huge and immaculate. For me, 'taking a bath' was just wiping myself down with a washcloth... It's been an absolute dream to have access to the mansion's facilities ever since starting work here. It puts me in a good mood every single day."

Though magic had driven the development of this world in science's stead, hybrids lacked the ability to make use of it. While simple things like water taps were conveniently touchless appliances for humans, they were inaccessible to hybrids because they were really magic items. Regardless of whether the

supernatural power in question yielded water by causing it to flow or just by controlling a pump made no difference: either way, only humans were able to take advantage. Hybrids, on the other hand, had no choice but to repeatedly haul buckets of water between the river and the bathtub when they wanted to bathe. With magical power, humans were even able to draw water that was already hot, whereas hybrids had to gather and burn firewood in order to heat theirs up. With so many hurdles to clear under normal circumstances, it was no wonder that the ability to take a bath daily put a smile on Chestnut's face.

"I see. So Monstro sets up a bath for you every day, then?"

"He does. Cleaning it is still the maid's responsibility, but every day after he finishes preparing our food, he goes out of his way to fill up a bath just for us."

"Just for you and the other maids? Does he not take one?"

"Mr. Monstro is always confined to the kitchen until late into the night. He has to stay back to prepare for the following day as well as think over the menu. He gets in the bath much later than we do."

"Always working late... Makes sense. He did seem pretty tired tonight."

"Yes. Tigaro is correct to say that he's rather severe, but...even so, there are many things for which I am grateful to Mr. Monstro as well. He takes care of us, he's dependable... It's true that he's obsessive about his cooking, though. I couldn't help with that even if I wanted to."

So Monstro stayed shut away in the kitchen late into the night working on the food he was so highly particular about. Tigaro had said that the maids were served leftovers. If so, that meant that Monstro was putting in all that work for Beelzé's sake alone.

Why on earth did he go so far just for one man?

"This Beelzé person: what's he like?" I asked.

"I don't know much about him, but...I have heard that Mr. Monstro has long been indebted to him for some service rendered in the past. For that reason, our Master has prepared his food every day for thirty years now. He hasn't skipped even one meal."

“For *thirty years...*” I said. To still be paying off a debt after such a long time... What could Beelzé have done, saved his life or something?

Timing-wise, it lined up with the stampede. Perhaps Beelzé had contributed to Monstro’s successful dispersion of the devil fly swarm. It could be that Monstro had offered to cover all of Beelzé’s food in return for being allowed to take all of the credit.

There was another possible explanation. Though I would prefer not to think so, it could be the case that Beelzé had some kind of dirt on Monstro. No matter how delicious, though, demanding food for thirty years was strange however you looked at it. If that were the explanation, it would mean that just for the sake of good food, Beelzé hadn’t left home in three decades. No trips or outings of any kind. If he really did have something on Monstro, it was far likelier that he would demand money, not food.

But while I was interested in Beelzé, it was more pressing that I decide what to do about the bath. I’d already freshened up with Clean Beam, but I did have some time to kill. I didn’t have anything better to do, and I’d been working so hard lately—why not take a little bath?

“Would you please show me the way to the bath?” I asked.

“Certainly,” said Chestnut and did just that, guiding me to a dressing room on the first floor. The antechamber had been meticulously attended to, and a feeling of cleanliness pervaded the room. A large mirror, spotlessly clean and without even a spot of fog, was hung on one wall. The tiles covering the floor were shining, no darkened areas or smudges to be seen, and there was even a basket full of crisp, white towels that looked brand-new.

“Please, take your time and enjoy yourself,” Chestnut said and politely bowed her head before returning to the hallway. Once the door to the dressing room had fully closed, I quickly disrobed and transferred to the bath.

The wide, extensive space was thickly shrouded in steam. A small, latticed window in one wall did its best to ventilate the room but evidently fell a bit short of the task. The bathtub, similar to the kind found in onsen ryokan back home, was itself quite large. After rinsing myself off, I submerged myself in its waters and leisurely stretched out my legs.

The feeling of slipping into the bath was so pleasurable that without thinking, I let an “Ahhhh...” escape my lips. Though the heavy cloud of steam made the air in the room quite hot, the temperature of the water was just right.

I felt my muscles begin to loosen, the bath seeming to ease my accumulated fatigue. *How many years has it been since I've taken a bath like this?* I wondered to myself. I'd gotten into the habit of only taking showers. With how good the bath felt, I started thinking that someday I'd like to go on a tour of multiple hot springs. Maybe, I thought, I could even bring some friends along to enjoy it with.

But...I was the only man in the group.

I had been a person with no interests at all. Since coming to this world, I'd developed a taste for all kinds of new things, but women still weren't one of them. I was overflowing with love for animal ears, but the object of that fixation had nothing to do with gender. It couldn't really be said that it had anything to do with women's bodies. Though I couldn't vouch for the future, that was where things stood in the present. For that reason, I had no problem with the idea of mixed bathing, but my three friends would feel differently. After all, it wasn't like we were all kids. Even though they held me in high regard and cherished our friendship, they still wouldn't want to expose their naked bodies in my presence.

They could enter the bath wrapped in towels, but sometimes towels went transparent when wet... It would be fine as long as there was some surefire way to keep their bodies covered.

“...Wait a second,” I said, suddenly remembering something from the previous world. One time, when I was searching for something resembling a hobby to keep my attention, I had turned on the TV late at night. Some anime, the kind broadcast only after dark, had come on. In it, there was a scene in which a woman's body had shone with light. An unnatural glow that seemed to come from no particular light source had conveniently hidden her chest and pelvic region from view. The light had been left completely unexplained by the story. Its origin was an enigma, but it *was* a light. My beams, too, were made of light. They, too, could be made to radiate out from just one part of the body.

Of course, even if their bodies were glowing, they'd still be taking off their clothes, which was nerve-racking for girls of their age regardless of how well they were covered up.

As I was thinking it over, I was suddenly interrupted by voices from the dressing room. They were fairly loud, so I was able to make out who was speaking without straining my ears: two of the voices were full of energy, merrily bantering like children, while the third was chiding them.

Oltea, Frieze, and Tigaro.

"Didn't Chestnut say Kaito was already in the bath?! At least cover yourselves with towels or something!" Tigaro said.

"But if we aren't naked, then we can't fully enjoy the bath!" said Frieze.

"I haven't taken a bath in such a long time! I'm so excited!" said Oltea.

"We'll go in once Kaito finishes up!"

"But it's so much more fun if everyone goes in together!"

"Hold on, Kaito! We're coming!"

It seemed that they'd come here under the influence of alcohol after learning my whereabouts from Chestnut. Tigaro was frantically trying to stop the two of them from following through on the impulse. Tigaro hadn't had much to drink, but Oltea and Frieze had gone pretty far with the wine.

With a loud bang, the door to the bath flew open.

"Whoooa! This place is huge!"

"You could swim in this thing!"

Oltea and Frieze were standing there, naked as the day they were born. Despite the fact that they were completely exposed to me, they showed no sign of caring. It didn't seem like something they would have done sober, and I worried that they would be mortified after the drunkenness wore off... I decided to try out the method I had just devised in order to make them believe I hadn't seen anything.

Suddenly, light began to emanate from their chest and hips and their eyes

grew wide with surprise. Easily amused, they each began to poke at their glowing areas.

“Eh?! Frieze! You’re glowing!”

“Oltea, so are you!”

As I was explaining that I had fired a beam of shining light—Shine Beam—I used it on myself as well, completing the preparations for our bath.

“Kaito, Clean Beam, please!” called Frieze. The washing area had soap, of course, but Frieze must have felt that Clean Beam would be more effective. Oltea joined her in begging me to wash the two of them with my beam.

Firing Clean Beam, I rained a shower of bubbles down on Frieze and Oltea. After the bubbles passed over them, water splashed into the air as they leaped into the bath. As they completely submerged in the comfortably warm water, their faces melted into expressions of pure pleasure.

“H-Hey,” came Tigaro’s voice suddenly. She was peeking through an opening in the door. “That beam... Would it work even if you used it over clothes?”

“It should. Do you want to come in too, Tigaro?”

“W-Well... It would be a little lonely if I just went in all by myself, so...” she said in an embarrassed mumble. As I used Shine Beam on her, light began to faintly glow through the bust of her maid’s uniform.

Tigaro withdrew from the room before returning a little while later to nervously enter the bath, her chest and pelvic area concealed by dazzling light. Be that as it may, things wouldn’t have been much different without the light: Tigaro was hiding her breasts and everything below her abdomen with her hands. Oltea and Frieze smiled over at her.

“Come on, Tiga, the sooner you get in the better!” said Frieze.

“The water feels incredible!” said Oltea.

Perhaps spurred on by their encouragement, Tigaro mustered all of her courage and removed her hands.

“You...can’t see anything either, right, Kaito?”

“Everything’s completely hidden,” I said.

“I-I see. Good, that makes me feel better... By the way, your body is shining too, right?” she asked.

“Absolutely sparkling,” I said.

“I guess it’s all right, then...” she said and, taking a relieved breath, started rinsing off. Once done, she asked me to use Clean Beam on her.

Seeing her, Oltea and Frieze began to laugh.

“Tiga, your face is as red as a tomato!” said Frieze.

“You’re embarrassed!” prodded Oltea.

“You two are gonna understand how I feel perfectly once you aren’t dead drunk! I hope you’re ready!” Tigaro retorted, blushing with increasing intensity as they teased her.

Night had fallen over the mansion and the moon was shining brightly in the sky.

“I made a terrible mistake...” Frieze said.

“I wish I could go back in time and hit myself...” Oltea said.

After their bath, everyone had gathered in Kaito’s room to chat. At some point during their conversation, the veil of drunkenness seemed to have lifted from Oltea and Frieze. Remembering the way they had gotten completely naked and barged into the bath, they were holding their heads in shame and groaning.

Tigaro sighed, evidently tired of it all.

“That’s why I tried to stop you. I told you that you’d regret it later. You’ll keep ending up in these embarrassing situations if you don’t listen to the advice of people older than you!” she said.

“I know. I didn’t listen to you, Tiga...”

“I wish you’d slapped me or something to really make me stop...” said Oltea.

“I’d never be able to hit one of my friends... I just hope this experience teaches you to be a little more moderate with your drinking,” Tigaro said.

“I really didn’t plan to overdo it like that today. I mean, we’re supposed to go on our investigation of the Deep Woods tomorrow! But...that wine was just too delicious,” Oltea said.

“It tasted so different from how it smelled too. The moment you bring the glass to your nose, you get this delightful grape smell, but even though there’s that strong sweetness, the aftertaste is so crisp and—”

“I kept saying, ‘This is the last one, this is the last one,’ but I accidentally just kept drinking more and more...”

“You have poor self-control...” Tigaro said, trailing off.

“And your self-control is amazing, Tiga,” Frieze said.

“You stopped yourself after just one glass,” Oltea said, amazed. “I guess that maturity is only natural—you are eighteen, after all!”

“I don’t really think age has much to do with it...”

Tigaro couldn’t speak for Oltea, but the Frieze she had known hadn’t been so weak-willed. Frieze had become independent the day she turned fourteen, announcing even at that young age that she was going to go and become an adventurer. Originally, she and Tigaro were supposed to become adventurers together. In the end, Tigaro had become a maid—a position she’d now decided to leave behind—but Frieze had really done it. She’d gone and debuted as a real adventurer. Eventually, failing to earn a stable living that way, she had resorted to making wagers, but even then, she had always believed that she would emerge victorious. If she hadn’t been a strong-willed person, she would not have been able to persevere.

Still, here she was dealing with the fallout of drunkenly rushing naked into an occupied bath...

Surely this is due to Kaito’s influence on her.

Kaito was a truly reliable man. Having a dependable person like him by her side must have softened Frieze and weakened her resolve.

That's not such a bad thing, Tigaro thought to herself. Of course, seeing Frieze overdrink had made her worry, but being around someone whose benevolence you could presume upon was good for you. It was a happy thing that she was comfortable with her guard down.

Although...

"Even if I was drunk, barging into the bathroom naked like that was terrible of me... Kaito, do you have a beam that erases memories?" Frieze asked with a dejected look on her face.

"I don't think so," Kaito said with an awkward, strained smile. He continued, trying to ease their worries, "But I didn't even see anything to begin with. The beam hid everything right away."

"Hmm? Is that true?" Frieze asked.

"But I feel like there was a moment before my body started to glow... Am I just imagining that?" Oltea said.

"You must be. I mean, just think about it: if I had seen you two naked, would I be able to talk to you so calmly right now?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" Frieze said.

"You two are both cute," Kaito said to the girls, who had been looking at him with blank, confused expressions. "If I had seen a couple of cute girls like you naked, then surely my face would be turning red talking to you right about now."

Both of them began to blush at suddenly being called cute.

"R-Really? You think...that I'm cute?" asked Oltea.

"Not just my ears, but me? You think *I'm* cute?" asked Frieze.

"You're both cute. In fact, if I were about ten years younger, I'd probably be trying my best to get your attention," Kaito said.

"But you are young, Kaito! You look like you're sixteen!" Oltea said.

"Yeah, what Oltea said! Kaito, you look the same age as me!" Frieze shouted.

"Thank you, I'm happy to know you think I look young," Kaito said. His quick-

witted charm had earned a bright smile from each of them. Tigaro felt confident that the girls would use what they had learned today as an incentive to practice restraint when drinking in the future, so in the end, the crisis had turned out all right.

“Finally feeling relieved has honestly made me kinda sleepy...” Oltea said.

“We woke up pretty early today. Tomorrow is an early start as well. We should probably get to bed,” said Kaito.

“Agreed. I hope nothing happens in the Great Forest tomorrow...” said Oltea.

“There’s nothing for it but to pray that we don’t get attacked by devil flies,” Frieze said. Both of them wore anxious expressions. In truth, Kaito had already told Tigaro that he planned to carry out the investigation himself, but she intended to keep that secret safe. They were terrified of the mission, but they wouldn’t want Kaito to brave the danger alone. It was his worry that if they knew he intended to go solo, Oltea and Frieze would surely insist on tagging along.

The two of them weren’t children, though. Tigaro had said as much to Kaito, arguing that they would understand his intentions if he just communicated, but he had replied that he didn’t want them to be worried while he was gone. That was why he planned on leaving early in the morning and returning before Oltea and Frieze woke up.

The pieces were in place: it was already the small hours of the morning, and what’s more, Oltea and Frieze had both had enough to drink that, provided no one roused them, they would be soundly asleep until noon.

“Good night, everyone,” Kaito said.

“Good night,” the others replied in unison.

Tigaro, Oltea, and Frieze stepped out into the dimly lit hallway. Tigaro parted ways with the other girls and walked the corridor until she came to her assigned chambers. She was about to enter when something stopped her.

“Hmm?” Feeling someone’s gaze on her, she turned around. The passageway was long, and its many recesses swallowed up what little light there was. If anyone was there, they were too shrouded in darkness to be seen.

Maybe I'm just imagining things, she told herself and turned her eyes away. She entered her room. *It's so dark in here*, she thought. Moonlight was streaming in through the window, but compared to Kaito's room, it felt downright gloomy.

It had been a long time since she had been in a room quite so dark. At Kaito's house, the light in her room stayed on until he came to turn it off for her just before she slept, something Monstro hadn't once done for her.

The kitchen and bath remained well lit late into the evening, but not the maid's rooms. Those were pitch-black once darkness set in. Still, she'd had a room to herself, a clean bed to sleep in, delicious food every day, a wonderful bath to enjoy, and two gold coins to look forward to at the end of each month.

There was no doubt that Kaito was the kinder of the two, but...

Monstro...might not be such a terrible guy after all, she thought to herself. Of course, she could never forgive him for raising a hand against her friend, but Chestnut herself seemed not to hold a grudge, and Monstro *had* apologized to them both.

True, the man had a quick temper, but that kind of short fuse often came from sleep deprivation. His lack of sleep, of course, was the result of being so busy in the kitchen. The man worked so hard on the food that it was a detriment to his health, and yet still he treated his maids to the leftovers. There were women who had been dangerously thin upon their hiring who, after a few months in Monstro's employ, had begun to look healthy again.

He sent someone all the way to the royal capital just to apologize to me and then treated us all with such hospitality when I came back. It was thanks to him that I was able to send money back to my parents too... I shouldn't be so harsh. I need to stop holding such enmity toward him.

With her feelings sorted, Tigaro crawled into bed. It had been a momentous day, full of excitement. With everything having only recently come to an end, she hadn't had time to get all that tired. Still, after only a short time lying there, a feeling of fatigue began to slowly settle over her. Bit by bit, her drowsiness mounted until she finally fell asleep.

Almost.

In an instant, Tigaro's consciousness was revived. She gasped wordlessly. Something heavy weighed on her stomach, and pressure was being applied over her mouth. Her eyes jolted open and panic set in as the source of her sleep's disturbance came suddenly into view: Monstro, a knife clutched tightly in his right hand as he stood over her.

"Huh?!"

The moment she laid eyes on the blade, glinting in the moonlight, the blood drained from her face. She desperately tried to escape, wriggling her body in his grasp, but Monstro didn't yield an inch to her efforts. He pressed down on her mouth with incredible force as he restrained her. Pain mingled with dread and terror, all of it coming out as tears.

"I'm so *sorry*, Tigaro. I'm sorry, but you have to die."

"Mmm! Ngghm!"

"I'm so sorry... I'm sorry..." said Monstro, raising the tightly gripped knife.

Tigaro squeezed her eyes shut. One second passed, then two, then three...

The pain never came. Fearfully, Tigaro willed her eyes to open.

Monstro's face was contorted into a chaotic, terrible expression. He looked like he could burst into tears at any moment. The knife, still held high above his head, was repeatedly trembling back and forth in his increasingly shaky hands. And then—

"I-I... I can't do it. I can't kill you," Monstro said, his thin and feeble voice trailing off as his right hand became limp and fell to his side. The strength holding his left hand forcefully over her mouth likewise began to drain away.

Tigaro seized the moment and immediately shoved Monstro away. Once free, she bolted for the door and, almost falling over, threw herself through it and out into the hallway.

She screamed the name of the one man she could count on: "Kaito! Kaito!" She made for the room two doors down from her own, calling for him all the while, and burst into it.

Act 4: The Demon King of the South

That same evening.

“Kaito! Kaito!”

The sound of an urgently screaming voice coming from the hallway outside my bedroom forced my eyes open as I wondered, sleepily, what was going on. I woke up just as the door was thrown open. Tigaro, having suddenly barged in, climbed onto my bed.

“H-Help me!” she said, wrapping her arms tightly around my neck as she screamed, imploring my aid. Her fragile body trembled against mine, voice full of horror.

“What’s wrong? Did you have a scary dream or something?” I asked, rubbing her back. She pointed at the door.

“M-Monstro, he... My room, he came and...”

“To apologize?” I said after a pause. It would be strange for Tigaro to be so shaken by Monstro coming to apologize, but an uninvited guest in your room while trying to sleep could be scary. That being said, it didn’t seem like that was what she meant. Monstro had probably come for another reason.

“N-No! H-He tried to kill me! He tried...”

“To kill you?!” I said. It was absolutely unthinkable. The image of Monstro apologizing to Tigaro in front of the mansion was still seared into my retina. To think that the same man who I had watched lay bare his desire for atonement on that lawn would suddenly turn around and try to murder Tigaro... It was beyond belief.

That being said, it was also unthinkable that Tigaro would lie about something like that. No matter how much she hated Monstro, she wasn’t the kind of person who would falsely accuse someone just to bring about their downfall. If her words were indeed true, then his motive had to be revenge. Perhaps she had said something that angered him when he fired her, and using the apology

as a pretext, he had brought her back to the mansion so that he could keep her close and watch vigilantly for an opportunity to take her life.

It was nothing more than conjecture, of course. Without hearing his side of the story, I would simply be jumping to conclusions. It wasn't too late to make my judgment after speaking with him.

"Is Monstro still in your room?"

"I-I don't know... Maybe he ran away, but maybe he's still in there waiting for me to come back!"

"Okay, I'll go check it out."

"B-But he had a knife!" Tigaro said. She seemed not to want me going anywhere dangerous. She strengthened her grip around my neck, holding me tightly. I laid my hands on her shoulders and spoke reassuringly:

"It's all right. I'm strong. I'll be okay."

"B-But...if you get stabbed because of me, then... You don't want that, right?"

"Don't worry, okay? I promise, I won't get stabbed," I said in an effort to calm her nerves. Her grip loosened a bit. Gently, I separated myself from her. I rose and summoned Shield Beam in an oblong, rectangular form that resembled a policeman's riot shield.

When I stepped out into the hallway, I found Oltea and Frieze standing in the darkness. Both of them, it seemed, had been woken abruptly by the scream and had rushed to my room.

"Hey, what was that scream just now?" Oltea asked.

"It sounded like Tiga... But why was she calling out your name?" Frieze asked.

"Monstro attacked Tigaro with a knife," I explained. In the light cast by Shield Beam's glow, I saw their faces stiffen with shock.

"Monstro attacked her?!" Frieze said.

"Is Tigaro okay?!" Oltea asked.

"She's shaken up but doesn't seem to be injured," I said.

Relief setting in, the two of them looked to my shield.

“That shield... Are you going to fight Monstro with that?” Oltea asked.

“If all he has is a knife, then I can help too,” Frieze said.

“I’ll be fine on my own. I’d rather you two stay here with Tigaro and keep her company. She’s in my room, terrified.”

Oltea and Frieze nodded, urged me not to get hurt, and went into the room. I watched until they were safely inside to make sure and then went down the corridor to peer into Tigaro’s chambers. On the other side of the threshold, visible by the light of the moon streaming in through the window, Monstro was squatting atop the bed. A paring knife lay discarded on the floor by his side.

I sent magical energy into the panel embedded into the wall that governed the lights, and in an instant, they snapped on and illuminated the room. Monstro turned his eyes upward ever so slowly to look at me. His face was twisted into a terrible, chaotic expression.

“S-Sword Saint... P... Please, somehow. Please, save me...”

Monstro descended from the bed as if falling and placed both his hands humbly on the floor. An act to elicit sympathy and trick me into lowering my guard was...not at all what this appeared to be. He had abandoned his knife on the bed and, though he had always looked unwell, now had the haggard, emaciated appearance of a man hanging by a thread. His expression was genuine. It was the face of a man desperately begging for salvation from the bottom of his heart.

“Tell me what’s going on,” I said, dropping Shield Beam as I spoke. I had come here to save Tigaro, so why was the man who had tried to murder her asking for my help? I didn’t understand the situation at all.

“Th-The truth is—”

“Kaito! What’s going on?”

My companions must have been worrying about me, for just as Monstro began to open his mouth in reply, Frieze called my name from the hallway. Oltea and Tigaro were with her too, peering into the room from their vantage behind Frieze’s back.

“It doesn’t seem like Monstro has any hostility left in him,” I said in an attempt to ease their fears.

Tigaro’s anxious expression, however, remained unchanged. “How do we know he isn’t just waiting for the perfect moment to strike?” she asked in a hesitant voice.

“I-I’m not... I’m really, truly sorry,” Monstro said. He pressed his forehead against the floor in shame, but his self-abasement did nothing to curb Tigaro’s suspicions.

She looked at him with doubt in her eyes. “But you said the same thing earlier today. Wasn’t that just a show you put on to disarm me too?”

Monstro, listening to the distrust with which Tigaro needled him, lifted his head to look at her. With a pained, apologetic expression, he began to speak words of repentance.

“I’m truly sorry... I didn’t think I had any choice except to kill you, but...I couldn’t... I can’t kill anyone, I... Especially not a poor kid who enjoyed my food so much. I-I can’t bring myself to kill...” Seemingly overcome with remorse, he spoke softly and feebly. It didn’t seem at all like a performance. Tigaro was looking at Monstro’s pathetic form in bewilderment.

“B-But you...you think you can just do anything and get away with it as long as your victim is a hybrid, don’t you? You said as much when you fired me, right?”

“I-I was on edge, irritated because the wine had been knocked over... I am so sorry for my cruel words...” he said. I wasn’t familiar with the details of the incident to which they referred, but I could see that Monstro regretted it intensely.

“I understand why you wouldn’t want to believe him, Tiga, but shouldn’t we at least hear him out?” Frieze suggested.

“I think so too. It won’t be too late to judge what kind of person he is after we’ve listened to his story,” Oltea said.

I nodded in agreement, adding my support to their efforts to calm Tigaro before continuing to question Monstro. “Just a minute ago you asked me to ‘save you.’ Could you tell us what the situation is?”

“I-It’s...” Monstro began speaking but, perhaps lacking the courage to speak frankly, quickly sank back into silence. After some time, he resumed in a shaky, uncertain voice. “This town is going to be destroyed by the stampede on the night of the next full moon.”

The stampede?!

“Has there been a movement of the devil flies?” I asked.

“N-No, they’re still in the Great Forest, but... As it is, they’re set to completely swallow up this town soon.”

“How can you say that so definitively?”

“B-Because...we’ll provoke Beelzé’s wrath,” Monstro said.

Beelzé, I thought, remembering the old man who lived near the mansion. Tigaro, who had worked as Beelzé’s server for two years and brought him all of his meals, widened her eyes in confusion.

“He’s definitely a tough guy to please and scary when mad, but he’s just an old man. Even I was able to win him over by trying my best. Besides, what does he have to do with the stampede?”

Monstro bristled at Tigaro’s question. Looking around the room as if checking his surroundings and speaking low, in a stifled voice, as if afraid to be heard, he began to lay things bare and answer her.



“Because Beelzé is... Beelzé is the *Lord of the Flies*.”

“The Lord of the Flies?! That old man?!”

“‘The Lord of the Flies’—that means that he commands all the devil flies, right?!”

“The level A monster otherwise known as the Demon King of the South?!” I asked. I hadn’t been aware of him until my conversation with the King, but I understood that his existence was common knowledge. Even among the well-known threats of this world, the Lord of the Flies was regarded with particular dread, especially by those of the continent’s southern region.

“But...I served his food for two years and I didn’t see anything monsterlike at all,” Tigaro said.

“That’s how Vlad was too,” Oltea said.

“He was a nasty man, but I never suspected him of being a monster,” Frieze agreed.

“A powerful enough monster with high enough intelligence behaves just like a human,” I said. “You can’t tell the difference unless they slip up and show their true colors.”

“I-If that’s true, then... Monstro, how did you see through Beelzé’s disguise?” Tigaro asked.

“I... I didn’t see through anything. I’ve always known,” Monstro said. He went on to explain that it had been thirty years since his first encounter with Beelzé. In order to save money with the eventual goal of opening a restaurant, he had accompanied a group of adventurers as their cook. It had happened one night when the band was making camp in the woods.

For having the audacity to be out of meat, Monstro had been coerced into venturing deep into the forest to hunt down an animal for use in that night’s dish. Unable to do so, Monstro had turned back to the campsite only to find that everyone present had seemingly been massacred while he was away. Devil flies, so numerous as to be uncountable, had blotted out the sky. Sitting among the corpses was Beelzé. It was then that Monstro had realized he was seeing

the man who commanded the swarm: the Lord of the Flies.

Then, as Monstro was begging for his life, Beelzé's interest had instead fallen on the man's cooking. Intrigued by Monstro's food, the monster had proposed a deal.

"Beelzé... Beelzé just wanted a peaceful life enjoying delicious food. If I could make that a reality for him, he promised to grant my wish in return, and..."

"What did you ask for?"

Monstro cast his eyes downward with regret.

"Even though I was saving money to open a restaurant, I was fed up with spending all my time sucking up to other people. If I could just become distinguished or important, I wouldn't have to spend my energy currying favor or flattering people, so...I thought about it and I asked him to help me make a performance out of driving away the stampede," Monstro said.

And as a result, Monstro had become the hero who saved the town and, accordingly, its appointed mayor. Up to that point, his wishes had been granted, but then every day for thirty years afterward, he had been forced to continue waiting on Beelzé's every whim.

It was an ironic story, but it had a twisted logic: without becoming rich, Monstro wouldn't have been able to provide the quiet gourmet life that Beelzé had demanded.

Had Monstro declined Beelzé's offer, he would have been killed, so it wasn't as though he could be blamed for his predicament.

"I see. So that's why you got so angry when that wine bottle you'd chosen to pair with the meal got knocked over. Because if Beelzé were displeased, then he'd destroy the entire town..." Tigaro said.

"Ahh, right... I feel genuinely awful about raising my hand to Chestnut, but...I had to be very careful to restrain myself so that I wouldn't do it again."

Even if nothing like that had gone wrong, Monstro had been living in fear of Beelzé's ire for thirty years. It would be hard on anyone's mental health to live in constant fear of being killed. Under those circumstances, with stress

mounting endlessly, it was little wonder that he would end up taking it out on the maids.

Knowing that he was liable to hurt his staff at some point, he must have decided to only hire hybrids. If Monstro were to strike a human employee, it would become an incident and could result in the loss of both his mayorship and personal fortune. If that were to happen, he would be unable to get Beelzé his daily meal.

“I think I understand the situation, but why haven’t you just tried to run away?” I asked. Surely Monstro, as just one person, would have been able to make it quite far had he attempted to flee. Breaking his promise would mean the certain destruction of the town, but at least he would be free from the terror personally inflicted on him at Beelzé’s hands...

“It’s impossible. There’s nowhere to go. My own hometown has already been ravaged by the stampede. My father, my store, my friends... All erased so thoroughly it was like they’d never existed in the first place. I don’t want anyone else to ever have to feel like this...” he said, though he looked to me for salvation.

“I-I’m at my absolute limit. I can’t bear a single day more of this cursed life. I don’t care if you look down on me or think me pathetic. I’ll even publicly announce that I had a part in the stampede, I’ll accept losing my seat as mayor—I don’t care. Even if I end up penniless...I just want to enjoy cooking like I used to. If I could just do that, it would be enough...”

“There’s no need for any public proclamation. Even if you did have a part in the stampede, the fact is that you’ve been protecting this town for thirty years now,” I said.

It was true that Monstro’s current status was the work of Beelzé, but the wealth afforded by that position was crucial to maintaining the tranquil life of continual feasting that his captor demanded. Without context, the idea of someone giving safe harbor to a monster sounded bad, but in this case, betraying the monster would have directly resulted in the commencement of the stampede. Even were we to consult with the guild, we would probably hear that there was no guarantee it was even possible to exterminate Beelzé. For

that reason, the best thing for Monstro to do was keep cooking the man's food.

Still, we couldn't just leave and consign him to his fate. There was, after all, still something I needed to ask him. Even after all his explanations up to this point, it remained unclear why he had felt the need to kill Tigaro.

"Why did you try to kill Tigaro?"

"Well, I..." Monstro began, glancing at her. He continued, his face betraying the difficulty of mustering the next words, "The night of the next full moon... At the Moonlight Feast, I... I had been ordered to serve Tigaro's flesh."

"M-My...flesh..." Tigaro mumbled.

"Y-Yes... He said that I needed to change my cooking for the better, that he hadn't eaten human meat in thirty years, and...he demanded that I use the meat of the server girl who had been bringing his food until recently. Demanded that Tigaro serve as the meat. That was his order," Monstro said.

After she'd heard Monstro's explanation, Tigaro's face went pale. "Th-That's why you invited me back to the mansion? To...kill me and use me as food?"

"That was my plan, but...I couldn't do it."

After a pause, Tigaro asked, "And you're not just saying all this to catch me off guard so you can do it tomorrow, are you?"

Indeed, there was still time before the night of the full moon. Technically, Monstro's chance to kill Tigaro had not yet passed.

"Not at all," said Monstro.

"And...why should I believe you?"

"If he was going to kill you, he wouldn't be going out of his way to get you to drop your guard in some roundabout way—he would have just done it earlier when he had the chance, right?" I said. "Additionally, Monstro has protected this town from Beelzé all on his own for thirty years now. I don't think a person like that would be capable of murder."

"I feel the same way. If he wanted to, he could have put poison in Beelzé's food by now," Oltea said. "The fact that he hasn't is proof that he's conflicted, thinking, 'I have to kill this person, but I don't want to,' right?"

“Attacking Tiga is unforgivable, but...fortunately, she didn’t get hurt, at least,” Frieze said. “At this point, I don’t think it’s Monstro who deserves our hatred, but Beelzé.”

“Well...if you all say so, I suppose I’ll take him at his word,” said Tigaro.

“Th-Thank you, Tigaro... I’m so sorry that I scared you,” Monstro said.

“You don’t need to apologize anymore. Right now, it’s more important that we figure out what to do about Beelzé,” she replied. “We could try to sneak Monstro out of town, but if word got out that the mayor had disappeared, there would be a panic. Beelzé would find out right away...”

“I’ll take him out,” I said.

“I know how strong you are, Kaito. I’ve heard all about it: how you kill rank B monsters like it’s nothing and make it back home before dark, how you defeated Vlad and protected the royal capital... But you’re talking about facing down the Demon King of the South! There’s no guarantee of victory in that battle. And beyond that, if you did lose, Beelzé might unleash the stampede just out of anger,” Monstro said.

“That’s true... He does want a quiet life, after all. He’s also not likely to let anyone who catches on to his true identity live. He’ll destroy the entire city either way.”

“Well then, what are we supposed to do?” Oltea asked.

“I know we don’t want to send Kaito up against the danger alone, but nobody other than him stands a chance against a level A monster.”

“I understand, but,” Tigaro said, her voice shaking, “even if Kaito goes, the odds are a thousand to one, right? With those chances...I think there’s a safer option we have to take.”

“A safer option...?”

All of a sudden, the meaning of her words hit me.

“You don’t mean that you’re thinking of sacrificing yourself, do you?”

“Y-Yes... That’s what I’m saying. Beelzé wants to eat me, right? If I let him eat me, then everyone can keep on living peacefully, just like they have up until

now, right? If that's how it is, then—"

"I won't let you do that!" I shouted. *I'll never let my friend become a victim like that! Even if it meant we could avoid all the danger we're up against, earning safety that way wouldn't make me happy!*



I will defeat Beelzé and continue enjoying my life with everyone by my side!

“I’m not going to lose. I’ll defeat him—no matter what—and protect everyone in the process! You’ll see,” I said.

“That’s right! Kaito is incredibly strong! He’ll beat Beelzé for sure!” Oltea said.

“Kaito is undefeated. He even took down Vlad! He can totally handle Beelzé, no doubt about it!” Frieze said.

As she listened to the two of them, Tigaro’s eyes began to well up with tears. She had acted courageous, concealing her fear so that the others wouldn’t worry about her, but it was clear that the prospect of sacrificing herself had actually been terrifying.

“P-Please kill him... I-I... I don’t want to be eaten...” Tigaro said. The horror that she had so stoutly endured and suppressed for appearances began to burst forth. She sat down on the spot as though the dread was physically weakening her.

“Leave it to me, okay?” I said to her with a smile. With that, I told everyone to go wake up the maids and evacuate them into town.

Our mobilization had begun.

After watching to ensure that Oltea and the others had successfully evacuated the occupants of the mansion into town, I headed for Beelzé’s hut. As a matter of precaution, I refrained from using Light Beam to illuminate my path as I drew closer, relying instead on the glow of the moon to guide my steps. After I’d walked in the darkness for some time, the old lighthouse, perched at the edge of its precipitous cliff, came into view. Age had taken its toll on the building, abandoned as it had been to deteriorate. Like an extinguished candle, it stood there in total darkness. There weren’t even any lights on inside of the living space attached to its base, the windows of which revealed only blackness.

“While I still can...” I said to myself and held my hands apart at the level of my hips. Light began to amass between them.

My enemy was a rank A monster. A head-on clash between the two of us could easily result in the same kind of rapidly escalating strife and destruction as had occurred when I fought with Vlad. It was true that surprise attacks were a dishonest path to victory, but if I got it over with and buried Beelzé now, while he still slept, I could prevent the fallout a proper battle would cause.

The light between my hands had grown into a sphere ten centimeters in diameter. I took aim, prepared to blow the entire building away with Death Beam, and—

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Just before I was about to fire, a cold, inhuman voice fell upon me from above. I immediately looked up and saw something in the shape of a man hovering in the sky ten feet overhead. An elderly man dressed in a long tailcoat, his ashen hair all swept back.

I had heard the same details from Tigaro when she was leaving the mansion: the figure before me matched her description of Beelzé to a T.

“DEATH BEAM!” I cried, letting loose the bluish-white beam without a moment’s delay the very instant I had surmised the man’s identity. Emanating from my hands, pressed together like two sides of a triangle, the beam grew until it was extremely thick and seemed to strike Beelzé directly, devouring him whole.

“Even more beautiful,” he said after a pause. “What a brilliant light—it’s just like the glow of the moon.” The voice, flat and without clear emotion, seemed to be in front of me. I promptly lowered my gaze and saw Beelzé standing about ten meters to my fore.

No monster had ever dodged Death Beam before. I hadn’t taken my eyes off of him for even a split second, and yet...Beelzé must have avoided the attack in the brief moment that my vision was blinded by the flash of light. Only by moving with obscene speed could he have evaded my attack in such a small window.

I was able to alter the trajectory of my beams by moving my hands while firing, but it was clear that even if I did, he would likely dodge my attacks. I would have to restrict Beelzé’s movement *before* firing my beam.

I stopped shooting Death Beam and, in the same motion, encased Beelzé inside of Shield Beam. He reached out and placed a hand on the inside of his cage, a thin, bluish-white film of light. The moment his fingers made contact, they were repelled with a sharp crackle.

“It’s no use! You won’t be able to get out of there!” I said.

“So it seems,” Beelzé replied nonchalantly. Even the recognition that he had been trapped wasn’t enough to shake his composure.

In the same position, Vlad had lost his cool and shouted, “Stop that at once and remove this stupid, horrid shield!” Why, I wondered, was Beelzé able to remain so calm? Could it be that he had dodged my Death Beam not with incredible speed but, perhaps, with something like teleportation? If that were the case, then Shield Beam would be effectively meaningless. But then again...if Beelzé could escape, he would likely already be doing so. The evidence suggested that he was not, in fact, capable of breaking free on his own, but... *If that’s the case, then why isn’t he panicking?*

“And why won’t you speak? Haven’t you come here with something to say to me?” he asked dispassionately, his eyes piercing me with a cold gaze. I had, of course, come to kill him, not speak with him. Why, I wondered, had he been outside in the first place? To look at the moon? To enjoy the evening breeze? Or, perhaps...

“Did you see me coming and then come outside?” I asked.

“One of the insects I’d sent to the mansion came back to inform me that a visitor was on his way. I thought it prudent to come meet the guest myself before he set foot inside.”

“One of the insects at the mansion...” I said. Suddenly, the buzzing sound of insect wings passed my ear. The fly that had flown by me thrust itself at the bluish-white light of the dome shield and was promptly repelled. The sight made me realize that I had thought I’d heard a similar noise when leaving the mansion. I had paid it no heed, but it had been one of Beelzé’s underlings all along.

So it isn’t just devil flies that he is able to control!

My strategy of blowing away his house without a fight had failed, but Beelzé was, nonetheless, locked up by Shield Beam. An insect caught in a bug cage, as it were. Circumstances may have been different than expected, but that didn't change that my opponent was at a disadvantage.

Despite that, he remained unnaturally calm. I began to wonder whether he had something up his sleeve with which to turn the tables. If he did, why wasn't he using it? Killing Beelzé in this situation would be easy. Just as I had with Vlad, I could fire a massive Death Beam, and as long as I dropped Shield Beam at the right time, he would be engulfed by the attack.

That was well and good, but Beelzé was acting as though he had a trump card yet to be played that would change things entirely. The fact that he hadn't used it yet, whatever it was, seemed to signal that he was waiting for me to give him an opportune moment.

If I fired Death Beam, the effusion of bright light would create a small window of opportunity while it disoriented me. That, I figured, was what Beelzé was waiting for. It was possible that I was overthinking things, but my opponent was a level A monster. Aside from his ability to control devil flies, there was no telling what other powers he could be hiding.

I needed to get a better feel for Beelzé's capabilities before firing Death Beam.

"By the way, are you an adventurer?" he asked.

"What'll you do if I answer yes?"

"Caution you that it is in your interest to let me out of here without delay, that's what," Beelzé said, seeming to confess that he was unable to break free on his own. Why, I wondered, would he solidify his disadvantage by giving that away? Was it intended as a ruse to throw me off my guard?

"What are you doing? Let me out. Now. You'll regret it if you don't."

"And why will I regret it?"

"You are an adventurer, are you not? The fact that you came here equipped with the knowledge of my being the Lord of the Flies means that Monstro must have cried and begged you to, right?"

“And so what if he did?”

“You attend to the needs of others, listen to their requests, face danger on their behalf... An adventurer like that could not simply stand by and watch as the people of this town meet their end.”

What is he trying to say? Should I *fail* to capture Beelzé, the devastation wrought upon the city would be much worse.

“You seem to be of the mind that if you defeat me, that will be the end of the matter. Unfortunately for you, things aren’t so simple. If I die, there will be no one to control the devil flies,” he said. If Beelzé were killed, then, the devil flies currently confined to the Great Forest would be scattered about every which way.

“In that case, I’ll just keep you trapped here and exterminate the devil fly swarm first!”

“Impossible. You’ve already proved incapable of dealing with my movements. The devil flies boast speed equal to my own. You’ll never be able to keep up.”

I was confident that I would be able to match their pace with Jet Beam, but my enemy’s numbers exceeded ten thousand. Consolidating thousands of flies, all buzzing around in different directions, into one manageable target would be difficult.

That being said...

“If they’re all in the Great Forest, then I can wipe them out all at once!” I said. Death Beam, expanded to its utmost limits, could make a clean sweep of even the vastest areas. Because I could adjust the laser’s trajectory with my movements, exterminating all of the devil flies was possible even despite their incredible numbers.

“I doubt any human is capable of wielding magic powerful enough for that, but it’s no matter. Regardless, you won’t be able to eradicate them. Human ears cannot perceive it, but my heart thumps to a different beat, one with the power to delude and tempt insects. The devil flies have already begun their advance. They’re coming here to save me,” Beelzé said.

Living things could hear only a limited range of frequencies. For example,

high-pitched noises were more difficult for the elderly to make out. In some cases, extremely acute sounds called “mosquito noises” were used to scare off young people who gathered disruptively at night when older people wanted their rest. The sound that Beelzé produced, it seemed, was similar, except that no human—young or old—could hear it. Furthermore, it was loud enough to reach the Great Forest, one hundred kilometers away. Like the mating call of a male cricket, Beelzé’s sound must have had some seductive power over the insects in question.

The captivating sound of a heartbeat with the power to lure and entice the devil flies even at great range... That was the card up Beelzé’s sleeve: the fact that the sound would continue only so long as he remained alive. His calm, composed demeanor in the face of entrapment was easy to understand given that even while immobile, he could trust that innumerable devil flies were on their way to save him.

“Every single insect that hears my heartbeat turns into my slave. Just like the housefly here warned me of your approach, the devil flies will come to protect me from harm,” he said. “Lord of the Flies” was certainly an appropriate appellation for one with his powers. For thirty years, he had kept the devil flies confined to the Great Forest and refrained from unleashing them on any other towns so that in an emergency, he could have them nearby to protect him.

Then again, considering things from the opposite angle revealed Beelzé’s weakness.

For the devil flies, which prided themselves on speed, one hundred kilometers was but a stone’s throw. The fact that they were kept on standby close enough to be called on in a pinch meant that Beelzé was not confident in his own abilities. Though his *speed* was troubling, he clearly lacked the power to break out of Shield Beam. In other words, I was able to kill him at any time, but...because of the complications, I couldn’t do so even though I wanted to.

The devil flies were barreling toward Port City on Beelzé’s orders. If he died, his influence would disappear and they would likely change course, but...then more than ten thousand devil flies would be set loose to scatter all over the country. The scale of destruction unleashed would be enormous.

On the other hand, I couldn't let Beelzé out of the shield either.

Crackle, crackle!

As I was racking my brains for a solution, a sharp sound like static electricity hit my ears. It was the fly from earlier, running repeatedly into the shield surrounding Beelzé. Despite the fact that Shield Beam repelled it each time, it slammed its body into the barrier again and again. Eventually, having used up all of its strength in vain, it dropped to the ground like a stone.

"You've finally perished, have you?" Beelzé muttered to himself, sounding depressed.

As soon as I heard him say that, a light bulb went off in my head. *If I'm gonna do it that way, I'd better hurry up and—*

My thoughts were interrupted by the ominous sound of buzzing wings. *Bzzzzzzzz* came the noise, reverberating. The light of the moon had tinged the night sky with blue, but the horizon in the direction of the forest—to the west—had gone completely black as something rose up to cover it.

The devil fly horde!

"Well then, adventurer! If you want to protect the town, you'd better release me!" Beelzé said in an elated voice full of confidence. Without responding to him, I turned and looked down to survey the city from our high-ground vantage. Sticking to the fundamentals of what had worked in the past, I began to extend a protective beam over the town. Starting in the metropolis's center, the thin layer of bluish-white light spread like a parasol until a dome shield covered the entire area.

"Beautiful. It looks just as if the full moon has appeared upon the earth itself."

"Pretty calm, aren't we?" I jabbed at him.

"Naturally. I hold the fate of the town *and* your life in the palm of my hands, after all."

"And how is that?"

"...What? What do you mean?" Beelzé said. My placidity having perhaps set him on edge, his gloating gave way to a cold, detached expression. At the very

same time, the horde of devil flies passed by a hundred meters skyward.

The enormous, dreadful sound of their collectively buzzing wings hurt my ears. Adding to the sound, a gust of wind accompanied their arrival, kicking dust up into my eyes, but I was otherwise unharmed. The devil flies, having failed to notice me, charged straight toward Port City.

Crackle crackle crackle crackle! came the sound of the shield repelling them as they swarmed around the town and repeatedly threw themselves against the barrier.

“Just as I thought, they didn’t even pay attention to me,” I said.

“That’s because I ordered them to assault the city. If I were to override their directive, they’d descend on you just as readily. Well then! Release me if you do not wish to die!”

“I refuse. Besides, you wouldn’t be able to kill me now even if you wanted to. The devil flies are completely fixated on the light I’ve created.”

“Even to the degree that they would disregard my instructions?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“...And what makes you so sure?”

“Because they’ve already stopped listening to you,” I said. Beelzé had been in low spirits listening to the sound of the small housefly ram itself against Shield Beam. And yet, despite that, he had let it go on fruitlessly until killing itself.

Seeing that, I had realized something. The light of my beams was even more appealing to the flies than the beating of Beelzé’s heart. Its charm overrode his commands.

After a moment of silence, he said, “I see. It seems you’re smarter than you look. Surely, then, you can understand. You only have until the break of dawn.”

Of course I had noticed. The light of my beams stood out because it was the dead of night, but come morning, the rising sun would outshine anything I was capable of conjuring. At that point, the glow of Shield Beam would lose its appeal and the devil flies would once again be at Beelzé’s beck and call. In order to force me to free him from the shield, he would simply send the swarm to a

different settlement.

However—

“I’ll eradicate all of them before first light!” I said.

“You’re bluffing. As if a mere human could use such magic! Even supposing that you speak the truth, any power strong enough to purge the devil flies all at once would surely bring about the city’s destruction as well!”

“I don’t plan to fire on the town—I’m going to aim for the night sky!” I declared. As I did, I drew my hands close to my body and held them down by my hips, giving form to a ball of light between them and building upon it until it had grown ten centimeters in diameter, then twenty, then thirty. It grew and grew until...

“DEATH BEEEEAAAAM!” I shouted as the cluster of light reached fifty centimeters in diameter. I aimed at the darkened sky above Port City and let loose the bluish-white laser. It shone as brightly as a firework at the moment of bursting. In an instant, the Death Beam had cast out the darkness and lit up our surroundings as if it were the middle of the day. The glowing ray, dazzlingly luminous to such a degree that it made me want to cover my eyes, shot straight out in a clean line, extending determinedly toward the sky above the town.



“Wh-What is this, you fool?!” Beelzé shrieked, finally shaken.

It seemed he had finally figured it out. One by one, each of the devil flies that had gathered around the light of the dome shield flew themselves directly into the path of Death Beam.

“I-It isn’t possible! Why are they flying into it?!”

“It’s phototaxis!”

“Phototaxis?! What in the hell is that?!”

“It’s a trait that insects have!” I said. There was phototaxis that drew some organisms toward light and phototaxis that caused light to repulse others. Flies possessed the former variety.

Devil flies were monsters, yes, but in outward appearance, they were strikingly similar to any old housefly. The poison moth, though also a monster, had also been influenced by phototaxis. Given that, it was no small wonder that the devil flies were much the same.

As a consequence of their tendency to seek out the strongest light, the swarm had ignored the shield surrounding Beelzé and gone straight for the one covering the city. Seeing that, I had decided to take advantage of that behavior by creating an even bigger light: the brilliant luminescence called “Death Beam.”

Just as I had planned, the devil flies threw themselves into it one after another, decimating their numbers in the blink of an eye. They truly were just bugs, drawn like moths to flame.

With his fighting power effectively neutralized, the once-calm Beelzé was suddenly worked up into a panic.

“Wh-Why did they just kill themselves?! Couldn’t they at least understand that touching it kills them?!”

“The light I cast was just that attractive to them!” I said.

“Do not mock me! I’m glowing too, aren’t I? Come *here*, damn it! Kill this human!”

“It won’t work. The light around here just isn’t the same as the light of the Death Beam!” I said. Even the light of the dome covering the city could not compete. The glow of the comparatively tiny shield surrounding Beelzé stood no chance against Death Beam’s radiance.

“*Stop* killing yourselves! Can’t you hear my orders?!” Beelzé shouted, seized by an urgent impatience. Right now, his heart was probably thumping furiously in his chest. Even so, he was powerless to rein in the devil flies as they continued to charge into the beam’s path.

At last, the entire swarm had been annihilated.

I let Death Beam dissipate, and our surroundings were once again consumed by the darkness of night. The faint glow of the shield surrounding Beelzé revealed a face contorted by rage and fear.

“So, that just leaves you,” I said.

“Shut up and stop messing around! Do you really think a human like yourself is capable of defeating me?!”

“Of course I do!”

“You’re bluffing again! You’ve already expended all your magic! You’ve run out of energy to use your powers, surely!”

“Far from it! I could keep firing that thing all night,” I said. If anything, I’d have liked to.

The reason being, of course, that Death Beam was the greatest! It made me feel good in a way that nothing else could even come close to! Huge amounts of dopamine had poured into my brain while I was firing it. In truth, I was still feeling the incredible high I’d gotten from shooting the beam for so long at once.

“Even if you *aren’t* bluffing, you cannot defeat me!”

“But *that’s* the bluff, isn’t it? The ace you had up your sleeve is already gone!”

“You think the devil flies were my trump card? You think me no better than an insect?! Even without the damn *devil flies*, I am a force to be reckoned with! In the beginning, the devil flies weren’t even a part of the picture! Back in the

day, I fought single-handedly! I used to eat petty adventurers like you by the dozen—even the ones like you, all brimming over with confidence!”

It upset me extremely to hear him brag about killing, even if it was the distant past he was talking about, but I was still riding high on the experience of firing Death Beam for so long.

My friends were waiting for my safe return. There was no time to waste: I had to take care of this guy once and for all.

I pulled my hands close to my body and placed them down by my hips. Light began to gather between my palms.

“I’ll show you something marvelous! My true form!” Beelzé shouted. The moment he did, his skin began to turn purple. His hair started to fall from his head, and fangs erupted from his mouth. His eyes bulged out, assumed a scarlet hue, and began to expand. His muscles swelled in size, causing the tailcoat he wore to burst at the seams.

He had transformed into a purple-tinged monster with the compound eyes of a fly. His arms had grown to the thickness of logs, and the fangs that had torn their way out of his mouth were as sharp as a tiger’s.

“This is my true form! I only take on this appearance when I haven’t had enough to eat, so normally I retain my human facade. No matter, I’ll just kill you and satisfy my appetite with your flesh! The strength I have now completely eclipses that of my previous body. There’s no comparison! I’m one hundred million times stronger! With this strength, I’ll crush your pitiful shield in a single strike! After I do, I’ll make a meal of you to satisfy my hunger!”

Beelzé had said the same thing twice. Maybe that was just because he wanted to eat me so badly, but his voice had been rife with tension, and the number—one hundred million—was clearly an extreme exaggeration... It seemed as though the transformation had lowered his intelligence.

The stronger a monster, the higher its intellect and ability to behave like a human. The form Beelzé took now, though, didn’t seem all too with it, nor did it look like a person. That meant that—

“You can’t break through the shield!” I said. Beelzé’s strength was even lower

than Vlad's had been. If Vlad hadn't been able to break out, I didn't think that Beelzé was going to.

Provoked by my words, Beelzé began to violently slam his fists into the walls of his cage. Every time he did, though, they were repelled with the same old crackling noise.

"Ah! Ah ha ha ha ha! Quite the robust shield you've made, isn't it? Then let me get serious too!"

"All right, let's both get serious!"

"Your 'serious' doesn't amount to much, kid! If you don't want to die, then you'll let me out of here! If you do, I'll at least let you live!"

"I refuse!"

"Th-Then I won't attack the city either!"

"Once I kill you, there won't be any attacks to worry about anyways!"

"Th-Then, then... Ah, that's it! Then I'll serve you incredible food! I've lived as an epicure for so long now, I've eaten so many wonderful meals! I-I can cook wonderful meals too! Gourmet dishes the likes of which you've never even tasted!"

"I know what real gourmet food is like! Food that you've never—" I started, only to realize that any further dialogue was just a waste of time. I took aim at Beelzé and fired Death Beam.

Kiiiiiii!

The bluish-white beam made a high-pitched whine as it shot out in a sharp, straight line, engulfing Beelzé in light. The lighthouse behind him was completely destroyed; not a trace was left behind.

"Th-That isn't true! I've had *so many* amazing meals! There isn't a single dish in this world that you know and I don't!"

The shield around Beelzé was still intact, and I heard his screaming voice from the other side of its thin wall as the beam raged on.

"Tell me, you damn human! What in the hell is it, the food that you're talking

about? Let me eat it, damn it!”

“Even if you escaped, you’d never have the chance to taste it! Not in your whole life!”

I dropped the shield. Beelzé’s complete annihilation took only a split second, not even long enough for me to hear his death throes.

Dopamine from the beam was flooding my brain. I almost wanted to stay there and continue firing it, but Oltea and the others were waiting, worried about me. Besides, the crackling noises would likely have awoken the townspeople. Seeing the devil flies push against the pallid glow of the shield would surely have brought to mind the stampede, spreading the dread and terror that came with that association and leaving them trembling.

I need to get back to town and reassure everyone!

I ended the stream of Death Beam and used Jet Beam to fly to high ground. Dropping the shield that had covered the town like a parasol as I flew along, I saw that a throng of onlookers had formed at the base of the sloped road connecting the town to the mansion.

A wave of monsters closing in would have driven the citizens of most towns to hide in their homes, but this was the city where Monstro had stopped the horde in the past. Seeking salvation, the people had gathered to go to the mansion for Monstro’s help.

There, at the bottom of the slope, was Monstro, awaiting my return and laboring to soothe the crowd. Spotting Oltea and the others near him, I headed their way first. Oltea raised her gaze at the light cast by Jet Beam and saw me. Her face broke into an enthusiastic smile.

“Welcome back, Kaito!” she said.

“You’re safe!” Frieze said.

“Are you injured?!” asked Tigaro.

All three of them spoke over each other. I responded with a cheerful disposition: “I’m back! And I’m fine, as you can see.”

“I’m so glad! That’s the Kaito I know!”

“What can I say? I’m tough!” I said, affecting an air of calm so as not to exacerbate Tigaro’s anxiety. In truth, one mistake and I’d have lost completely rather than returning with an injury.

I could have taken Beelzé by surprise right from the start by attacking from the sky, but I’d had to be sure of the soundness of my objective—I’d had to know that Monstro wasn’t trying to betray us. The moment that I fired Death Beam at Beelzé’s response had confirmed his hostility.

Even so, Beelzé hadn’t counterattacked when I missed the first time. Had he done so, I would certainly have been killed right then and there.

The cause of Beelzé’s defeat, ultimately, had been his interest in the light cast by my beam. It did not have as much of an effect on him as it did on the devil flies, but he nonetheless shared their trait. The light of the beam had captivated Beelzé.

“Mr. Sword Saint! Mr. Sword Saint! What happened to the devil flies?!”

“Did they fly off somewhere else?! Are they still a threat?!”

“The stampede... Has the stampede...finally resumed?”

It seemed that Monstro had told the townspeople that the Sword Saint had gone to meet the threat. The crowd around him pushed its way toward me, its numerous representatives making inquiries in uneasy voices.

I gave everyone a reassuring smile.

“The culprit, the Demon King of the South, who had more than ten thousand devil flies at his command, has been defeated by my hands! Never again shall the stampede come!” I said, raising my voice so that the people far away in the rear of the crowd could still hear my proclamation. The moment the words left my mouth, a cheer of jubilation rose up from the people. Everyone was experiencing joy from the bottom of their heart, but none more than Monstro, who had suffered terror at the hands of Beelzé for thirty straight years.

Overcome with emotion, he dissolved into tears. With his face still disheveled, Monstro delightedly grabbed my hand and held it firmly. Though he was choked up and could form no words, his gratitude came through loud and clear.

“Thank you! Thank you! You didn’t just block the stampede, you defeated the root of all evil... Thanks to you, the town is saved! To think I’d live to see a day like this, it’s... Really, truly, I don’t even know how to express my gratitude...”

Over and over, Monstro bowed his head, and I continued to smile at him all the while.

“Don’t worry about it. I was just protecting my friends. From now on, you just need to keep serving this town as mayor. Do your best to make it a safe place to live,” I said, smiling and encouraging him. He looked back at me and smiled with his entire face.

“From now on I’ll cook for everyone to raise their spirits! That’s how I’ll contribute to making this town a safe, harmonious city!”

“Are you going to open a restaurant?” I asked.

“Yes! I’ve dreamed about doing that forever! So...” Monstro turned and bowed to his maids. “Please, from now on, will you help me cook?”

The maids, seeing their boss bow in deference to them, exchanged bewildered looks. Nervously, Chestnut spoke up first.

“We don’t know much about cooking, but...you won’t get upset if we go into the kitchen?”

“Absolutely not! I wouldn’t even think of it! If you want to learn, I can even teach you how to cook. Just like in the past, when...when my father was alive. I want that again. I want to cook with someone again!” Monstro said.

As the sincerity of his request sank in, the maids all began to smile.

“We would be delighted to be allowed to assist you!”

“Ahh, Ahh! Please do!” he said, delighted. After a short pause, he continued, “Tigaro, if it’s all right with you, please come and share a meal with me sometime.”

The last time Monstro had said that, after showing Tigaro hospitality, he’d ended up trying to kill her. Knowing this, he spoke timidly and without confidence, but...perhaps sensing the genuine nature of Monstro’s apology, Tigaro awkwardly scratched at her cheek and replied, “Instead of saying

‘sometime,’ just eat with me today. I mean...your food was really delicious, so...”

Oltea and Frieze nodded with an “Mm-hmm, mm-hmm!” to signal their assent.

“Mouth-wateringly good! I wish I could eat like that every day!” said Oltea.

“If I started each morning with a meal like that, I bet I’d feel fantastic all day!” said Frieze.

“If you don’t mind, then, may we impose on your hospitality?” I asked cheerfully.

Seeing all of our smiling faces, Monstro looked back at us as a delighted grin of his own spread across his face.

“Yes, of course! I will do my absolute best to accommodate you!”

Epilogue: Rank A Adventurer

The next day, after a night at the mansion.

After a delicious breakfast eaten with great relish, we were seen off by everyone at the mansion, including Monstro, as we departed Port City for home.

We flew along, enjoying our conversation until, around the time the redness of the setting sun was recoloring the western sky, we arrived above the royal capital.

“I’m sure we’re all tired, so we’ll definitely stop by the house, but what should we do after that?” I asked.

“My butt hurts, but I’m not all that tired otherwise,” Oltea said.

“We were just sitting here, after all,” Frieze said.

“I’m fine too,” added Tigaro.

“In that case, shall we just head to the guild?” I asked. From our vantage in the sky, I quickly spotted the main street of Section One and began to fly toward it.

“Once Kaito reports his defeat of the Southern Demon King, everyone in the guild is going to be overjoyed, aren’t they?” Oltea said.

“He’s going to be absolutely engulfed in cheering! That’s how much the stampede terrified everyone!” Frieze said. The two of them seemed to have been excitedly awaiting our return to the guildhall. I, too, wanted to report the news as soon as possible. Even more, I wanted to give everyone peace of mind.

“Hey, it’d probably be better for me to wait outside the guildhall while you go in, right?” Tigaro asked shyly.

Oltea had sat in front for this flight, with Frieze behind her, myself after that, and Tigaro behind me, taking up the rear. Because Tigaro was at the back, I could not see her face, but her voice sounded lonely.

“You should come too, Tigaro.”

“B-But...I’m not an adventurer, right?”

“It’s not like non-adventurers are barred from entering the building, you know. The guild has a mess hall inside, and it’s open to the public.”

“Really? I guess it should be okay, then...” Tigaro said. It sounded like there was something else she wanted to speak up about. From the way she spoke, it was clear that she wanted to enter the guildhall with us, but even though she now knew she’d be able to, she didn’t seem much happier.

Maybe...

“Tigaro, I have one thing to ask of you,” I said.

“Of me? Is it cleaning?” she replied.

“No, it’s not cleaning. If I get promoted to rank A, I’ll have to find two more party members. I’ve kept my eye out, but nobody has really fit the bill. So, if it’s all right with you, would you like to join us and become an adventurer?”

“Me? An...adventurer?” Tigaro said. Her tone of voice had suddenly brightened. Just as I had suspected, she had grown lonely tending to the house all on her own.

There was the attempt on her life, the attack of the devil fly swarm, and even my battle with Beelzé. A lot had gone wrong, but even despite all of that, Tigaro had, from the bottom of her heart, *enjoyed* herself. That was why she wanted to travel by our side from here on out.

“Ooh, that’s a fantastic idea!” said Frieze.

“I completely agree!” said Oltea.

“Y-You’re really all okay with me joining you?”

“Of course!” said Frieze. “I told you a long time ago that we’d become adventurers together!”

“With Tigaro joining us, we can travel without worrying!” said Oltea.

“B-But it would make more sense for you to recruit someone who’s stronger in a fight...”

“I’ll handle the monsters. Anyways, just defeating monsters and coming home gets boring. I enjoy traveling a whole lot more with friends by my side,” I said.

Receiving our welcome, Tigaro’s voice was lifted by a happy energy.

“Thank you! If that’s how you really feel, then I’ll happily join the party!”

“Well, with that decided, we ought to throw a party to celebrate the admission of a new member!” Oltea said.

“And a party for Kaito’s A rank promotion!” Frieze added.

“You two are going to drink again, aren’t you...” Tigaro said warily, regarding them with an awkward smile.

We continued talking as I lowered our altitude until we touched down on the ground in front of the guild. I let Stick Beam disappear and stepped inside.

“Oh! The Sword Saint has returned!”

The moment I opened the grand entrance door, we were greeted with shouts of joy. The adventurers who were making merry in the mess hall lifted their beer steins, and the people lined up by the reception windows rushed over. Everyone was smiling ear to ear.

“We heard! You stopped the stampede!”

“Not even just held it back but exterminated the entire horde!”

“And you even slew the Demon King of the South, right?!”

“Thank you so much, Sword Saint! Now we can live without fear!”

The guild was full of excitement. Somehow, the news from Port City had arrived here in the capital and spread like wildfire in no time at all. Already, the tale of our exploits was common knowledge through the entire city—no, throughout the entire country.

“You’re incredibly popular here, Kaito...” said Tigaro.

“Of course he is! He defeated the Demon King of the South after already taking out Vlad!”

“I couldn’t be more proud of you as a friend!” Oltea said.

“Same. Kaito is the best friend I could ask for!” Frieze said.

Still glowing from the praise of my three friends, I went through the crowd, shaking hands one by one. After countless shakes, hand tingling with pain, I slipped free to accompany Oltea and the others to our usual reception window.

“Welcome back, Mr. Kaito! It seems you were quite successful in your endeavors at Port City! You exterminated the devil flies and, moreover, killed the Southern Demon King. You’re a proper hero!” said the receptionist.

I was happy to be congratulated, but the sheer amount of praise was beginning to embarrass me a little.

“Thanks. I know this is abrupt, but I’d like to report the completion of the Great Forest Survey assignment.”

After leaving Port City, we’d traveled to the Great Forest. The swarm that had attacked the town had been eradicated down to the very last fly, but that didn’t preclude the possibility that some individuals had remained in the forest. Because I wouldn’t settle for giving an incomplete report on a contract I’d accepted, we had made sure to check just in case.

“Our inquiry into the situation revealed that there are no devil flies to be found in the Great Forest.”

“I see! In that case, I’ll pay out your reward right away!” the receptionist said and placed the gold coins on the counter. “Here is your compensation: thirty gold coins! In regard to your reward for killing the Demon King of the South, a messenger from the king will visit you tomorrow! Additionally...” she said, but then spoke no further. Instead, she followed the word up by placing a shiny new pin on the counter. Proof of rank A, the pinnacle of an adventurer’s career. *The golden badge.*



Immediately, I removed my silver badge, returned it, and placed the new one on my collar.

“It really suits you!” said Oltea.

“It’s appropriately radiant for someone as distinguished as Kaito!” said Frieze.

“You look so cool!” said Oltea.

“Thanks!”

The promotion was great and all, but it was hearing my friends congratulate me that was *truly* special. It seemed that another reward was yet to come, but for me, the smiles on their faces were the greatest prize I could hope for. The more I could make them smile, the happier I would be.

“Before we head home, should we go grab a bite to eat?” I suggested. We had eaten a plentiful breakfast but had also skipped lunch and were, resultantly, more than a little hungry. At the mention of food, all three of them excitedly raised their voices.

“Oh, yeah! I wanna eat before going home!”

“Me too! To celebrate his promotion to A rank, we should eat something Kaito likes today!”

“True! Kaito, what do you want to eat?”

“It doesn’t matter what we eat as long as I get to have it with all of you!” I said. Food enjoyed while surrounded by the joyful banter of my beloved friends—that was the most delicious food of all. With everyone by my side, I could eat anything as though it were the most incredible gourmet dish.

“But if you *had* to choose, what would you pick, Kaito?”

“If I had to choose, then... Well, back in the day, I used to eat a lot of natto,” I said. The three of them stared back at me, puzzled.

“Natto? What’s that? I’ve never heard of it,” Oltea said.

“It’s a fermented food made out of beans that have been left out until they go bad.”

“Beans that have been...left to go bad? And that...tastes good?”

“I think it tastes pretty good, but I hear that there are a lot of people who don’t agree with it so much.”

“Huh... Well, I’d like to try it at least once,” Oltea said.

“It’s a food that Kaito likes, so I’m sure I could come around to it!” Frieze said.

“I could make some. We just need to let some beans rot!” Oltea said. I didn’t want to rain on her parade by mentioning that her suggested method would produce only...rotten beans.

“How about I make it this time?” I said. It had been forever ago, but when I was an elementary school student, my class had been made to take a natto-making workshop in order to deepen our appreciation for our food. There had been adult chaperones, of course, but we children had nonetheless made our own natto. Cooking was still a weak point of mine, but I was sure I could at least pull off a simple recipe like that.

“Well then, while we’re at it, why don’t we have a party where we all bring food we like and then we can exchange!”

“Ooh, that sounds fun! I’ll bring wine!” said Oltea.

“Then I’ll bring some beer!” said Frieze.

“But those are just drinks... Well, it still sounds fun, so I guess it doesn’t matter,” said Tigaro, wryly smiling as though their behavior amused her.

I could hardly wait for the day, but there was still dinner to be enjoyed tonight too! And tomorrow. And the day after tomorrow, and the day after the day after tomorrow and on and on—I would be able to eat with everyone every day. Every single day, I would pass the time with these people... I was, truly, so glad to have been transmigrated into this new world!

So, eagerly awaiting my next chance to sit around the table with the friends whom I had come to love, I stepped out of the guild hall. They came too, right by my side.

Afterword

Hello again everyone, Nuko Nekomata here.

I want to express my gratitude once again for your continued readership, this time with volume 2 of *From Desk Job to Death Beam: In Another World with My Almighty Lasers*. Thank you so much for picking up this work.

It is thanks to your support that we were able to release this second volume of the story. It was the impact that a certain animal-eared girl had on me that was the impetus for my first foray into writing light novels, so it brings me great pleasure to write a few of my own into the world.

Next, I have an announcement to share. My previous work, *Moto Kano Sensei wa Choppiri Ecchi na Kateihoumon de Kimi to no Ai Hagukumitai*, published by Comic Fire, is in the process of being adapted into a manga series with Kei Hazuki in charge of illustration. Please check it out if you are at all interested.

And now I must share some words of gratitude.

The publication of this book was only made possible by the tireless efforts of numerous other people besides myself.

Firstly, I must thank the many talented people of Hobby Japan Publishing's paperback editorial department.

I also owe a great debt to Cut, who took the time to hand-draw this book's excellent illustrations even though they were already busy.

Additionally, I extend my thanks to the numerous proofreaders, designers, and everyone else involved in realizing this publication.

Truly, thank you.

And, of course, above all, I must thank all of you readers who purchased my story. For you, I reserve the highest gratitude. There is no greater happiness than the knowledge that my efforts might have brought some small measure of joy into your life.

With that, I leave you with the hope that we might one day meet again somewhere.

Until then,

From another day, still quite cold, sometime in 2024

Nuko Nekomata











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Volume 2

by Nekomata Nuko

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