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AUTHOR: SHIRAIISHI ARATA
ILLUSTRATOR: YUUNAGI

THE **INVINCIBLE**
SUMMONER
WHO CRAWLED UP FROM **LEVEL 1**

Wrecking **Reincarnators** with My **Hidden Dungeon**



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An anime-style illustration of Kaori Shinozuka, a young woman with short, light blue hair and yellow eyes. She is wearing a dark purple and gold outfit with a white cape and is sitting in a red chair. She is holding a small photograph of a person. The background is a warm, golden-brown color.

Kaori Shinozuka

An anime-style illustration of Megumi Iijima, a young woman with long, dark blue hair. She is lying in a hospital bed, covered with a white blanket, and appears to be sleeping. The background is a soft, light blue color.

Megumi Iijima

“Daikokuji Hospital, Tokyo,
Room 302. This photo shows her
at this exact moment in time.”

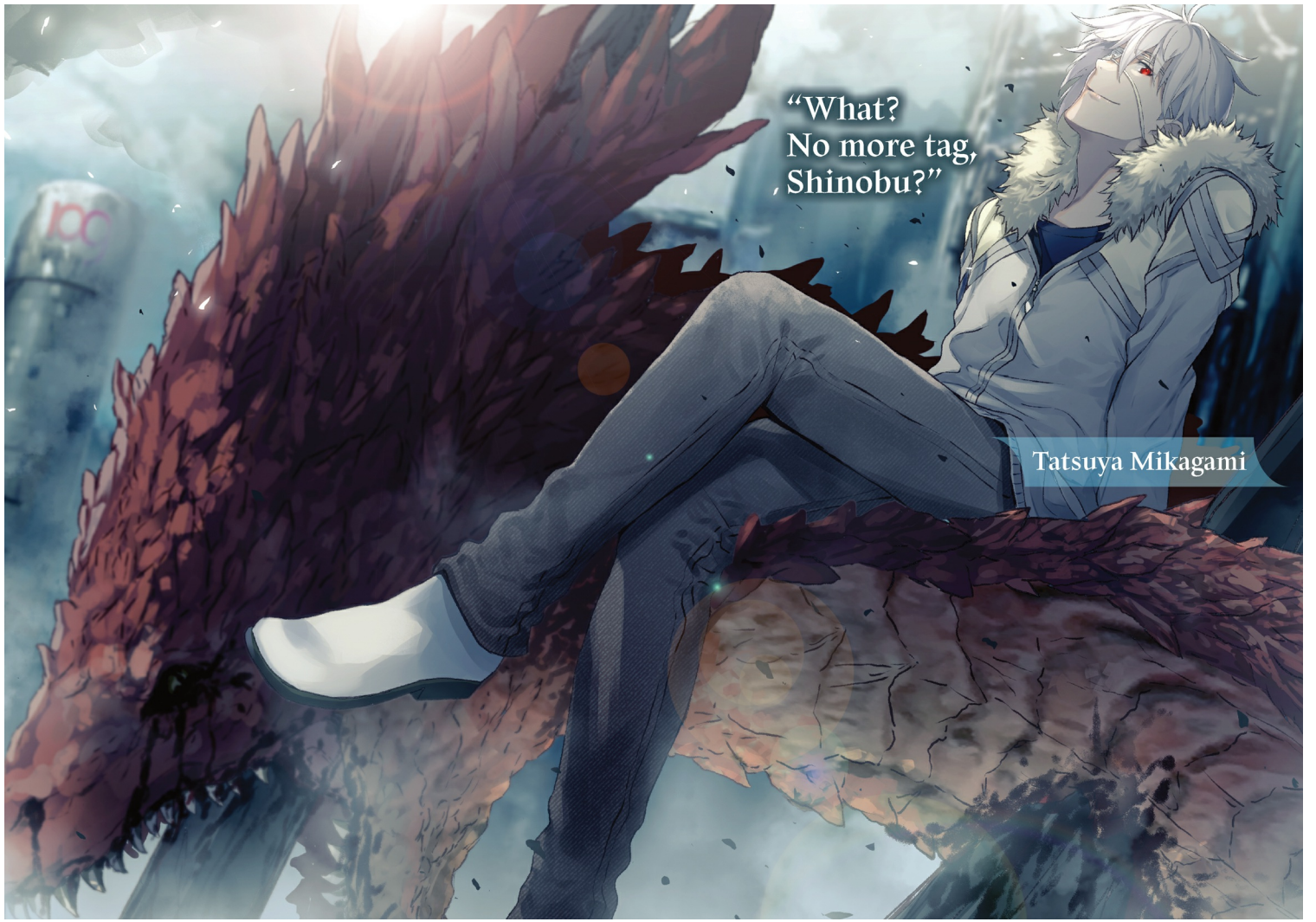
“...What is this?”

The photo she'd handed
to me was of my sister
sleeping in a hospital room.



The Great Sage Isabella

“Is she the Witch of the North that’s apparently lived for over four hundred years?”



“What?
No more tag,
Shinobu?”

Tatsuya Mikagami

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Chapter 1: Conditions to Beat the Game

Shinobu Iijima

“Nothing but death awaits you now. What will you do, Shinobu Iijima?” The blue-haired woman cackled with an ominous grin.

I kept up a calm front. “Don’t you think killing me ‘on sight’ is a bit much?”

Well, then. Things aren’t looking good.

I don’t know if it’s because of my foster father, but the other reincarnators don’t seem to like me very much. They decided among themselves that they’d kill me on sight.

Five of them were level 99, while the other seven were over level 70.

We were surrounded. I gulped down my anxiety.

I had one advantage over the other reincarnators—access to the new event dungeon, the 13 Floors to Utopia, and all the perks that came with it. More specifically, in this case, a skill called Release of God’s Might that buffed my summons’ stats by a multiple of 7 would come in handy.

There could be four summons on the field at once according to the game system. But I still hadn’t fulfilled the conditions for summoning my trump card, Amaterasu. Which meant that—besides Gabriel, Tsukuyomi, and Cerberus, who were already out—I would have to summon one more, probably Bahamut. If all their stats were multiplied by 7...

No. I’m still only level 83.

We wouldn’t get decimated, but there were more of the enemies than me and my familiars, so the chances of them beating us weren’t zero. Moreover, I couldn’t let Alice fight here. I wouldn’t be able to bear it if she ended up being taken hostage. That left running away as the safest option, but would I really be able to make a clean getaway from battle veterans while protecting Alice?

It didn't take much thought to conclude that it was impossible.

...Right?

A flash of brilliance shot through my brain.

It'll be fine.

No matter the situation, there was one surefire way to get all of us to safety without a scratch.

It was perfectly possible, as long as I used *that*.

In which case, I had the leeway to pull information from these guys.

"So? What do you want from me? Don't you have something to say?"

I changed my tone to pressure the woman into answering.

"Something to say?" She looked shocked. "Why do you think I do? I just explained to you that I'm part of the Council of Gods, and that we decided to kill you the moment one of us found you."

"You wouldn't have bothered telling me your name if you were just going to kill me, nor would you need to flaunt how strong you guys are. You could've just ganged up on me when I least expected it. Or at least that's what I would've done."

I meant what I said. They clearly wanted to talk instead of fight.

The change of tone seemed to have worked, but one wrong move and it wouldn't end well. The provocation drew the enemies closer to me. It was only a matter of time before they boxed me in.

"Huh. So, you *do* understand the situation you're in." The woman smiled. "You're starting to show some of Mr. Imabayashi's slyness."

"That bastard's just my foster father. He's not my birth father, and he didn't raise me."

She bowed her head slightly.

"...What are you doing?" I didn't understand what was happening.

“Allow me to apologize. You have a much better understanding of the rules of this world than I thought.”

“The rules?” That cleared up nothing for me.

The woman nodded deeply. “Fights between reincarnators often end up being bloodbaths. Mr. Imabayashi has his eyes on you especially. Had you been blissfully unaware of how this world works, I would’ve had half a mind to force you into our protection here.”

Protection? I cocked my head.

“To make it brief,” she continued, “I’m slightly different from the other members of the Council. Among the five grand guildmasters, I was the only one who voted against assassinating you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

It must’ve been as plain as day that I wasn’t understanding anything, because the blue-haired woman chuckled.

“I don’t know how much you know, but the reincarnators are wreaking havoc in this world.”

“I’m aware. Some of the natives here called themselves ‘God Killers’ and attacked me. If you all hadn’t acted so unscrupulously, maybe that wouldn’t have happened.”

“That brings up the debate on whether or not the natives are just data, but I personally view them as living human beings and believe they should retain the right to life. It’s because I say things like that that I’m considered to be different within the Council.”

She seemed to be trying to tell me that the reincarnator factions weren’t hive minds. Was she lying? Or was she actually as rational as she seemed?

Either way, I had a despairing lack of information to form a proper judgment. “What are you trying to say?”

“I want you to join our guild. There are advantages for both of us.”

“What advantages?”

“Lots of them, but the main one is that we can share two with each other.” She held up two fingers. “There’s a guild quest I want you to take part in. One of the prizes is a Log-Out Ticket.”

“Log-Out Ticket?”

Another nod. “We suspect it’s one of the game’s conditions.”

“For clearing it, you mean?”

“The second advantage for you is that we’ll protect you from Mr. Imabayashi. We’ll even throw in something else... Hm, how about something regarding your sister? I can give you details about the cerebral contusion that has her hospitalized right now.”

I didn’t waste any time getting the words out of my mouth. “Tell me everything. Why do you know Megumi’s medical information?”

Even I didn’t know her status, despite being the one she fell from the apartment with.

The other players could find out that Megumi was in the hospital through the game’s Friends List, but they would have never been able to find out that she’d fallen to her death and gotten a cerebral contusion.

“My name is Kaori Shinozuka. Come to the guildmaster’s office if you want to learn more. I’ll get some tea ready for us.”

There was no grasping the true intent behind her smile.

+

“Physical proof holds more weight than just words. First, I’m going to show you a document regarding your sister’s status,” she said before she departed toward the valuables storage.

I stayed in the guildmaster’s office and sipped my tea. The office decor was a blend of Western and Eastern... Or maybe not. It had a basic sofa and a table for receptions, and a work desk placed on a red carpet. It had the kind of fancy decor you’d expect from a guildmaster’s office, except for the katanas and scrolls hanging on the walls, which gave the place a traditional feel.

Ms. Kaori told me that her family had done kendo since the Edo period, and

they were in charge of a dojo in Chiba that Ryoma Sakamoto had once attended. She'd had katanas in her house, so this style of decor made her feel at home.

“Master Shinobu, this tea is so good!”

Alice sat down next to me, her ears fluttering in excitement.

“Alice, wait! There might be poison in it! Let me use Judgment Magic—”

She tilted her head at me as she watched me panic. “We demihumans have a strong sense of smell, so finding poison is a cinch!”

“Really?” She'd said it as if it were obvious, so I didn't know how to react.

I was pretty sure I remembered this information being in the lore, so she was probably right; still, it didn't change the fact that there could have been poison in that cup.

I used Judgment Magic on the tea and cookies on the table. *Okay, no poison.*

A tiny Cerberus sitting politely under the table caught my eye. He'd used up all his power during the last fight, so he couldn't keep his human or beast forms at the moment and had turned into a small black dog.

His tail was wagging. He probably wanted some cookies.

“Do you want some, Mr. Cerberus?” Alice leaned over.

“I am a warrior. Sweets are for the weak.”

“Are you sure? You're sure you don't want any?” She plucked a cookie from the plate and waved it over Cerberus's head.

Like a cat following a toy, he shook his head as he watched it.

“*Woof!*”

He jumped and grabbed it with his teeth.



Crunch, gulp, ragh, ragh.

I caught Alice snickering at him as we listened to the sounds of him devouring the cookie.

“There’s more, Mr. Cerberus!”

“That was merely a conditioned reflex. I jumped without realizing it. I do not need another one... *Woof!*”

The same thing happened once Alice began waving another cookie above Cerberus’s head.

Man, they’re pretty close.

Cerberus was a monster while Alice was a beast-human, so perhaps they had stuff in common.

Come on, Cerberus. You’ve got a sweet tooth, so there’s no need to hold back.

“We have tea too, Mr. Cerberus!”

“I will have some if there is no sugar or milk...”

After preparing the tea on the table, Alice gathered Cerberus in her arms and sat him in her lap. How was he gonna drink tea as a puppy? It looked really hot.

I focused on Cerberus as he stretched his tongue out to the steaming cup.

“Yelp!”

Oh yeah, it’s hot.

Alice struggled to contain her laughter as she observed the spectacle.

Maaan, they’re pretty close.

To be fair, I also had trouble approaching Cerberus when he was in his hot guy form. He was the stoic warrior type to the bone. It was probably a great discovery for Alice to find out he could take the form of a palm-sized doggy.

As soon as we’d settled comfortably onto the sofa, a bald guy plopped himself down on the other side. He wore a tank top that showed off his brawny

physique.

He was one of the three level 99 guild members that had been guarding the door since we entered the room.

He glared at me. “I’m gonna tell it to you straight—I don’t like you. I’m against Ms. Kaori’s decision to not kill you.”

Alice froze at his words. Cerberus poised for an impromptu fight at the scent of potential battle. Stat-wise, he was only around level 30. He’d only be good for helping Alice escape. Evidently he knew that too, since he was scanning the room for potential escape routes. He probably hated the idea of running away, considering his warrior personality, but as the war veteran guard dog of hell, this was the best choice he could make. I was glad he could calmly discern the situation.

“It’s a bit sudden for you to say you don’t like me, considering we’ve only just met,” I said cautiously. I didn’t have many choices since I didn’t know how these guys would come at me. I figured I’d get a feel for their dispositions by offering some harmless words.

He began listing off the guilds. “Tiger’s Eye, who control La Vita Empire’s Imperial Court; Dragon’s Roar, who control the Holy Church; Soaring Deities, who control the Border Union; the Crimson Moon Brigade, who control the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“And the Lions of Patriotism, who control the Merchants’ Alliance, right?”

“I was once part of the Lions of Patriotism, which Mr. Imabayashi is the guildmaster of.”

I could tell my poker face slipped. *That bastard... He’s strong enough to control a powerful guild now?*

“That man is a grand guildmaster? Isn’t he a little...challenged, personality-wise?”

“That he is. But he’s rich. That’s why we all obey him.”

“Rich? You’re a reincarnator—you’re overwhelmingly powerful in this world. You could get money from pretty much anywhere if you wanted to. So much

that you wouldn't know what to do with it all."

The bald man laughed. "Saito."

"Huh?"

"My name's Saito. Call me that."

He's really full of himself.

It was like he was asking for a fight with the way he was talking to me. I wondered what he wanted.

"I'm sorry for not asking for your name, Mr. Saito. So, what's up with this money business?"

"Mr. Imabayashi owned tons of land in the best parts of town. I heard he had tens of billions of yen in assets. Is that true?"

"I'm not sure if it was *that* much, but he sure was unbelievably rich—in Japan, that is. Japanese yen isn't worth anything in this world."

My words caught in my throat as I realized how stupid I was.

If Ms. Kaori was right, and there was a way back home from this game, then...

Players could trade real-life money.

Regardless of in-game currency or assets, requests could be made with real-life money as the reward.

"Don't you think that man could've lied about being rich?" I tried to backpedal. "I knew for a fact that he was rich, but why did you guys believe him so easily?"

"The head of marketing for Daitoto Bank and a real estate agent were reincarnated here. There's no one that doubts his immense wealth."

Goddamn it. The bastard is too lucky.

"But even if you believe him, he can only promise you things with words, nothing else."

“A special item exists that ensures any promise made in-game is kept. It takes effect once the player logs out.”

“Once they log out?”

“It’s called the ‘Blood Oath Carved into the Soul.’ Anyone who breaks a promise will be baptized with Instant Death Magic. Nobody can verify its authenticity, but that’s what was written in the description, so we have no choice but to believe it. Allow me to start from the beginning.”

It would be really bad if this guy was telling the truth.

That bastard and his money existed outside the laws of this world. I might not have known what the otherworlders were really doing, but I was sure that a lot of them killed one another right after they were reincarnated. Plus they could make the natives do their bidding with their strength. It was only natural for the morally bankrupt ones to reveal themselves in droves. It wasn’t hard to imagine that they’d be willing to do anything depending on how much yen was offered to them.

Damn it. The whole situation is completely in that bastard’s favor.

“Mr. Imabayashi is pretty stern, so the Crimson Moon Brigade taking you in means going against him.”

“So?”

“You’ll hear it from Ms. Kaori later, but there *are* benefits to taking you in. It would, however, put our relationship with Mr. Imabayashi in jeopardy. Some of us in this Brigade don’t agree with Ms. Kaori and have voiced our objections. Like me.”

Saito huffed a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders. “There’s a problem with you too. You’re a summoner, right?”

“I am.”

He didn’t even try to hide his disdain. I knew exactly what he meant by that, but I figured I’d hold it in and continued to listen.

“Summoners may be good for solo runs, but they’ve got an abysmal knack for being jacks-of-all-trades.”

I'll give him that. In general, the five essential roles in a party were a tank, a melee, a support class that could apply buffs and debuffs, a healer, and a mage. Even during group battles between guilds, parties like this would form a single unit.

"In a party, the number of familiars a summoner can call upon is significantly reduced. And as you know, even if that summoner fights by themselves with only their summons, they don't even come close to a party of players around the same level in terms of strength."

Saito placed his elbow on the table, holding out his right hand.

"Mr. Saito?"

"Arm wrestle with me. I wanna get a proper feel for your condition."

"Arm wrestle?" My head tilt made his nasty grin get even wider.

"I bet you felt like the strongest man alive, waltzing through this underdeveloped world among the indigenous savages who might as well be from the Middle Ages. I'm about to let you know that it was all an illusion."

Alice shuddered when he said "indigenous savages." *Ugh, right after she finally overcame persecution at school and the trauma of losing her hometown too... Bastard dug it all back up.*

"I'll show you the true power of a melee class," he continued after huffing another breath. "In your case, that's the first thing you need to learn. Once you've been humbled, shut up and get out of here before Ms. Kaori comes back."

"What'll happen to me then?"

"You won't have her backing you, so the other reincarnators will probably gang up on you and steal your life away."

I took a pause. "You realize I'm a human being, just like you, right? Don't you think it's awful to talk about killing and getting killed like it's nothing?"

"Murder is forbidden here at the Crimson Moon Brigade, but I have experience killing the indigenous who tried to run while I was with Mr. Imabayashi. People live, then they die. It's survival of the fittest. I'm pretty sure

I know that better than you.”

Oh, I see. I probably don't have to speak so politely to this guy anymore. He just confirmed that he's the same type of bastard as my foster father.

“What's your class?”

His eyebrows twitched at my sudden change in tone, then his face morphed into a victorious one. “I'm a Heavy Fighter.”

Ah, the guys who are covered in plate armor and swing around battle-axes. Their speed stat and ability to retreat may both be 0, but their muscle strength and defense stat are maxed out. The class was like a blend between a tank and a frontline attacker. If I recalled correctly, they were weak to magic. Among all the classes, they'd probably be either first or second place when it came to things like arm wrestling.

What should I do?

My insides were churning as I looked at Alice's downtrodden face. This guy was a bona fide asshole. It was increasingly obvious that things would get even worse if I lost in a match like this.

I might as well go all out, then.

My trump card guaranteed that we could get away, and I already had Alice's safety under control. As long as our escape route was there, nothing else mattered. It wouldn't be a bad idea to test out how much of an advantage Release of God's Might could give me against these guys.

“Whatcha gonna do, Shinobu Iijima? Don't tell me you're scared.”

“Nah, I'm good. Let's wrestle.”

His brows twitched again. “That's not how you talk to an adult. Looks like you need to be taught some manners.”

“Sorry to say, but I determine who I respect based on what's inside, not some number.”

I mirrored his stance and put my elbow on the table.

Summoners are able to receive a fraction of the stats of any summons on the field and add it to their own. That's why they're able to hold their own relatively well as solo players, even though they can't be buffed by allies.

But of course, receiving stats from their summons isn't as good as getting buffed by a support player. I could tell that Saito was being buffed by one of the level 99 people behind him, and with him being a strength-based class on top of that, my chances of winning were slim to none.

I did have one thought—what if my allies' stats being substantially raised by Release of God's Might made their buffing abilities even stronger? Just thinking about it made my confidence grow.

I'd struggled through hell to obtain this skill after Floor 1 of the 13 Floors to Utopia, Agartha.

Use Skill: Release of God's Might.

I initiated my link to the souls of Gabriel, Tsukuyomi, and Bahamut, who weren't present. I'd already made sure that I could borrow their powers without them being out, since I'd tried several different methods when testing out the skill. Four summons were buffing me, so Cerberus being weakened shouldn't be that detrimental.

Saito and I locked our right hands together over the table. He clenched mine with all his strength in an instant.

"Hah! Are you pretending it doesn't hurt? Be careful, your bones might crack before we even get to wrestle!"

He really was strong. I felt like my hand was being clamped in a vise.

But the pain wasn't so bad that I couldn't take it, so Release of God's Might was definitely working.

I flashed my own grin at him. "Sorry, but I don't think you're strong enough for that."

"The only thing that comes outta your mouth is shit, brat. Hurry up, let's start

already.”

“Any time you’re ready.”

Saito’s arm immediately fell forward. The back of my hand shot toward the surface of the table at an incredible speed.

“Ha ha! Weak, aren’t we?! Your mouth’s the only thing with vigor in it!”

Freeze.

A split second before my hand hit the table, both of our arms froze up.

“...What?” His brows were doing yet another legendary furrow.

“All I can say is, what you see is what you get.”

My words made his face contort into the same expression as a hannya mask. I could feel him push more strength into his arm, but my hand wouldn’t go down any further.

“Grrr...!” The muscles of his right bicep slipping out of his tank top were bulging so hard that they were turning blue.

It seemed he’d reached the limit of his strength. I put about eighty percent of my strength into my hand.

“Guh!” he grunted. “What?! You’re pushing back?!”

I couldn’t help but be impressed by the sheer muscle strength of a melee class. Our powers were about even at this range, with mine edging out ever so slightly.

But I wasn’t even at my full power yet.

“Hrgh!”

I groaned as I unleashed everything I had in me. An outlandish amount of physical pressure forced itself from my palm, plunging Saito’s right hand into the table at a great speed.

Crash!

The table buckled under his knuckles and his body arced as it flipped over, his back hitting the ground. He struggled to pull himself up, turning away from the broken table.

“Y-Y-You! What the hell did you do?!”

“I used a paid item. Titan’s Drug.”

That was the name of a super rare item that could temporarily raise your strength stat.

Naturally, I didn’t have it. I lied so he wouldn’t get suspicious. I didn’t feel like revealing my leg up with Agatha and all that yet.

“Titan’s Drug?! You used that *here*?!” Saito’s big mouth had fallen all the way open. I couldn’t blame him. I’d doubt my sanity too if I really used an item like that on a stupid squabble.

I gave him my usual nod. “I don’t like being looked down on.”

“You’ve gotta be nuts!” His shouts made him seem like he was levelheaded, but I didn’t miss the fear and cold sweat that came down his face. In his mind, it seemed I’d been ranked up from “an impudent brat” to “a lunatic when provoked.” Just as planned.

The door to the guildmaster’s room opened with a clack. Ms. Kaori entered, blue veins popping on her temple.

“What’s going on here?! Explain, Saito!”

†

“I’m so sorry, Iijima! Please eat this so I can make it up to you!”

A new table had been brought in, and on top of it was a whole roasted turkey, white bread, oxtail curry, and salt-crusted lamb, among other things. Spices were on the rare side in this world, so this meal could only be described as gourmet, even speaking lightly.

Since he’d been rude to a guest, Saito would be severely chewed out by Ms. Kaori later.

“Master Shinobu? Can I...eat this?” Alice’s mouth was watering.

“They told us we can, so I assume so.”

She'd already bitten into the meat before I finished my sentence.

“Ahmg, ahmg, crunch, crunch, glug glug glug!”

I'd noticed this before—Alice's appetite was a sight to behold. It was so bottomless that I felt like I was getting full from just watching her.

They'd prepared some stuff that resembled dog food for Cerberus too.

“I am a warrior...” His catchphrase was audible between vehement munches as his tail swooshed back and forth. *It would be tactless of me to tell him otherwise. I'd feel bad for him.*

His character had probably been written to be incapable of disobeying his puppy instincts in this form. Or something like that.

I turned back to Alice. “I know you're always hungry since you're still growing, but make sure you chew your food.”

“Ah... Yesh shir, I'm shorry!”

She giggled at her blunder. I couldn't help but laugh too.

“Aren't you still in high school, Iijima?” Ms. Kaori asked. “As far as I can tell, you're still growing too. Eat up!”

“Wouldn't want the offer to go to waste!” I followed Alice's lead and took a bite of the lamb.

Man, that's good!

My cheeks went lax as soon as I brought the oxtail curry to my lips. The tail meat melted inside my mouth. The flavor was closer to Japanese curry than Indian curry. It was nothing less than exquisite.

I gulped down some of the water, “By the way, about my sister Megumi—”

Ms. Kaori stopped me by holding her palm up. After wiping her mouth with a napkin, she pulled out a single photo from her pocket.

“We'll get straight to the point.”

“...What is this?” The words barely came out of me.

The photo she'd handed to me was of my sister sleeping in a hospital room.

“Daikokuji Hospital, Tokyo. Room 302. This photo shows her at this exact moment in time.”

I couldn't bring myself to respond. I'd known generally where she was through the Friends List, but nothing this specific. I couldn't rule out the possibility that that information was some kind of bluff either. But in this case, there was proof.

Gazing at Megumi's face brought back all sorts of memories. After a while, I looked at Ms. Kaori. “How do you know any of this? And why do you have a photo?”

She looked back with a bitter expression. “Telling you the answer to that is a rather difficult endeavor.”

“What do you mean?”

“To be frank, very few people know about this. I think it's mostly us five grand guildmasters.”

“You *think*? So there are things you don't know either?”

“Well, the source of the information itself is an unknown entity, after all.”

A moment of silence.

I took another sip of water, then tried again. “What does that mean?”

A very blunt question, but there was no other way to ask.

“This information came from Tatsuya Mikagami, the player who was once ranked first in *La Vita Online*. As far as I remember, he was also a medical student and a national athlete for three different sports.”

“...Uh, what? Is he Superman or something?”

“He was genuinely incredible. It was hard to believe his ingenuity and reflexes were human. That's why he was able to reap ten thousand guild coins during the first round of killings, obtain a Log-Out Ticket, and beat the game.”

“If he beat the game, then he's not in this world anymore, right? Then... How

did he get this photo of the real world in real time?”

“Slow down. You still don’t know what led up to all that. I’ll have to start by explaining the guild quest required to obtain a Log-Out Ticket.”

†

Ayumu Imabayashi

In a special dungeon, the area wedged between time and space: Purgatory.

The stone cave continued far into the dark depths. We progressed deeper and deeper into it, ignoring the ghosts that would sometimes pass by through the chilly air.

This was the dimensional interval that existed within the sacred mountain of the world of *La Vita*. We’d been going down for about three hours by then.

Once we finally exited the cave, we arrived at the barren wasteland of Purgatory. We made it far enough to see The Gate of Petero with our own eyes, the final destination in Purgatory. Nothing beyond the gate had been implemented into the game, but we didn’t care about that. The important thing was that a level 99 monster that only wielded Instant Death Magic lived here.

The Evil Eye of Death.

A monster shaped like an eyeball. As you would expect, it had the Evil Eye of Instant Death. If you equipped yourself with antideath items and gear, you could lower the chances of instant death remarkably. And the only way to avoid certain death from insta-death moves was—

In rare cases, even a level 1 player could defeat it and get a ton of EXP.

“Hurry up and go! You piece of shit!”

I pointed at the far-off Evil Eye, giving the groveling coward in front of me a good kick.

“P-Please wait, Mr. Imabayashi!”

“Wait? For what?”

“It’s an Evil Eye of Death! It could kill us instantly!”

“We have antideath items equipped. You realize you’re the only one of my subordinates that isn’t level 99, right?”

“B-But the insta-death! The chances of us evading death aren’t zero!”

“Less than 0.0001 percent. Do you know what that is?”

“That’s the chance of me dying from the Evil Eye’s Evil Eye skill, right?”

“Yes. You can take about ten hits from it in one battle. Very easy odds to overcome.”

“But I’d have to defeat it over a hundred times before I made it to level 99...”

I kicked his ass yet again. “This is the most efficient way to farm EXP!”

“B-But the insta-deaaaath!”

“You know, all the others overcame their fears and leveled up this way. You’re the only one left!”

The piece of shit got on his knees and pleaded, tears welling up in his eyes.

“But sir... I’m just a cowardly human being!”

“Does it look like I care? We’re trying to surpass all the other guilds here! Be useful for once!”

The bottom of my foot stomped on his head, causing him to screech.

“Just do it already! Get your level up and actually do something for once!”

“B-B-B-But! What about you, sir?! Would you do this in my position? I’ll say it again—it’s insta-death!”

I ground my foot on his scalp with a cackle. “Of course I wouldn’t! It’s insta-death!”

“Then don’t make me do this! Or at least join my party and help me out! There are safer ways of doing it than this!”

“I’m already level 99, idiot! I don’t need to do this, nor do I need to help you level up! The risk may be small, but it’s still there!”

“B-But none of the other guilds force their members to level up like this!”

“Well, duh. No matter how big the safety margin is, when you die, you die. This game’s shitty system says that you can’t gain any more EXP if your level gap with the other players is too big. Those other chumps are all weaklings who avoid battles.”

The piece of shit began crying out of fear. A large man crouched on the ground, weeping. It was so pathetic that I had to laugh. I wanted to bully him a little more, but unfortunately, I was in a good mood by that point.

“Guess there’s nothing I can do about you. I’ll forgive you.”

I graciously removed my foot from his head. He looked up at me with a face full of hope.

“R-Really, Mr. Imabayashi?”

“Of course. I won’t bully you to this degree anymore.”

“Thank you so much! Thank you so, so much! Anything... Anything but insta-death, please!”

I cocked my head in confusion. He cocked his back at me.

“No, you still have to exterminate the Evil Eye of Death solo. Remember, your quota for today is to level up five times.”

His face froze over in an instant. “But you just said...you’d forgive me...”

“And I did. I took my foot off your head and let you look up at me. Don’t take it for granted.”

“N-No way...”

I turned, waving my hand behind me. My ten level 99 guild members walked behind me as we approached the Gate of Petero.

“If you aren’t done by the time I get back, I’m gonna hunt you for a bounty too.”

†

Leaving the shit behind us, we walked for a few minutes toward the Gate.

Murayama spoke up from beside me. “You really are crazy, Mr. Imabayashi.”

“How so?”

He chuckled darkly. “Your leveling methods. Over fifty people have died since the beginning of the year.”

“This is the only way to make those low-level shitheads stronger and you know it.”

“It was impressive that you noticed,” he said after a shrug.

“Hm? You mean the inventories?”

“Exactly that. Such a wild method... Normally, the other five grand guildmasters would have noticed your extreme increase in strength and your strange actions. This could even lead to war. They could also simply check who’s been dying on the Friends List.”

He wasn’t wrong. We were preparing for the upcoming major update, Agartha, among other plans in the works through different routes.

I needed to get Agartha in my hands as quickly as possible, since it would provide a huge boost in power for the players. Whoever got to monopolize it would end up ruling over all the reincarnators. Whoever ruled the reincarnators ruled over the world.

“They are generally counted as dead players once the clock strikes midnight on their death day. Lots of people have noticed.” I shrugged.

“You’re the only one who noticed the underside to that rule though, sir.”

“It was only a stroke of luck that I did, if I’m being honest.”

“No need to be modest. I never expected that putting corpses into one’s inventory would prevent them from being counted as dead.”

“You can’t put living things in your inventory, but animal meat is fine. I got the idea when I found out that meat doesn’t rot in it either.”

“Time is essentially stopped in there, right?”

“Yeah, it worked out precisely how I wanted it to when I tested it. The Friends system can’t register bodies inside an inventory as dead. I really got lucky with

that one.”

Really, really lucky.

The only other people who knew about this were my few close subordinates. It'd been quite useful for helping me in my journey to surpassing the other guilds. If those guilds noticed that my underlings—no, my war slaves—were dying from leveling attempts, they'd figure out that I was preparing for war.

I guffawed. My forced-leveling system for the low-level, reincarnated shits was so effective it couldn't be measured properly.

“No, it can't have just been luck for you. Back when player killing was rampant and everyone was panicking, you were the only one who went around collecting the bodies and conducting experiments on them.”

“I did it *because* no one else would do it. Don't you agree?”

“I suppose... But it's still super impressive. You're fucking nuts, Mr. Imabayashi.” He seemed to be truly impressed. He then became exasperated from the bottom of his heart.

“You know what, Murayama?” I flashed a smile at him.

“Yes sir?”

“This is what I think: including the inventory thing, I can only think that this game's system is intentionally designed for player killing.”

“That might be true. The rewards you get from guild quests are quite strange as well.”

“That's why I've decided.”

“Decided what, sir?”

“Well, I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, you see.”

“As you've mentioned.”

“I've been able to use money however I want my whole life. The heavens told me that has been my fate since I was born.”

“...So what?”

“It’s also my fate to live that way in *La Vita Online*. Since the system itself is providing for me, I will obey my will and live my intended path.”

Murayama paused. “I’m not quite sure how to respond.”

“I’m the passive one in this relationship, in other words. If the heavens are going to love me with everything they have, then I will allow myself to be loved with everything I got. That’s just how it is.”

“You’re the *passive* one? I can only see you as being on the offense here!”

We’d arrived at The Gate of Petero in the middle of his exclamation. The Gate opened in the middle of the barren wasteland it was built on.

Past this was the warping of the dimension’s edge, forming a wall. The next dimension up should’ve been visible past it, but it was all black, completely opaque.

Of course it has nothing. That area hasn’t been implemented into the game yet.

Not just this dungeon, but every unreleased area in the world of La Vita was like this: an impassable void spreading out.

“All right, we’re here. If I recall, you’re the only one who doesn’t know the secret behind this gate, Murayama.”

“That’s correct. I was told everyone gets shown this to celebrate them reaching level 99.”

“Now that you’re level 99, you’re one of my confidants, both in name and status. Only people I’ve approved of can see what’s past here.”

“So, what’s in it?”

I casually raised my right hand, illuminating the area with Light Magic.

“What are you doing, Mr. Imabayashi?”

“Showing you what’s beyond the Gate.”

“But there’s physically nothing there. Light won’t show anything in the dark—
Eek!”

Murayama screamed when he saw it, just like every other wimp who’d come

here.

“M-Mr. Imabayashi! What is *this*?!”

“This is what happens”—I paused for a second to gaze at the scene before me, the light revealing a hilarious sight—“to the people who gather enough guild coins, buy a Log-Out Ticket, beat the game, and manage to *log out*.”

†

Shinobu Iijima

Guild quests were bonus quests that would occasionally be given to the members of each guild.

There’s a reason I’m saying “would.” They were mostly intended to supplement what was going to happen after the Agarthia event was officially implemented into the game, the big renewal with it.

At present, while the update hadn’t yet been applied, the quests would preempt the balancing issues that would arise with the new rewards and the beginner mission “Let’s Register with a Guild!” which was intended to gauge user reactions. They were also quests that were introduced as a sort of test.

“I know about those quests, but what about them? The rewards you can get with the guild coins are the usual stamina recovery items and rare gear, right?”

Ms. Kaori nodded deeply at my confusion. “I understand being skeptical. You aren’t part of a guild right now, after all. Take a look at this.”

She called up her own menu screen and gestured for me to look at it. There was a section titled “Guild Quest Exchange.” Listed on it were a bunch of items you could exchange with manga-like designs.

“Are these rewards...firearms?”

TAC-50 Anti-Materiel Rifle: 100 Guild Coins

M2 Browning: 150 Guild Coins

M134 Minigun: 50 Guild Coins

The list also included an M4 carbine for 20 Guild Coins, a Gatling gun, and an...assault rifle, based on the drawing.

I didn't know much about guns, but even if these were slightly modified to fit a video game, I could tell that they were meant for soldiers. There was even a stun grenade listed.

"Why are these the rewards? They don't make any sense within the context of this world."

"That's why these Guild Coins are so strange," Ms. Kaori answered. "Compared to everything that's in perfect conformity in this world with only small adjustments, these clearly stand out, don't you think?"

"Yeah, they really do. But you know what's weird?"

"What?"

"Putting aside the obvious question of why there are guns here, we reincarnators are much stronger than, say, tanks. We're more like giant, destructive missiles. What I'm trying to say is, it's weird that these would be put here when we're so strong already."

"Hang on there, Iijima. Check this out."

She fidgeted with the screen and a long, golden image appeared with a description underneath.

Pure Gold Bar, 1 kg: 1,000 Guild Coins

A bar of pure gold. Can be carried over to the real world.

I wasn't too well-versed in the workings of money, but I was pretty sure that one gram of gold was worth a few thousand yen. In which case, this bar would be a few million. Not to mention...

"It can be...carried over to the real world?"

"The firearms, gold bars, and everything else you can exchange the guild coins for have that in the description."

"Wait a second. Why would...?"

“Don’t bother asking me,” she brushed off my confusion. “Now, take a look at the final page.”

She changed the menu screen again. This was written on the next page:

Log-Out Ticket and sSsidfjie*Uu3sdJGn: 10,000 Guild Coins

“What’s this?”

“The ‘can be carried’ message and the Log-Out Ticket. When we were all reincarnated here four hundred years ago, we found out that this was one of the requirements for beating the game.”

“But there’s gibberish in the item title.” It was suspicious no matter how you looked at it.

She gave a small nod. “There is. Everyone noticed it and was wary of it, and it took about half a year before the first killings occurred.”

“Killings...?”

In the back of my mind, I could see the names on the Friends List turning red in quick succession. I finally began to understand why players had been killing one another back then.

“I see. So that’s what happened... Players can steal one another’s guild coins by killing.”

“Nailed it. Since the update hasn’t been officially implemented yet, only the first guild quest has been given to us. Meaning there’s a limit to how many guild coins are in circulation right now.”

The guild coins had become a scarce resource. Not everyone could obtain a Log-Out Ticket in this situation, so players resorted to killing to get them. That’s why so many people were now dead.

“In those cases, they wouldn’t be considered ‘player kills,’ but actual murders, right?”

“Not as much time has passed in the real world as it has here, apparently. But there are all kinds of people with all kinds of circumstances in this game. Some

of them have sick loved ones who could die at any moment, while others have kids who can't be left alone for long periods of time.”

“I understand that. But is it really possible to come to the conclusion of killing other human beings so easily?”

“Half of us reincarnators have been given a tremendous amount of power in this world where there are no laws.”

I couldn't respond. She was right, after all.

“Some of them have lost all reasoning and see everyone else as mere insects, yet they still needed half a year to get to that point. Do you get what happened?”

I sighed knowingly. If nothing else, I saw the people native to this game, like Alice, as fellow human beings. I couldn't say for sure about the other reincarnators, but they must have seen the natives as normal humans too.

Compared to them, the reincarnators were treated as invincible every single day. What would happen once they got a taste for killing after dealing with bandits and bounties?

It was obvious. The morally bankrupt reincarnators would begin attacking innocent villagers or even nobles to satiate their greed. They'd see themselves as special, so other people's lives, even those of their fellow reincarnators, would hold less weight to them. The killings were the result of that.

“That makes the guild coin rewards even worse. It's like they're advocating for us to kill one another. That, on top of the power gap between us and the natives, makes me think whoever did this to us intended for this to happen from the start.”

Ms. Kaori tilted her head a bit. “Could you elaborate?”

“Megumi... My sister's log-in time has been on display this whole time, right? You all knew it was four hundred years away, even back then.”

“We did.”

“Before the pre-Agartha update added the guild coins, it wasn't possible for you guys to leave the game. The rewards even include a ton of real-life money.

It was only natural for the morally bankrupt to steal guild coins, aiming for the gold bars and Log-Out Tickets.”

“It didn’t take long for you to understand. I only just told you, yet you have a thorough grasp on the situation already.”

“In my previous life, there was a monster that would’ve done horrible things if laws didn’t exist.”

“Are you talking about Mr. Imabayashi?”

I just shrugged in response. Ms. Kaori burst out laughing seeing that. *Oh, it seems she knows the pain of being around that bastard too.*

“It’s just as you’ve imagined. After the first round of player killings, four people managed to get enough guild coins.”

“Those are the ones who got the Log-Out Tickets.”

She nodded and held up a glass of wine.

I pressed further. “You say ‘first round,’ but that was the only instance where people actually died. Why is that?”

“As you already know, there’s a possibility that we could all make it home with enough time. Once the update is applied and the quests are given to us regularly, guild coins will stop being a limited resource.”

“Agartha, then. Reincarnator society won’t be a zero-sum game anymore.”

“That’s right. A huge, game-changing event that will begin as soon as your sister logs in.”

I probably shouldn’t tell her that I already have access to Agartha’s dungeon. I still don’t know if I can trust her.

I couldn’t bring myself to hate Ms. Kaori at this point, however. How should I put it? My heart calmed down, in a nonromantic sense, when I talked to her. She also just seemed like a genuinely good person.

“To conclude, not many murderers who were willing to kill their fellow Japanese people were out there. Only three people ended up getting Log-Out Tickets after killing players.”

Ms. Kaori was probably being conscious of Alice by specifying the type of people, meaning the reincarnators really did have different opinions on the natives. It was definitely apparent after seeing the hatred from the Sages.

Something bothered me about what Ms. Kaori had said. “Three people? I thought four of them had enough coins?”

“Four had enough. Three of them were player killers, and the last one was a PKK, Iijima.”

“PKK?” I nodded. “A player killer killer?”

“That was the man I mentioned earlier, Tatsuya Mikagami. He killed several player killers and ended up with ten thousand guild coins.”

She clapped her hands together, signaling the end of the conversation. “And that was everything you didn’t know about the last four hundred years.”

Our long discussion finally ended. I’d heard a lot of useful information, but I had to get one thing out of the way first.

“Okay then, what exactly are you going to make me do?”

“I want you in our guild. We will guarantee you protection from Mr. Imabayashi, and in exchange, you will provide us with guild coins.”

“...I’m not sure how to parse that last part.”

“Guild coins aren’t only obtained through quests and player killings. You can also trade them.”

“Trade?”

“Just think of it as the fee for being a guild member. A set number of people have to participate in each guild quest, right?”

“Right.”

“For the first quest, there’s no set number. It can be done solo. Everyone except you has already done it, so we couldn’t join you even if we wanted to. When the Agarthia event begins, it will overthrow the entirety of society’s balance. We have no idea how the other guildmasters will move.”

“Are you talking about the gold bars?”

“I am. Each guild will do their own thing, including us. The members of our guild focus on getting home over everything else, through mutual unity.”

“What do you mean?”

“The guild coins our members collect are pooled into the guild’s funds. Our guild’s accomplishments, as well as each of our combat abilities and efforts, are considered while making decisions, and we distribute based on majority opinion.”

“This sounds very beneficial to me.”

Ms. Kaori was convincing me that she was much better than that bastard, that was for sure.

“Unfortunately, you’re ranked below the bottom of our distribution criteria, and we’re already protecting you from Mr. Imabayashi. I won’t be able to convince any of the other members to give you any more.”

“Putting me aside, doesn’t that make this system disadvantageous for lower-ranked people?”

Ms. Kaori thumped her chest to reassure me. “Including me, the five of us level 99 original members of this guild have decided to stay in *La Vita* until the final guild member has returned home. We wouldn’t abandon them in cold blood. The other four might have to go home in a dire situation...but if nothing else, I’ve decided to stay.”

She said this with a smile that shined like the sun. *Oh boy.*

I’d been observing her cautiously, talking to her like a fraud who could trick me at any moment, but in that moment, I couldn’t feel even a hint of malice or deception behind her words.

“Um, Ms. Kaori?”

“Yes, Iijima?”

“You haven’t killed anyone, have you? Including the natives.”

“I have not, excluding appropriate defense. What about it?”

“I think there are a lot of reincarnators who have lost all reason at this point,

so...”

“That there are. It hurts me to think about it. It turned out there was a limit to my powers as well, leading to a lot of this world’s humans getting attacked. I don’t know how to make up for it.”

Because she was being so up-front with me, I decided to throw her the most honest question I could ask.

“How in the world are you able to stay so sane in a world like this?”

“A lot of people have asked me that. They’re all satisfied with this one answer.”

“Which is?”

She puffed up her chest once more. “My father and mother were police officers, my brother was a police officer, and my grandfather and great-grandfather were police officers. And when I was in Japan? I was a policewoman myself.”

I froze, then burst out laughing as it all came together. “Ha ha! I see, I see. Now I’m convinced.”

“When a natural disaster happens, the JSDF and police are supposed to be the last to retreat to safety. We can’t just leave the citizens there, can we?”

She beamed a kind smile at me.

†

Ayumu Imabayashi

The light shone past The Gate of Petero. Nothing was supposed to be in that space except the darkness. But in it stood a giant tree, and hanging from its branches two men and a woman hanging.

Tetsuji Kijima.

Kotomi Ohira.

Ryoma Sugiura.

The three player killers who'd gotten their hands on Log-Out Tickets. They were now strung up on a life-sucking tree that might have been a dryad. The vines had invaded their bodies, looking like veins that had burst from their skin. The vines were particularly focused around their heads, most likely devouring their brains. Feces and drool dripped from the three bodies, their faces devoid of any signs of life.

Murayama couldn't find words to respond with. I glanced at him, then put my hand out to the border beyond the gate.

Knock, knock.

I knocked twice, which was the trick, same as last time. Despite it supposedly being the void, there was a tangible space between me and it. We'd tried attacking it with Grade 5 and Grade 6 magic last time, but the wall didn't take even a smidgen of damage.

"M-M-M-Mr. Imabayashi! Wh-What *is* this?!"

"The land beyond Purgatory. The only thing I can say is that it's an unopened, unimplemented area."

"But those are the player killers! I've run into Ohira before! How are they here?!"

I put my hand on my chin and gave it a good thought. I always thought about it whenever I was asked this question, but I only ever gave one answer.

"They managed to get outside of the game system by logging out."

"But they didn't go back to the real world!"

"Remember the glitchy words in the Log-Out Ticket title?"

He gasped, then gulped.

I pointed at the bodies. "As you can see, they logged out. The system wasn't lying about anything."

“But that’s... That’s just... This has been our only hope for the past four hundred years! Some of us are still living full of hope!”

“You say some strange things. I saw you having fun abusing your power with your strength backing you up.”

“In my case, yes,” he shrugged. “But guys like the ones in the Crimson Moon Brigade would be shocked to find this out. Don’t you have about ten thousand guild coins yourself, Mr. Imabayashi? Is this why you didn’t leave the game?”

“I already had the guild coins before I found out about this. I’m simply enjoying the world of *La Vita*. Plus, those glitchy words were pretty suspicious, don’t you think? As if I’d touch that.”

“How very...you,” he mumbled. “But really, what *happened* to these three?”

“We dispatch investigators here periodically, but they come back passed out in tubes. They must be having bad nightmares or something, because sometimes they open up their eyes and scream in fear like animals.”

I met his eyes. “To me, they don’t look happy.”

“I’m sure they aren’t.”

Murayama then gasped when he realized the important part.

“What about Mikagami? Tatsuya Mikagami, the guy who was number one in the rankings! He’s not here!”

I put my hand to my chin again for another thinking session. Like before, there was only one real answer.

“No clue. He’s the only anomaly I still don’t understand. However, he was the one who gave me the Key to Agartha, so the answer’s probably there.”

“The Key to Agartha? The one from the new update? Does that mean you have access to it now?”

“Yes, I do. I’ve only told this to my close associates, so keep it under wraps. Incidentally, do you know what ‘Agartha’ means?”

“No idea, sir.”

Not that I would have expected such a dim-witted man to know.

Agartha.

The name of the utopia said to lie within the center of the planet. It was also said to move in and out of the planet’s core.

“To explain it to an idiot like you, all of the answers we’re looking for are probably in there. Which means we can’t let anyone, and I mean *anyone* else, get to it first. That’s our goal in the meantime.”

We had already begun our Agartha run. But there was no guarantee that we’d be able to clear it once Megumi logged in and all the other players gained access to it. My only option was to set things up, both in the public eye and behind the scenes. Getting these low-level scrubs stronger was part of that plan.

“By the way, what happened to Saito? The guy we sent to the Crimson Moon Brigade.”

Murayama’s eyebrows shot up as if he’d only just remembered the name. “Ah, yes. He contacted us yesterday. As you predicted, they’d gotten in contact with Shinobu Iijima.”

“That shitty brat...”

I clicked my tongue when I heard his name. He didn’t log in for the longest time, and then disappeared off the radar as soon as he did, even though I was aiming to kill him the second he landed after the tutorial. And just when we’d finally caught wind of him, he was with that woman?!

“I already made a secret agreement with the other grand guildmasters about the Crimson Moon Brigade, so this is a good opportunity.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“I’ve never liked that woman. I’m gonna make Saito purge both her and the brat.”

Chapter 2: The Ancient Flower That Blooms at the Far End of the North

Shinobu Iijima

The weather was nice, with small clouds here and there across the blue sky. Past the coniferous forest, there was a snowfield as far as the eye could see.

“This coat is so useful, Master Shinobu! It’s thin, yet so warm!”

The fur coat I’d given Alice was more stylish than practical. It matched her cat ears. But I’d cast Grade 3: All Adjust onto it, so as she said, it didn’t let her feel the negative twenty-degree temperature. This spell was so powerful it could completely shut out certain amounts of heat and chill during battle.

“What about you, Gabriel? Aren’t you cold? I didn’t cast anything on you.”

“Grade 1 temperature-changing attack magic does not affect us. The air surrounding my body is maintained at around twenty degrees Celsius.”

“Well, that’s convenient.” It was a little surreal to see a woman in a sleeveless maid outfit walking through a snowfield. Just looking at her made me shiver. The climate here was like being even farther north than Hokkaido in the dead of winter.

“Woof! Woof!”

Cerberus, still in his puppy form, happily ran amok with his tail swishing back and forth. Alice watched him with glee plain on her face. Cerberus wasn’t showing even a shred of dignity as a soldier, which was only fair, since once he got his power back and turned into a hot guy again, he would become an unapproachable, too-damn-serious beast.

“Master Shinobu,” Gabriel said, bringing me back to reality. “I have a question.”

“Yes, Gabriel?”

“The Brigade is going to take a portion of our guild coins. Was it really all right for you to accept this request?”

“Hmm...” I put my hand on my chin and gave it some thought. “I’m just pretending to go along with it for now. I’m still observing the situation.” She tilted her head slightly, so I explained further. “The quest won’t activate unless I’m registered with the guild. It would have been bad for them if they couldn’t get me to do it, right? We don’t even know what they’re using the coins for either.”

“That is correct.”

“As of now, our goal is to get as much intel as we can. Even if we have a general idea of what we should do, we still don’t have enough information to work with. Ms. Kaori seems fairly trustworthy, but I can’t say the same about the other members of the Crimson Moon Brigade. And that’s not even the most pressing problem.”

Gabriel sighed in relief. “I’m relieved to hear that you’ve thought so far ahead, Master Shinobu. My apologies for doubting you.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I’m glad you were concerned for me.”

“Of course, Master.” Her bow was so perfect it could only be described as beautiful. Sure, it was weird to see a maid in a snowfield, but as far as fantasies go, this wasn’t bad.

“At the end of the day,” I continued, “we need guild coins too. Ms. Kaori told me that I can keep all the coins from this specific quest. We can use them after the Agartha event, so it was a good opportunity to take.”

“It was also beneficial for us to receive the Scrolls that we’d been looking for, for Alice’s spell acquisition process.”

“That too,” I nodded. “I take up any offers that are beneficial to me.”

Alice had been quietly listening until that point. Her eyes sparkled as she found the chance to jump in. “You’re so incredible, Master Shinobu!”

“Incredible? How so?”

“I genuinely thought Ms. Kaori was a good person, so I figured you shook her

hand because you thought the same.”

“Nope, I was just being cautious. She probably really *is* a good person, but that conversation wasn’t enough evidence for me. And that’s without even mentioning the other guys.”

“But still! I hadn’t really considered any other option...”

“We’re putting our lives on the line here. It would be way too dangerous to just blindly follow their orders. Whatever happens, I’m the one who decides where I’m going to go.”

Gabriel nodded wholeheartedly, and Alice looked grave.

“The same applies to you, Alice.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“Only you can decide your own fate. If you decide that I made a mistake, then you’re free to consider cutting me off and choosing a different path.”

“N-No sir! I could never!” she shook her head and mumbled fervently. “You’re like *God* to me, Master Shinobu. You could never make a mistake...”

I could only laugh bitterly at her innocence. Ruffling her hair, I accepted my fate. “Well then, I guess it’s okay for you to trust me in general as your guardian.”

“Y-Yes sir! I always will!”

“But once you get a little older, you’ll have to start thinking for yourself. Your path is your own.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but...”

“But?”

She gave me a full smile. “I think I’ll always believe in you in the end, Master Shinobu! That’ll always be the right answer, because I love you!”

Oof, she’s getting pretty close to blind faith here. That’s not good, honestly. But, well...I can’t feel that bad about it when she’s being so straightforward with her feelings.

“Just keep it in the back of your mind, then. Never forget to think for yourself,

Alice. As for you all—Gabriel, you’ll help me remind her, all right?”

“As you wish.” Her expression didn’t change.

Alice then changed the subject. “So, the gods said we’re doing a ‘guild quest’? That means they give us a ‘mission’ to solve some of the world’s real problems. Did I get that right?”

“Yup. That’s why we’re here.”

I pointed to the edge of the field in the distance. We could just faintly see the tiny silhouette of a city to the north. More specifically, we could see the giant wall that surrounded it, built to protect the city from monsters.

“Let’s press on. We have to solve this monster hazard.”

A mechanical voice played in my ears as a menu window popped up in front of my eyes with a *ding*.

—The Guild Quest has been activated.

—Mission Quest: The Overflow of Permafrost will now begin.

—Guild coins have been added to your inventory as a bonus for your first time challenging this quest.

†

We found ourselves in the inner garden of the soldier’s garrison in the northern city, painted silvery white by the snow.

It was impossible for humans to survive farther north than this, so this city was the northernmost source of life. There were two reasons for that: the cold (obviously) and the sheer number of monsters that inhabited the area. Monsters were already hard to kill in the first place, but their natural resistance to the cold and aggressive nature allowed them to multiply freely here.

More bluntly, the place was *overflowing* with monsters. That wasn’t the only problem though—their activity had also increased recently due to the alignment of the stars and the moon. Occurrences like this took place every few years around here, but if the humans just left the monsters be, then—surprise, surprise—the monsters would come to destroy the city.

Adventurer's Guilds from each kingdom would combine forces to exterminate them. But as you'd expect, it wasn't exactly a charitable exercise for them. The whole reason humans even bothered building a city in such a borderline uninhabitable place to begin with was because of the abundance of resources under the surface—gemstones, gold, the works. There were plenty of rewards in exchange for help. Furthermore, the rarer the materials the monsters dropped, the higher the price you could fetch for bagging them.

For this quest, we were joining the fight against the swarm of monsters, and the Brigade was using this as a way to test me. With us were a bunch of other humans here trying to get rich quickly.

“I'd say there are about a hundred people here, Gabriel.”

“Ninety-six people, to be precise, Master Shinobu. As far as I can see, their levels are strikingly low.”

“The soldiers dispatched from the kingdoms and adventurer's guilds aiming for the money are given special treatment. They don't have to take the exam to get chosen like me.”

The look on Alice's face became increasingly fearful. “U-Um... They all look so strong. Should I really be here?”

“You can use Grade 2 magic now, so you're probably one of the stronger people here. Have a little more confidence.”

“But you've been the one laying the foundation for me, sir. It wasn't through my power... It feels like I've been cheating.”

“Are you saying I'm cheating too, since people like me automatically learn how to use magic just by leveling up?” I chuckled.

She nodded slightly. “That's why it's...embarrassing.”

“What is?”

“You, Lady Gabriel, Lady Tsukuyomi...and even Cerberus are going to take the exam, right? Why am I also included...?”

“Cerberus is going to be admitted as a pet, but yeah, Gabriel and Tsukuyomi will participate.”

Having multiple summons out at once ate up my MP like a bitch, but the situation called for it. The Crimson Moon Brigade knew we were here, meaning they could attack us at any moment. I didn't believe Ms. Kaori was my enemy, but I also didn't want to be caught unprepared. You'd think that I'd opt to summon my trump card, Amaterasu, but I still hadn't fulfilled the conditions for her yet.

As I was lost in thought—

“Hey, buddy! Looks like you brought women, a kid, and a dog to fight monsters with you. You sure you're sane?” A man with a beard and a scar on one eye called out to me. Had this been a port town in the southern kingdom, I would've said he looked like a pirate.

“It's none of your business who I decide to bring with me.” I tried to defuse the situation so I could escape. I didn't want to linger with a guy like this around.

He grabbed my shoulder just as my heel started to turn. “Hang on there. Me and most of the other guys here put food on the table through adventurer work. Seems like you're one too, but it makes the rest of us look bad when you bring along such strange company.”

“How exactly am I making *you* look bad?”

His smile turned foul. “We work in teams. If a bastard who brings along women and children calls himself an adventurer, it makes the rest of us also look like chumps. If the rest of us look like chumps, the reputation of adventurers as a whole is gonna plummet, and then our clients will try to lowball our rewards—”

He just wouldn't stop talking. I understood what he was getting at but couldn't stand to listen to him anymore. His words were going in one ear and out the other.

Things had taken a turn for the worse. The guys around him were agreeing with him and jeering at me.

“...So to sum it up, if a bastard like you dicks around here, it makes the rest of us look bad. Get it? Go apologize to every one of us immediately, then go back

to wherever you came from! And just apologizing won't be enough—get on your knees and grovel! Just looking at a womanizer like you pisses me off!”

At that moment, I heard a loud sigh beside me.

Looking over, Tsukuyomi was shrugging her shoulders in an exaggerated motion.

“Shinobu. Just how long do I have to wait until I can kill these pebbles? Can I do it now?” Her smile looked sweet, but her eyes were terrifying. Her switch had been efficiently flipped.

Oh boy. This is bad.

Tsukuyomi moved first, before I could get the words “no killing” out of my mouth.

The one-eyed man turned his verbal attack toward her. “Wh-Who do you think you are, cutting in like that? And did you just call me a pebble? I'm an A-rank adventurer! Yeah, I wasn't able to get the special treatment this time, so I have to take the exam, but if this were the usual circumstances, I'd be so high up the ranks that insects like you wouldn't even be allowed to speak to me—”

“You're so kind, Shinobu. You've just been letting him go on and on.”

She pressed her middle finger to her thumb and held those fingers up to his chin.

“I'm not as nice as you. I hate what I hate.”

Snap!

A nice, mischievous sound rang out as she flicked the man's chin in one smooth motion.

“Huh?” He dropped to his knees, his eyes turning white as he then fell on his back with a thud.

“Oh, to be felled in such an unsightly way by one of those women he was putting down. There you go, show the public your disgraceful form.”

I couldn't help but be captivated by the smile that graced Tsukuyomi's face as she turned toward me.

†

“Damn it... What the hell did she just do?!”

The one-eyed man glared at us with a scary expression after regaining consciousness. He whipped around with a shriek once Tsukuyomi returned his glare.

Looks like he finally understands who he's dealing with. Good.

I knew Tsukuyomi was a troublemaker, but man, she could really get things boiling in an instant when she wanted.

The same could be said about Gabriel. At first glance, she looked the same as ever, watching the whole ordeal, but upon a closer look, you could see veins pulsing out of her temple. Thank god she was holding herself back.

Meanwhile, Cerberus was off frolicking in the snow, wagging his tail as if he didn't have a care in the world. I was grateful for that, considering he'd probably start hurling his huge blade without question had he been in his hot guy warrior mode.

Thirty soldiers came running at us from the garrison. At the helm was a woman whose blonde hair ran down her back. Her chest was exposed by her see-through nightgown... *No, wait, those might be mage robes that are just kinda sexy.*

Underneath her robes was a see-through dress that might as well have been an undergarment. She looked like she was wearing less clothing than even Gabriel, yet I figured those clothes probably had Grade 3: All Adjust cast onto them just like ours, which meant she wasn't just some random bystander. So long as strong foes who could use Grade 5 like the Sages existed in this world, there was no letting my guard down.

That said, I shouldn't have bothered thinking that hard about how strong this woman probably was, considering the legion of guards trailing behind her.

A man in fancy armor near the blondie raised his voice, making it boom around the area.

“Ten-hut!”

The adventurers around him responded by standing straight and paying full attention. This woman and her soldiers appeared to be the proctors for this extermination selection exam.

They walked closer and closer until they reached us. While the men lined themselves up behind her, the blondie took a few steps forward. She softly lifted her right hand, and with a clear snap, the snow around her flurried. Groups of it amassed into shapes, and before any of us knew it, over a hundred ice sculptures had formed around us.

The woman checked them briefly, then nodded, satisfied. "All right, then. There are two phases to this exam. For the first test, you will be destroying these sculptures."

I could feel the air around me lose its tension as everyone sighed in relief.

"Oh, that'll be easy."

"We don't even need to use magic or weapons to break some ice."

"I bet the melee classes can do it with their bare hands!"

Despite the murmurs around her, Alice's expression remained serious.

"So you noticed, Alice?"

"Only that the ice isn't normal, sir."

Good. She hadn't been fooled by the simplicity of the woman's words but had closely observed the statues themselves.

Ice sculptures could be made with Grade 2 magic, but the spell she had used was Grade 3: Queen of the Frozen Edge, which created extremely dense ice intended to be hurled at enemies. Not to mention, she used it at such a high degree that this phenomenon came about. *I mean, just look at these numbers. This woman isn't someone to be messed with.*

I kept my eyes on her, watching her use her fist to knock on a nearby sculpture.

"For those of you wondering, these ice sculptures are about a six on the Nurallipe Solidity scale," she laughed gleefully.

Those words made the whole crowd start buzzing. *A six on the Nurallipe Solidity scale? That means they're tougher than metal!*

Her smile widened. "Weapons, skills, fighting spirit, magic. Use whatever you like. Think of it like the trial shots you'd fire during the entrance exam for a magic academy."

She extended her hand toward the man in fancy armor. He handed her an oak staff. Magic power began flowing through it as she put her intent into it.

"*Whew!*" Blondie then swung the staff at the nearest sculpture, smashing it into pieces with ease. It was like she'd smashed a glass window with a golden bat.

"People call me a Great Sage. I really am one too, as a magic class. Did you see that physical attack I just did? That's the bare minimum of what you need to be able to do to pass this test today. That's what we're looking for here."

The crowd's mutterings got even louder, particularly at her calling herself a Great Sage.

"Wait, is she the Witch of the North who's apparently lived for over four hundred years?"

"Wasn't it eight hundred years?"

"*That's* the bare minimum? Just how many monsters do we need to exterminate?!"

Fancy armor man slapped his plated palms together. "Silence! Our Great Sage Isabella is speaking!"

Everyone quieted down. Isabella's words sliced through the chilly air. "All you're doing is attacking an opponent that won't fight back. It's nothing like testing out your powers in an actual battle. But if you can't even do this, then you'll be no match for the monsters up north. Especially not against Frost Orcs."

Handing the oak staff back to the armored man with a smile, she locked her hands together. "Ah, I almost forgot. Those of you who manage to break these will also be asked to exterminate a Devil Grisly solo."

The anxiety among the others was palpable, a completely different

atmosphere than the one we'd started with. Not surprising, as most adventurers developed an inherent sense of danger custom to their lines of work. It could only kick in because they were still alive.

"If any of you just pissed your pants hearing that, then go ahead and take your leave. Another bare minimum we're looking for are people who would eat stuff like this for breakfast." Isabella's wide smile faded away to reveal a cold, hard look. "Cowards that can't handle that should just go home. It's a waste of my time dealing with people like you. It's not like we're expecting much from these open trials to begin with. All the *talented* people are participating through special admissions already."

We fell silent and the atmosphere became heavy for a short yet long while. Then, one by one, the applicants began removing themselves from the field, until only about half of the original hundred were left.

"Oh," Isabella cackled lightly. "More of you stayed than I thought. Does that mean you're confident? We're grateful for that, I assure you. I couldn't tell you whether it's confidence or hubris, but I'm not expecting much anyway. Go on, do your best."

Gabriel opened her mouth. "May we finally begin, then?"

"Yes, go ahead. Use weapons, magic, whatever you want."

Obedying, Gabriel began walking toward one of the ice sculptures.

Isabella took a bit of interest in her. "No weapon, I see? So you must be using magic. Very well then, since you're our first batter, show us how it's done. Destroy that block of ice with every bit of magic you have."

There were about two meters between Gabriel and the sculpture. Confusion colored Isabella's face. "Hm? What kind of spell will you be using? Long-range magic won't be effective at that distance."

Ignoring her, my summon walked faster and faster toward the statue.

"Oh? Oh?" Isabella continued to babble. "What's going on? Only melee attacks would work at such a close proximity. What, are you going to use your bare hands or something? You silly thing. Evidently you weren't listening when I explained that these are a six in solidity. We don't need idiots who can't

understand briefings.”

With just one meter left, Gabriel swung her fist out.

Smaaash!

Bull’s-eye. The ice sculpture disintegrated at her feet.

Isabella’s had broken into pieces, whereas Gabriel’s turned to dust. The sculpture was now micro-ice floating through the air, the sunlight making it sparkle around us. Diamond dust had been created in this inner garden of the garrison, in other words.

A lazy, airy voice chimed in. “Now that Gabriel’s done, can it be my turn already?”

Isabella couldn’t respond to Tsukuyomi’s words since she was too stiff with shock. All Tsukuyomi could do was sigh and gather up her own magic.

“Don’t mind if I do, then. Grade 5: Toy Box of Rotting Death.” Her whisper conjured a giant red coffin in front of a sculpture.

Seeing this, nonsense poured out of Isabella’s mouth. “G-G-G-Grade...5?! Impossible... The sheer amount of magic here... I-I-It’s real?!”

The coffin’s lid sprung open a split second after Tsukuyomi snapped her fingers.

Ah, right. This. Pretty sure this is that stupidly large-scale undead summoning spell.

The process itself was simple: all she had to do was use the coffin as a portal connecting our world and the underworld. An unbearable number of high-level undead monsters would rush through it, and voilà.

You could see the underworld if you looked through the coffin when it opened. Taking a peek inside, I could see a bajillion skeletons from the Troops from Hell jostling en masse in a wasteland. If I had to guess, I would’ve said there were maybe a few tens of thousands.

“Erasing one of the sculptures from this place would count as destroying it,

yes?” Tsukuyomi’s gaze landed on one unfortunate ice sculpture.

She arced around to its backside and kicked it into the world beyond the coffin.

“Okay. I cleared the exam.”

Isabella looked like she didn’t know what the word “exam” even meant. She’d already lost all strength in her legs and could only open and close her mouth repeatedly.

That’s when I realized that the coffin itself had been facing Isabella as well, so she was probably distracted by the view. Who could blame her? There were tens of thousands of Troops from Hell in there. It didn’t help that all those skeletons had caught sight of her making wholly uncomfortable, prolonged eye contact.

Those Troops began channeling their bloodlust toward her. You could tell when that happened if their eyes started glowing purple, the iconic offense color of the undead. Their killing instincts were now trained on Isabella, meaning they were about to move in on her as a group.

They all started running at once toward our world.

Doom! Doom! Doom! Doom! Doom! The sound of an earthquake rumbled from the coffin.

Isabella started screaming. *“Heeeeeeeek!”*

An uncountable number of high-level undead ran toward her in a hellish scene. No sane person would be able to handle that, and she was no different.

Tsukuyomi snapped her fingers once more.

Thunk!

The coffin’s lid shut itself, and the whole thing vanished as if it had never been there in the first place. The only thing left was a Great Sage crouched on the ground, whispering, “Grade 5...”

I cleared my throat. “Okay, so... Tsukuyomi?”

“Hm? Something wrong, Shinobu?”

At this point, it didn't matter whether I stood out or not. The reincarnators already knew who I was.

But still... I had to sigh.

“Look, you don't have to make *quite* that big of a scene whenever you do stuff.”

She clasped her hands behind her back and tilted her head at me, slyly licking her lips. “But this woman looked so full of herself. I just had to bully her.”

“Er, right. Yeah. You, uh, really are like that, aren't you?”

She pulled a small bag from her pocket and threw it down on the ground in front of Isabella, who screamed a little in response, still dazed.

“This is...a magic stone from a Devil Grisly?”

Tsukuyomi pulled out yet another bag, then another, and another. Soon there was a pile of magic stones in front of Isabella. Seeing the multicolored stones, or rather, the cores of high-level monsters, made the blood drain out of her face.

“Not just from Devil Grislies,” my summon said lazily. “Some are also from the even stronger Atlas Grislies. I even threw in a core from an Ancient Ice Dragon.”

“A-Ancient Ice Dragon?! No... You... I mean, my lady, you hunted the ruler of the grand snowfields?!”

“I did. The fool came after me without realizing our difference in power. I don't feel like taking the second phase of this exam, so can we just say this is enough?”

“M-M-M-My lady, who are you...? C-Could you be...one of the...G-Gods I've heard about? Ah, ah, aaah...!”

A deep sigh relieved the tension from my body after having watched this ridiculous banter. I let my head hang as I addressed my companion.

“Tsukuyomi, I won't ask you to restrain yourself.”

“That's surprising.” Her eyebrows lifted a bit. “I really thought you would in

this situation.”

“I can’t. It’s my fault for bringing you here in the first place.”

I couldn’t care less about what happened after that. I hadn’t been hiding her; I just wished she would’ve done things a *little* differently.

My light headache let me know that what was done was done.

†

Four weeks later.

The seed of the frozen Ancient Flower flew down from space, landing to the north. Beyond the end of the flow of time, close to that of eternity.

When that seed graced its former homeland, the Ancient Flower chose the breeding grounds for the Frost Orcs as its landing spot, the central base for the infestation. At the current point in time on this planet, this was the place with the thickest amount of magic sexual power, the highest level for the breeding of life.

When the seed of the Ancient Flower became the tail of a comet and pierced through the atmosphere, the King Frost Orc, who reigned over that nest, sensed a change and looked to the sky. He felt it, a smile of ecstasy ringing with it.

The orcs’ nest was then destroyed.

Among the atrocious, marvelous torrent of magic power emitted from the Ancient Flower, the king experienced fear and carnal desires. And so, the seed landed on the earth.

The clouds shot upward with the intense sound of the explosion. It left behind a large crater gouged into the earth.

When the seed took root, the entirety of the Frost Orcs’ nest froze over. The finale was Freezing Magic that would overtake everything around the center of the crater.

An incredible cold wave. The King Frost Orc felt the greatest pleasure as his limbs turned to ice. He didn’t try to fight the onslaught at all. With the same expression of ecstasy as all the other Frost Orcs, he even removed all of his armor, his only defense against the cold.

Freezing one after another, the brethren turning into ice sculptures all gazed at the King Frost Orc with smiles of pleasure. These males ejaculated enough white fluid to fill a full cup each as their hearts froze over.

This did not only occur in the Frost Orcs' nest either. All of the monsters living in the surrounding ice fields did the same.

The male monsters ejaculated.

The female monsters orgasmed.

All of their lives expired as they experienced the consummate ecstasy of each of their roads thus far.

The Ancient Flower provided them with these sexual pleasures in exchange for their lives, turning them into seeds. The souls of these living beings were the greatest source of energy for the Flower's growth to adulthood.

This growth, this feeding, would not stop until the Flower returned to its true, humongous size, which had once enveloped an entire continent. So long as it ate all the monsters around it, those souls would become the power to help it grow. It ate more and more monsters as fast as it could, transforming with them.

The more it grew, the more monsters came into range, and the more it ate the life of the land. Eventually, it would devour the humans' kingdoms as well.

The Ancient Flower increased its feeding speed, desperate to regain its power. Its gathering of souls accelerated, further speeding up the feeding process and body expansion.

The Ancient Flower. A super life-form, also known as Sweet Death.

In *La Vita Online*, players had to defeat it within twenty-four hours, or else it would grow so powerful that it would destroy the world.

Raid Event: A Sweet Death Foretold by the Ancient.

The raid boss had touched down.

†

Four weeks prior, in the present.

Shinobu Iijima

A hotel room in the northern kingdom was prepared for us. It was a high-class hotel intended for nobles, and they even gave us the royal suite as special treatment.

“Master Shinobu! Look at this bed! It’s sooo fluffy! Look, look, I’m bouncing on it! Bounce, bounce! Bounce, bounce, bounce!”

“Woof! Woof!”

I had to cringe a bit at Alice and Cerberus making a fuss, but we *were* in a bedroom roughly forty square meters wide. The bed was smack-dab in the middle, which was sort of awkward.

If you’re wondering how we ended up here, it was because of Great Sage Isabella. Believe it or not, she actually had a reason for being so pompous during the selection exam. She was intentionally weeding out the weak and unprepared to prevent any unnecessary deaths. We got an earnest apology from her about that, along with Tsukuyomi receiving her undying adoration.

Thus, we were selected to participate in the big Frost Orc extermination and were even given relative freedom despite not asking for it. Considering this treatment, it wasn’t hard to imagine that the upper echelons of their extermination team had some circumstances they were dealing with.

For me, all this was nothing but a big headache. This was why I hated standing out for no reason.

The next day, we left our luggage in the hotel and walked around the snowy city.

It looked very medieval-ish, pretty much what I thought Stockholm, Sweden, would look like. To be fair, the whole world was based off of Europe in the

Middle Ages, so of course the town would look like that.

I was a little surprised to see that the roads were so full of people even though it was freezing out. *Actually, Sapporo is also bustling with people during the winter too, huh? I guess when you live in the snow country, you get used to it.*

The town's main street was jammed with people trying to get into the grocers lining it. The seafood, like sauries, was all frozen so solid you could stab someone with one of them. Seeing so many unusual things made it kinda fun to walk around.

"All the women here are really beautiful," I remarked.

I'd heard of Nordic beauties before, and that phrase seemed to apply to this world too. The women here all had white skin and blue irises. Just *looking* at them soothed my eyes. A man's heart couldn't help but race.

"They really are! I'd heard that the northern kingdoms had a lot of beautiful women, but I didn't think it would be *all* of them!"

Alice's mood seemed to be even better than usual. Ah, I should mention—she failed the exam. She hadn't been able to catch Ms. Isabella's eye since she could only barely use Grade 2.

Not that it mattered, since all Tsukuyomi had to do was say the word and the problem solved itself. Alice was allowed to come along as a servant who'd take care of us.

It made me sad to see her so bummed out yesterday. She probably only jumped on the bed to keep me from worrying.

Though she'd been forcing herself yesterday, there was a genuine smile on her face today. I'd say it was refreshing for her to go sightseeing and enjoy herself.

Something at one of the stalls caught my interest. "Sir, what's this?"

"Are you from down south, mister?" the stallman asked. "This here is the juice of a Mishmash Orange, all frozen up."

Orange popsicles on sticks were lined up in front of him. I assumed he'd made

these frozen sweets with the natural freezing temperatures.

Alice had evidently never had ice cream before, as she was gazing at the popsicles in wonder, so I asked the owner to give us two.

“Whoa, this is good!”

The taste reminded me of when I lived with my real parents. My relatives in Kansai had brought me a popsicle as a gift one time. They’d gotten it from a Chinese eatery that sold meat buns and dumplings but was famous for its popsicles during the summer. I remember it being super tasty. This one had a similar flavor.

No, wait. Maybe the oranges here had more sugar in them, but this one was way better than the one from my childhood. That popsicle impressed me back then, but the pure ingredients in this otherworld popsicle definitely won out.

“It’s delicious, Master Shinobu!”

“Yeah, it is! I’m surprised at how good it tastes.”

I’d had popsicles before, and I liked them. For Alice, she was probably experiencing double the marvel since it was her first time. Her smile spread to me too.

“Want something from here, Gabriel?”

“I’m fine, sir. I already ate breakfast.”

“What about you, Tsukuyomi?”

I’d barely gotten the question out of my mouth before I started laughing. A cup of hot chocolate in one hand, Tsukuyomi was already stuffing her face with an orange popsicle she’d bought from another stall. Hanging on her arms were a bunch of paper bags, telling me she was making the most of her shopping spree.

“You’re so carefree.” I was almost in stitches.

“I know, but just to make it clear, I’m better about it than my sister.”

“Amaterasu sets off the free-spirited scale the moment you look at her, after all.”

At present, the wild and free sun goddess was holed up behind a stone door. Remembering that made me rather depressed. It was just so hard to summon her since she had so many restrictions.

Let's stop thinking about that.

I bought Alice her own hot chocolate, then we began walking toward our next destination.

+

We made it to the Great Sage Isabella's mansion.

"Lady Isabella is busy at the moment," the gatekeeper said to us at the entrance.

Ms. Isabella was famous for having her base in the northern city. She was one of the native humans who had been alive since before the reincarnators showed up.

There were two main reasons why she hadn't been culled by the reincarnators thus far: one, because she wasn't strong enough to be a threat to them; and two, because this place was under the Crimson Moon Brigade's jurisdiction. So long as Ms. Kaori was in charge, the other guilds couldn't come after the natives here. Thus Ms. Isabella was able to live for over four hundred years.

I gestured helplessly at the gatekeeper. "I think your master will tell you to let us in if you mention that Shinobu Iijima is here. Please."

"Shinobu Iijima'? I've never heard such a name." He only looked confused for a second. "Ah, I see. You're one of *those* people. We get some like you every now and again because of how famous Lady Isabella is."

"People like me? How exactly are they like me?"

"There's no shortage of fools like you who go throwing around the lady's name to try and use her power. We can't be bothered to entertain every one of you. Why don't you come back after making an official appointment?"

He has a point, but still. I sighed. There was a reason we'd come to this mansion. Getting turned away at the gate would render our entire trek

pointless.

“Had you been someone like Master Notchmath, the Great Hero of the Lilic Empire, then maybe we would’ve given you the time of day. But seeing as you don’t have an appointment, and *especially* since you’re a gaudy young man with women and children trailing behind you, we can’t possibly let you through.”

Ookay, how am I gonna convince this one?

Tsukuyomi opened her mouth as I started to brainstorm. “Hurry up and let us through already. That woman will know what to do as soon as she hears the name Tsukuyomi.”

“*Tsukuyomi...?*” The name caught his attention. “I feel like that was the name Lady Isabella was vacantly muttering under her breath when she returned...”

It appeared Tsukuyomi had been the one to remain in Ms. Isabella’s mind and not me. With an impact like that, how could she not?

“Hmph,” snorted the gatekeeper. “Well, suspicious as you may be, it would still be acceptable for me to allow you into my office outside of the mansion. But just in case, wait here while I go confirm with the butler.”

†

We were led to the gatekeeper’s office to wait while the servants passed the message on to Ms. Isabella. The interior was simple, as you would imagine for a room where the gatekeeper was meant to take breaks in. You couldn’t really call it furniture, but there were round wooden stools around the desk. In the corner was a bunk bed meant for naps.

“Master Shinobu,” Gabriel called out to me.

“Yeah?”

“It is rather presumptuous of that mage to call herself a Great Sage. Do you really believe she possesses skills that will prove beneficial to you?”

“Didn’t you see her power up her staff back at the garrison?”

The monster hunt expedition would begin in a month. Simply sleeping and eating in the hotel until then would be a waste of time, so I came here to ask Ms. Isabella to teach me something.

“The natives here have to learn advanced battle techniques on their own. The reincarnator-hunting Sages did too.”

“Indeed, they had superior combat abilities. However, Isabella does not, no matter how you look at her.”

“It’s not a matter of how strong or weak she is. The important thing is how useful her weapon buff skills are.”

“Hm.” She didn’t look satisfied with that answer, but Gabriel didn’t press further.

She was right to be skeptical, since I really was here on a gamble. In addition to the reincarnators looking down on the natives in general, she probably didn’t like that I wanted to learn from someone weaker than me. But to me, that in itself had the possibility of giving me a leg up over the level cappers. If it genuinely turned out to be of no use, then all I’d have to do was get some information out of Ms. Isabella over tea, then spend the rest of my free time leveling up and strengthening Alice.

The sound of frantic sprinting echoed outside of the office. The turning of the doorknob made a high-pitched squeak as the man from before burst into the room, all the blood drained from his face.

“I-I’m so sorry! I had no idea you all were such important guests!” He’d flung himself onto the ground in front of Tsukuyomi and made it clear that he was speaking more to her than the rest of us. It was so obvious what had occurred moments ago that I couldn’t help but laugh. I felt a little bad that he’d probably gotten yelled at. He’d only done his job as the gatekeeper and hadn’t been particularly rude to us.

“P-Please come this way!” His voice was muffled by the ground. “I’ll take you to the parlor in the mansion!”

I’ll be sure to tell Ms. Isabella that this guy is a proper gatekeeper, I thought as I got up from my chair.

†

In stark contrast to the office outside, the parlor was incredibly fancy.

After we'd waited a few minutes, three knocks came from the door. I thought the knocker would let themselves in, but they never did. The room fell silent.

I wasn't sure what to do, so I just mumbled, "Come in." The door opened slowly.

Ms. Isabella walked in, straight toward Tsukuyomi, her face almost blue. She got on her knees and bowed her head.

"L-L-L-Lady Tsukuyomi... I heard that my gatekeeper was horribly rude to you."

"You would be mistaken about that." Tsukuyomi was checking her nails.

"Mistaken?"

She pointed a well-manicured finger at me. "Shinobu is my boss."

Don't point. It's rude. Not that Tsukuyomi would have cared even if I'd said so.

Her words startled Isabella. "T-Terribly sorry...Master...Shinobu?"

"My name is Shinobu Iijima, Ms. Isabella. You don't need to call me master."

"No sir! As a fellow sorcerer, I couldn't possibly refer to you as such after being shown such a miracle—"

"Er, no, I'm just some seventeen-year-old..."

"*Seventeen?! You control a being like Lady Tsukuyomi who can use supernatural spells at seventeen?! You're even greater than I thought...!*"

"Anyway! Please stand up and stop bowing your head!"

"I-I could never... Never!"

I see. She's the type who isn't going to change her tone toward me no matter what.

"If nothing else, then at least raise your head. It's hard to talk to you like this."

Ms. Isabella did as she was told, with her knees still firmly on the ground. *Guess there's nothing I can do about that. She just won't listen.*

I stood up from the sofa and knelt to match her.

"Master Shinobu Iijima?"

“I’ll get straight to the point. I want you to teach me how you strengthen your weapons by focusing magic into them.”

“You want me to...teach you *my* skills? Master Shinobu Iijima, why are you kneeling? The difference between your power and mine is that of heaven and earth!”

“Well you see, I specifically came here to beg you to teach me.” I bowed my head the same way I’d done my whole life in Japan.

“S-Sir, I’m not worthy of you lowering your head to me!”

“Starting now, we’re teacher and student. This isn’t that strange,” I chuckled.

Her mouth opened, closed, and made nervous sounds over and over.

†

A-rank Adventurer Joachim

The selection exam for the overflow extermination team. Naturally, I passed with flying colors because I’m an A-rank adventurer. It really pissed me off that I was put into the soldier’s garrison instead of the high-class hotel, but I forgave them since they gave me one of the better officer’s rooms.

We were drinking in my room.

“That bitch!”

It served them right that the little Alice brat failed the exam, but just remembering the woman called Tsukuyomi made even my fine liquor taste bad.

“Speaking of which, Joachim, that Tsukuyomi woman sure was weird. How on earth did she make you pass out with just a flick to the forehead?”

I sucked air through my teeth. “That woman named Gabriel too.”

The man next to me was my old friend, Nathan, who also was an A-rank adventurer. I was shocked when we ended up reuniting at the garrison.

“Humor me, Joachim. We’re A-rank adventurers, said to be able to take on a thousand warriors, yeah? So how did those women make us think they were monsters?”

“Hell if I know! I don’t even want to think about it. Might bring bad luck.”

That’s when I remembered something I’d heard from an S-rank who had once been called a legend on the battlefield.

“Nathan, have you heard of the Gods?”

His brow twitched. “I thought we weren’t supposed to talk about them. Not many of us A-ranks know about ’em.”

“Don’t be such a pussy. I’ve never seen anyone get killed just for talking about them.”

“But you know Maximian, one of the regional lords? His whole dominion and croplands were burned down forty years ago because of that.”

“That happened to him because he went around preaching about the ‘truth of the world order’ or some stupid shit like that. The two of us are just talking about something we both know about. No one’s listening.”

He thought for a bit about that, then nodded.

“You probably noticed, but...” I continued.

“Yes,” he cut me off. “That was my first time seeing one, but they’ve gotta be Gods. The rumors don’t even do ’em justice. Probably best not to get involved with ’em, else we get turned to dust. Can’t get judged by a God we don’t bother.”

“That’s a true phrase, but you know what’s truer? Can’t bag a lion cub unless we go into the lion’s den.”

He cocked his head, wary of my next words. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve heard all the legends surrounding them, but... Ever heard of ‘in-game items’?”

“What now?”

“You’d expect legends to be nothing but embellished nonsense, but in-game items are the real deal. Apparently, they’re legendary artifacts that only the Gods have. *Treasure* doesn’t even begin to describe them. They’re even rare among the Gods themselves, so much so that they could buy an entire kingdom

depending on who they're sold to."

"Huh. Doesn't sound real. What are they specifically?"

"The Holy Sword Excalibur, the Jewels of the Poles, the Mud Stream of Death, even the Collar of Zeus. Those are the artifacts you've probably heard of."

"...You're being serious? You really could buy a whole kingdom with those!"

"All of those belong to the Holy Church, the Merchant's Guild, and the main branch of the Adventurer's Guild Conglomerate. The groups that are full of Gods, in other words."

Nathan had to gulp. "Yeah, you're right. That's convincing enough. So, what do you plan to do? You're not gonna kill them and steal the items, are you? You'll die."

I nodded sharply at how well he understood me. "Those kids are all strange in the most apparent way. You know what I'm getting at."

"Strange? Uh, they're hot, and there's a dog and a kid..."

A smile dawned on his face as it came to him. One came to my own face as well. "Exactly. We'll go after the little girl. She can use quite a bit of magic for a brat, but she doesn't stand a chance against us."

"Are we gonna use her as bargaining bait for the in-game items?"

"I wouldn't dare cross a bridge that dangerous. Once they see our faces they'll never forget 'em. We wouldn't be able to outrun them either."

"So what's she for?"

"They're only bringing her along as their pack mule for the extermination. The chances aren't high, but there could be artifacts in there. We'll kidnap her when they're not looking, kill her, and search the body for in-game items before burying it. Then, all we'll have to do is pretend like we have no idea what happened to her and make our escape as soon as we get the chance."

He hesitated a moment. "Isn't that plan a little too risky to bet our lives on? Especially if we don't even know if she has artifacts or not."

"I guess."

I knew he'd say that. I shrugged and asked him a question.

“Doesn't it sound pretty exciting having your way with a woman that belongs to a God? We may well never meet one again.”

Nathan rolled his eyes at me. “There you go again. You've always been like this. Princesses of small kingdoms, daughters of marquesses... You sure like your high-class ladies, don't you?”

“How 'bout it?”

“I also enjoy ruining high-class ladies. Kidnapping, sexually assaulting, killing, then burying one in the mountains? My track record is thirty-seven for thirty-seven. No trace will be left this time either.”

We both had our reasons for prioritizing “strength” since our youth. As orphans, we'd been bought by old noble hags as sex slaves and had been treated horrifically. We killed them as soon as we found an opening, then became adventurers after faking our identities. It wasn't exactly funny that the trauma caused our sexual preferences to become just as fucked up.

We were pretty well-known within the Adventurer's Guild.

And of course, this was a secret kept between the two of us.

“The dangerous ones are Tsukuyomi and Gabriel. We have to slip out from under them and snatch the artifacts.”

“Honestly? The artifacts are just a bonus at this point. Our real goal is the kid!”

Nathan and I locked hands in a firm handshake.

†

Shinobu Iijima

A giant plain of ice and snow served as our training grounds. The light from the sun reflected on the ground was blinding.

“Okay, Alice. According to Ms. Isabella, the first thing we have to do is control the magic power flowing through our bodies.”

In my hand was a knife I'd gotten from a Legendary Goblin. I gathered up magic in my right arm and focused it into my palm.

"And then, make the magic flow from your palm into the weapon it's holding."

I demonstrated my words. "My knife will get stronger thanks to this buffing spell. If we apply this to Dimensional Transport Magic—"

The magic in the knife concentrated into a point, then shot out like a ball of light and floated in the air. It slowly fell to the ground. As I watched it, I cast a defense-heightening spell onto the snow to harden it.

With that point in the center, a circle of snow with a diameter of about five meters turned into what looked like an ice-skating rink. The crackling of the newly formed ice was satisfying to the ears.

"Now, we'll apply it to Separation Magic intended for cloning..."

I brought out another ball of light. Twenty more ice rinks appeared around us. *Good job, me.*

"And that's how it's done."

"How exactly?!"

I figured that she'd react that way. Magic operation came semiautomatically for us otherworlders just with our levels.

Alice had learned how to use Grade 2 magic from Scrolls, but it would take a lot of time for her to be able to actually use it herself. She'd have to study diligently, then practice over and over again. It wasn't a matter of just doing it once she had the knowledge and procedures in her brain like it was for me.

"Well then, uh, Alice...what in particular did you not get?"

"I understood gathering magic into your palm. Nothing after that. I don't even know what buffing magic is supposed to be. You even threw in complete nonsense like 'Dimensional Transport Magic' in there..."

For reference, summoners couldn't be buffed by their allies, nor could they buff them. That was by far the biggest drawback when playing a class intended for solo play.

In my case, however, I technically knew *how* to use buff spells, so I was able to apply that knowledge into my magic flow. I'd say it was similar to how magic swords worked. Magic could make a sword denser, or set it on fire, or something. High-level weapons tended to have magic affixations on them in the first place, so with those in the way, strengthening them wasn't really possible.

That's why I thought this method wouldn't work for me at first, but then I remembered that alchemists in this world could animate golems, and it hit me.

What if I could buff my summons with the same methods?

That's what I was testing out here. Aside from that, this was definitely necessary for Alice's magic acquisition as well. I had Gabriel add this exercise to Alice's daily training menu.

"No need to rush, Alice. This training should strengthen you up in the long run."

"But, sir..." she sighed dejectedly. "We natives really are completely different from you, huh, Master Shinobu?"

"Don't worry about it. In my case, it's just player compensation."

"I can't help but worry. You were a beginner at weapon buffing just a few hours ago, but now you're leagues ahead of me. Not to mention, I failed the selection exam..."

Man, she sure takes responsibility for everything. She's making me sad just listening to this.

What she was really showing was her will to be useful to us, though. It wasn't a bad thing for her to use this series of events as the backbone for her comeback, but it also wasn't good for the mood to be so somber.

I tried to change the subject. "Let's take a break and get some food. Can't train on an empty stomach."

Gabriel nodded at me when I glanced at her. "There are plenty of rations in your inventory, sir. What would you like to eat?"

Off to the side, Tsukuyomi was as carefree as ever. Being in a giant snowfield apparently wasn't enough to stop her from donning a black bikini and

sunglasses and lounging in a beach chair with an electric blue cocktail in one hand. Looking at her made me feel like I was on vacation in a southern kingdom.

Is she just here to play around?! Though I guess her being like this means things are peaceful right now, so...

“Ah, oh yeah! You liked the meat from the Holly Holly Birds, right, Master Shinobu?” Alice sounded a bit brighter.

“Hey, you remembered! Yup, I like it 'cause it tastes like fried chicken.”

Gabriel shook her head, disappointed. “We’re out of that at the moment, sir. It’s hard to find that meat in the markets as well. My apologies.”

“I’m fine, Gabriel. You’re doing great.”

She really was so good at taking care of us. I wasn’t going to complain about our equipment or rations either. It still hadn’t been that long since I’d come to this world. Gabriel was doing great considering how little time she’d had in the town and our current situation.

Alice chimed in. “That’s not what I meant, Lady Gabriel, Master Shinobu.”

“Huh? Then what?”

“Look, above the forest... They’re flying up there. The Holly Hollies!”

We looked to where she was pointing, and about three kilometers out, the field ended and the grand forest began. I had to use Far-Sight Magic to see what she was talking about. I was surprised to see Holly Hollies flying up there, just as Alice had said.

“You’re right, there they are. Did you notice them, Gabriel?”

“My apologies, Master Shinobu,” said Gabriel. “I can only now see them with Far-Sight Magic.”

“Did you use a spell to see them, Alice?”

“No sir, I can see them with my bare eyes. My people lived in the forest, and we’re demihumans, so we have stronger senses than humans of your build.”

I was too stunned for words.

Wait, this isn't really that weird, is it? This girl has cat ears and a tail. Of course she'd be different from humans like me.

That's when the light bulb went off in my head.

Her senses are stronger than those of normal humans?

I gulped down my new, daunting idea. "Say, Alice, were your people better than other humans at using bows and stuff?"

"Not just bows and arrows—long-range tools in general were our specialty as well. Our eyes and ears work well, so we can discern the direction of the wind with just our senses. Though that's why we were called indigenous."

"In what specific way did you use bows?"

"The cat-eared adults who went to battle could fire them at a range of about five hundred meters. That wasn't especially impressive, however, because long-range mages can use Ritual Magic to achieve the same feat."

As she laughed bitterly, I couldn't contain my joy and threw my arms around her.

"Wh-What are you doing, Master Shinobu?!"

"I found it!"

"Found...what?"

"What you can do for us in battle, Alice!"

†

The icy campgrounds were illuminated by the snow. I let out a small sigh after filling all the bullets with magic.

TAC-50 anti-materiel rifle, M2 Browning, M134 Minigun, M4 carbine, M84 stun grenade, and several types of bullets... I'd exchanged all of my guild coins for these guns. They were absolutely necessary for Alice's power-up.

Of course, we needed to test one out before using up all the guild coins. Turned out to be a bingo.

The TAC-50 anti-materiel rifle: a super long-range rifle that had a world record

of hitting a target from over three thousand meters away.

What would happen if I had Alice use this? I made her try several different methods.

In just three days, she was regularly able to hit targets from over seven thousand meters away. I had no choice but to invest everything I had into her.

*What is she, Go*go 13?!*

Regardless of what I had to say about it, it seemed her people were naturally inclined toward long-range combat. Was that compensation from the game system? Or were her people's senses really just that much better? I didn't know.

I was able to confirm that the weapon buffing spells made both her bullets and the functions of her guns exponentially better. It even lessened the recoil upon firing. The whole thing was nothing but surprises.

Therefore, something as nonsensical as seven-thousand-meter shots were now possible for Alice.

I couldn't help but feel suspicious at first. Why did this world need guns in the first place? But when I thought about it, these were the best things to give to natives if you wanted them to join you on the battlefield. It definitely wasn't a coincidence that Scrolls were included in the exchange list either.

Putting that aside for now. I had Tsukuyomi summon a monster around level 40 to confirm whether or not Alice was able to shoot a fatal blow with the powered-up anti-materiel rifle. She was.

In this world, when a monster was defeated, the EXP was distributed based on the contributions of each person that fought it. When Alice defeated that Sky Dragon a while back, she'd been wearing the leveling item meant for beginners, so we could only do that once. With this new super long-range method, there was no better way for her to level up.

Strengthening a native was something only I could do, since I was the only one who needed to take an NPC to Agartha with me. Guild coins didn't grow on trees either, so I was pretty sure hardly any other reincarnator had tried this

before.

My reverie was broken by Gabriel arriving, with Alice in her arms.

“We’re back, Master Shinobu.”

Seeing how limp Alice was, she’d probably reached her limit and passed out. Imagining Gabriel’s usual Spartan training made me wheeze in a bad way.

“Really going all out from four in the morning, huh? You can heal her physical exhaustion with Recovery Magic, but try not to cause her too much mental stress.”

“I had intended to end our session at midnight, but Alice insisted otherwise.”

“...She did? Herself?”

I looked over at her. A rag doll was the only thing I could liken her current state to. Did she actually push herself to the point of collapsing?

“She seemed to be motivated by her failing of the selection exam as well as your magic control training with her earlier today.”

“Meaning she didn’t want to be a burden on us.”

“As it stands, she is currently useless to us.”

I wheezed again at her biting words. Gabriel, Tsukuyomi, even Cerberus—my familiars all had extreme personalities, no exceptions.

“However...”

But from her expressionless face came a soft smile.



“Her determination is good. I praise her for that.”

I gently petted Alice’s head, listening to her soft snores over Gabriel’s shoulder. No one could think badly of a fifteen-year-old girl who was trying so hard.

...Okay, maybe Tsukuyomi would.

But at least Cerberus didn’t hate Alice. He would probably praise her determination too.

“Gabriel, I’m sure you were already going to, but please cast an exhaustion recovery spell on her. Try not to wake her up while you’re at it.”

“As you wish.”

“And even if she asks to be pushed this hard, make sure you know where her limits are at.”

“On that note, Master Shinobu, are we continuing with the plan to have her acquire Grade 3 magic, then change course to practical spell training?”

“Yes. Now that we have weapons we know she can fire, we can focus on leveling. We’ll work with the monsters in this region until they aren’t worth the EXP anymore. She’ll probably get to about level 20.”

“Would that be precisely what you planned, Master Shinobu?”

I responded with a nod. “We have to use our time efficiently. Ms. Kaori gave her approval as well.”

“Cerberus is currently resting to regain his true power; therefore only Tsukuyomi will be able to join you this time... Are you positive that you don’t need me to go as well?”

“In addition to protecting Alice, I also need you to help me fulfill the summon conditions for Amaterasu. I’ll be fine with just Bahamut and Leviathan since I have Release of God’s Might.”

“This may be an unwanted suggestion, but I recommend retreating as soon as you feel even the slightest sense of danger.”

“I value my life too, you know. I can always rethink this plan. If things get

dangerous, I'll come back here and take you with me."

The place I was headed toward at the moment was a dungeon: the Grand Library of Aquatic Wisdom. There were tons of Forbidden Records and stuff there.

I was originally going to go there for Alice's Grade 3 Scrolls anyway, and it was in the Crimson Moon Brigade's domain.

Scrolls aside, I also wanted alchemy documents related to golems. If I could add the alchemy techniques to Ms. Isabella's magic strengthening, that could lead me to a method that powered up Gabriel and the others directly. Those were my main goals for exploring this dungeon.

Gabriel looked up at me. "You are the support for our hearts and the reason for us to live. Please, take care of yourself."

"I'm so high level that this place won't even give me any worthwhile EXP. You're making a big deal out of nothing!"

Ms. Kaori had told me a lot of the reincarnators weren't level 99 yet. But most of them hadn't thrown themselves into danger for the sake of leveling up either. Since the natives considered them godlike at level 50 anyway, there wasn't much of a point in putting themselves in danger just to get stronger. There were enough of them between levels 10 and 40 who'd made sure to level up just enough to put a big margin between themselves and the natives too.

"I wish you luck," Gabriel bowed.

"I leave the rest to you."

†

And so, the extermination expedition would begin the next day.

I was successfully able to buff my summons, and their stats gained a twenty percent boost. I'd hoped to do some leveling as well, but I had to prioritize strength as a precaution. Overall, our combat abilities were about as good as they were going to get. Hunting low-level monsters didn't make for good EXP, so leveling at this stage would come with risks. The best course of action was to level up after everything was said and done.

That said, Alice's leveling was progressing smoothly. She'd been defeating monster after monster with her firearms, rapidly getting up to level 20. Our targets for this expedition were just Frost Orcs. I was thinking suppression shots from a heavy machine gun would be all she'd need to fight them.

Everything had been going well, so we decided to sleep early in preparation for the following day. The too-wide bedroom made me uncomfortable at first, but I felt reluctant to part with it, knowing that this would be my last night in it.

A mechanical *ding ding ding* resounded through my head.

—All Frost Orcs confirmed defeated.

—Guild Quest: The Overflow of Permafrost complete.

—1,000 Guild Coins will be rewarded to you as an additional bonus for your first time challenging a Guild Quest.

“What?” My brain couldn't keep up with the information on the window that had just popped up. The voice of God responded to my whisper like rubbing salt into the wound.

—In 10 hours, the Raid Event: The Ancient Flower Foretells a Sweet Death will begin.

—In 10 hours, the Ancient Flower will awaken and begin to siphon the life force of all of the living beings around it as feed for it to grow at an extreme speed.

—In roughly 24 hours, it will exceed the extermination abilities of humans, so let's exterminate the Ancient Flower before then!

A horrible cold sweat ran down my back.

Frost Orcs.

The northern city.

And the Ancient Flower.

It would've been nice if all of these things were only coincidentally happening at the same time, but I couldn't bring myself to believe that. But the deal had

been sealed when the words “The Ancient Flower Foretells a Sweet Death” showed up.

“Gabriel, this is bad.”

“Indeed, it is. I should have noticed as soon as I heard that the targets for this Guild Quest were Frost Orcs of the northern city. My deepest apologies, Master Shinobu.”

“No, it would’ve been ridiculous of me to expect you to realize this was happening. I hadn’t even heard of raid events occurring in this world. And why is it a past event, even?”

Raid Event [The Ancient Flower Foretells a Sweet Death].

The first-ever event that featured a raid boss. If I remembered correctly, it was an unknown plant from space that had taken root in the nest of the Frost Orcs. It would grow exponentially once the event began, ending the world within twenty-four hours. Players were supposed to gang up on it and defeat it before it grew that big. Once defeated, portions of the boss called “Ancient Flower Remains” would spawn endlessly until the end of the event period. You were supposed to beat it down until your stamina gave out, and you got rewards based on damage output. It was a pretty basic event. The first form of the Flower would die quickly, and since there were so many rewards, it was also a competition of speed.

At the time, it was rumored on the forums that if not enough active users participated and the twenty-four-hour mark passed, the game itself would be shut down. On that note, I’d heard of a not-so-funny story about that: the reason they’d implemented this event right off the bat was because the devs believed the initial player base wasn’t large enough. If there weren’t enough players to complete this event, then they’d use it as an excuse to end the game service for real. Though that was just a rumor.

“Master Shinobu, didn’t the Crimson Moon Brigade tell us that there were no raid events? Could they have possibly concealed this information from us?”

“I can’t say the possibility *isn’t* there, but I think this really is the first raid

event that's ever occurred in this world. They're going in chronological order, as if retelling the whole story from the beginning."

Gabriel nodded softly. "So, what shall we do?"

"I have no idea what's going to happen."

"Truly. I am not sure what the end of this world will entail after twenty-four hours, but it would be best for us to move as quickly as possible."

"You know where the Frost Orcs' nest is? We're going there."

"As you wish."

I pulled out the communication orb Ms. Kaori had given me. It had been custom-made for the Crimson Moon Brigade.

"Are you requesting support from the Crimson Moon Brigade?"

"It's a raid. They'll probably all come rushing once they hear the situation."

Truthfully, all of the otherworlders were in danger because of this threat. Ms. Kaori might have even been able to pull support from other regions of the world and not just her guild.

I ran my fingers along the crystal ball and clicked my tongue. "Damn it!"

The orb was operating fine, but there was no response from Ms. Kaori. It didn't even seem to connect to her at all.

I looked out the window and gazed outside. *Don't tell me...*

"This is way worse than I thought."

Everything outside the boundary of the city territory was wrapped in complete darkness. Ms. Kaori had told me about this, but at endgame, it was possible to leave through an unimplemented area that served as the final destination to an extremely difficult dungeon, past a dimensional wall. For some reason, that wall was now here.

No matter what you did, you wouldn't be able to break that wall.

"Master Shinobu, could this be...?"

"It can't."

All I could do was shake my head at the next message window.

Player Limit: 1

There was also something about new registration entries not being accepted, so I knew full well what was going on.

“You’re asking me to beat this raid event by myself...?” I faced the message box head-on and spat, “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me, voice of God!”

We flew to the edge of the darkness, confirmed that the wall couldn’t be broken, and melancholily headed to the center of the overflow.

†

We settled ourselves about five kilometers away from the Ancient Flower to observe it. That’s when we encountered a dimensional wall as we were flying with Flight Magic.

“It seems we cannot pass until the event has begun, Shinobu.” Gabriel had gone off to do her duties, so Tsukuyomi had joined me.

It was probably the same wall as the one at the edge of the city. We couldn’t get any closer, but this one was transparent, so we could at least see with Far-Sight Magic.

“So that’s the Ancient Flower.”

A cliff stood at the edge of a valley above the river, about five hundred meters above the water. The Frost Orcs’ nest at the top was being devoured by a single, giant tree. I’d say it looked about three hundred meters tall and a hundred meters wide, trunk, branches, and leaves included. Quite impressive for a tree that was supposedly still young.

This monster had been modeled after a dryad that sucked life energy from humans. So, the tree should have had a core in the shape of a dryad. I found something like that placed squarely in the center of the tree through Far-Sight Magic. Countless vines and ivy covered it for protection, so it wouldn’t be easy getting to it.

“What shall we do?”

“We’ll need to take care of *that* first.”

A space was sandwiched between the walls, acting as a barrier. On the other side of it lay a ton of monsters, all repeatedly slamming against it, trying to run for their lives. If I had to guess, there had most likely been other monster nests within that barrier aside from the Frost Orc one. The monsters had witnessed the Frost Orc nest being obliterated by a giant tree with ominous magic, so it was only natural for them to try to flee. Survival instincts were one-hundred-percent functioning.

As soon as the Ancient Flower fully began its reign, all of those monsters would become fodder for it right after freezing into popsicles.

“A horde of over a thousand monsters, huh?”

Before me was a rather disgusting sight: monsters as far as the eye could see along the dimensional wall, all glued to it, trying to escape. The Ancient Flower would stop at nothing to eat as many of them as it could to strengthen itself. The more it ate, the faster it would grow, and the more power it would accumulate. Kind of like building a snowman.

It wouldn’t do us any favors to let that thing eat all those monsters straightaway.

“We have to do everything we can to prevent it from eating at all, including all the monsters in there.”

In twenty-four hours, that flower was going to become as big as a mountain. I didn’t want to imagine what would happen if it got even a little bit stronger.

“Think of it this way... If it eats even *one* monster, our chances of winning vanish. That’s gotta be how we operate here.”

“All right. But...” Tsukuyomi looked up wistfully at the Ancient Flower, mischievous words spilling from her lips. “It’s such a filthy flower, isn’t it?”

At the edge of her vision was the top of the tree, where a rafflesia flower ten meters in diameter bloomed gracefully.

An hour remained before the event would begin.

We'd run around the whole night to prepare, barely making it. Gabriel, Tsukuyomi, Cerberus in his human form, and Alice wielding two huge guns were with me.

We joined Ms. Isabella at the soldier's garrison for a preattack plan rundown.

"Master Shinobu Iijima, are you absolutely sure you all are the only ones who will take on the enemies?"

I nodded deeply. "Anyone else would just hold us back."

"But this... 'raid boss,' was it? Is it really so powerful that even you all find it daunting?"

"It is."

It was more accurate to say that the whole thing was something we didn't understand. Most raid bosses in *La Vita Online* wouldn't fight back in the first place. Players were just supposed to gang up on them, seeing who could do the most damage each turn.

But how would such a boss turn out if it were a real-life enemy? There was no way for me to know.

"If you say it, then it must be true."

"I have a favor to ask of you, Ms. Isabella."

"About what we discussed before? Protecting the city?"

"I'm just checking to make sure. There were about five monster nests near the frozen Ancient Flower."

"You reported so."

"The monsters are trapped in the barrier the Flower had set up and have already run to the edge of it." There wouldn't be a point to explaining dimensional walls to her, so I figured I'd lie. "The Ancient Flower is sleeping right now, but once it wakes up, it's going to freeze everything around it, then suck up all the life energy for nutrients. That's how it's going to grow even larger at an explosive speed."

“That’s when the barrier will be lifted, correct? I understand you want to prevent the Flower from eating no matter what, but this plan is quite reckless.”

I’d laid it all out for Ms. Isabella. Once the barrier lifted, the monsters would all rush toward the human settlements. If we didn’t help them, they wouldn’t be able to escape the Ancient Flower’s reach, and they would be eaten. The boss would then grow.

Therefore, in order to prevent the monsters from getting eaten, we’d buff up their abnormal states they’ll be put in by the Ancient Flower, their ice resistance, and their speed to help them run. The monsters would still be dangerous, so they had to be exterminated before any casualties arose in the city.

I had to agree that it was a reckless plan. All I could do was laugh bitterly and suck it up.

Buffs from a summoner didn’t work on humans, but I was shocked to find out that they worked on monsters. I wasn’t sure why that was the case, but I had a sneaking suspicion that it was probably a programming mistake.

“Master Shinobu Iijima, all we have to do is exterminate the incoming monsters, right?”

“Yes. You know this city better than anyone. Please, tell me your plan for protecting it.”

“We could focus on protecting the thinner parts of the wall around the city...”

“So you’re going to intercept them,” I finished for her.

“That’s right. Monsters tend to attack people outside of the wall rather than inside it.”

“Then more monsters will gather in places where people congregate. If all of you stayed on the inside, the wall would get broken down, and things would get more difficult. Is that your thought process?”

“That it is. I understand you specialize in sorcery, but you know these special

tactics for adventurers. You've done your research."

I'd spent the whole month studying up on it, after all. I'd not only read forbidden tomes in the ancient library, but also books that might come in handy, just in case. What I'd just recited was written in an adventurer's manual or something like that.

I raised my right hand up to my chest and cast a spell. "Grade 4: Real-Time Mapping."

A spell that displayed a map of the surrounding areas. A map appeared in my hand.

"You really are amazing. You can use Grade 4 like it's nothing..." Ms. Isabella's temples were twitching.

As I'd heard, she was unable to use Grade 4. The adventurers and soldiers around us were cheering. I didn't have time to engage with them.

"On that note, would this road here be the best one to take for a straight path there?"

"I believe so. If you use that one, even if you get attacked by monsters in the forest, the Area of Effect Magic from our magic team will be the most effective."

"What do you expect the casualties to be?"

"We've already evacuated the civilians, so they probably won't be too bad."

I relaxed a little hearing that and bowed my head to her. "To tell you the truth, we might not be able to do everything we have to, so you'll be a big help."

"No problem. I am still called the Great Sage of the four protective blades of the Lilic Empire. Defense is my specialty."

"I'm counting on you, Ms. Isabella," I said from the bottom of my heart. I then placed my hand on Alice's head. "You too, Alice."

She looked taken aback. "Me?"

"You're plenty strong enough to take on the monsters here by now. I'll leave

them to you.”

She fidgeted, confused for a moment, then puffed out her chest while blushing.

“Y-Yes sir! I’ll do my best, Master Shinobu!”

†

Five minutes before the event would begin.

As expected, the wall partitioning us from the Ancient Flower was lifted, just like in the game. It was exactly the same as one’s interface changing to the battle screen a few minutes before a raid event commenced. And if it really was the same as the game, then once it started, all the players on standby would then gang up on the boss at full force.

But the only one there was me. I got chills down my spine just thinking about it.

“This is my second time seeing it, but it’s even more formidable up close.”

I’d looked at it from a few kilometers away last time, but now I was about fifty meters from the tree. At this range, I couldn’t see the whole thing, even if I tilted my head up.

Everything in my sight, from edge to edge, was the Ancient Flower.

I rose up with Flight Magic and flew toward the woman-shaped tree person “dryad,” the core of the tree.

“This is the same as the game too.”

On the upper right of her, I could see her thin blue HP bar, which was probably about a meter long. I’d come out of this the winner if I managed to whittle that down.

Floating in front of the dryad’s eyes was a polite alert from the game stating that we’d begin in forty-five seconds.

“Master Shinobu, as we arranged...”

“That’s right, Gabriel. We’re going to lead the first explosion into *that*.”

“As you wish.”

Thirty seconds left.

“Cerberus, protect everyone with your skill.”

“As you wish, Master.”

Twenty seconds.

“Tsukuyomi...”

“I know, Shinobu. Focus. It’s about to begin.”

Three.

Two.

READY...

Right as the words switched to English, Gabriel and I blasted Grade 5 magic together.

We were doing a typical gameplay trick. Every core player knew to take advantage of a bug that made long-range attacks possible for about a two-second window before the event officially started. This advance attack wouldn’t be aimed at the dryad, but below it.

The ground!

Because the boss sat atop a steep cliff five hundred meters up, our first task was to make it fall. With how massive it was, plunging to the ground should have caused it a good amount of damage.

We could have hit it with Grade 5 attacks at any point, but attacking with the intent of using gravity to pull it down could only be done this one time. Why? Because once the event began, it would grow limbs and start to move.

“Grade 5: Dimension Slicer Excalibur!”

My magic attack split the space around us, perforating the ground.

This alone, however, wouldn’t be enough to impact it when it landed.

“Grade 5: Holy Nuclear!”

Flames from Gabriel’s own Grade 5 erupted out to cover mine. Her magic inclination was toward Recovery Magic, so the firepower of her attack magic was known for not being as strong.

In this case, however, we’d already wedged the ground open. An explosion occurred deep in the pit I’d created, altering the texture of the ground. The roar of the quakes reverberated into the air. The cliff rumbled and broke down into a valley, taking the Ancient Flower with it. Perhaps because of how large it was, it seemed to be sliding down slowly, though in reality it was going at an incredible speed.

Vwoom!

The bass tone of the shakes resounded down to my lungs. The tree rotated 180 degrees as it fell, slamming into the earth headfirst. Its leaves flew into the air and mixed with dust, and its huge branches broke off and flew across the ground.

Checking the dryad’s HP bar with Far-Sight Magic, I let out a hoarse laugh.

“Didn’t go down even one percent.”

Gabriel’s tongue click echoed around the area.

And so, we watched arms and legs sprout from the tree of the Ancient Flower, expanding it to about three hundred meters on all sides. With a rafflesia at its head, it became a giant monster with limbs. I honestly didn’t think something so ugly could have such an unbecoming name as “flower.”

Despite everything, we hadn’t thought that would be enough to defeat this beast. Our initial attack wasn’t even complete yet.

“Grade 5: Toy Box of Rotting Death.”



Tsukuyomi's high-pitched voice summoned a coffin from the depths of the valley.

We had a reason for using Tsukuyomi's signature move right off the bat.

Grade 5: Toy Box of Rotting Death

In addition to endless necromancy rituals and shikigami summons, Grade 3 Dark-type monsters are summoned to "devour the entire screen."

The summoned undead are not only good as shields, but also as allies.

Even if one's opponent is at the level cap, this magic is so evil that they can still be overwhelmed through the violence of numbers.

The only ways to deal with it are by rendering Tsukuyomi powerless before she has a chance to use it or by having an expert exorcist capable of using large-scale Purification Magic in your party.

Without a way to prevent it, you'd be dead as soon as she activated it. Since she was infamous for being unfairly broken, particularly during PvP, every player automatically had a wide-range purification item added to their inventory.

I didn't know why I had to do this Ancient Flower event by myself, but since push came to shove, I was going to fight injustice with injustice. If this boss was supposed to be taken on by a ton of users at once, then all I had to do was prepare the numbers myself.

An uncountable number of undead flowed from the valley, all of them crawling up the Ancient Flower.

"What a horrible scene..."

The Flower looked like an island floating in a pool of black undead monsters. That was the only way I could describe it.

Even more undead came forth, adding to the horde. It was only a matter of time before the entire Flower was buried in them. But that's when—
"Gyaaaaaaaaah!"

The Ancient Flower screeched bloody murder. *Nice, it's working!* I couldn't blame it; the undead were biting it and slicing it with their swords.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Its screams got even worse. *Could it be...we have a chance?*

“No! Shinobu...!”

“What’s wrong, Tsukuyomi?”

“My spell is being canceled by an external force! I can’t keep it open!”

Tsukuyomi was struggling to speak as cold sweat ran down her face.

In an instant, all of the undead summons vaporized into black smoke that dispersed through the air.

“An external force canceled it out?”

“A voice spoke in my head, Shinobu. It said, ‘Error: Summon Limit.’”

Summon Limit? I had one for how many summons I could conjure, since that was my class, but Tsukuyomi’s spell was a fixed ability of hers that was summoning magic in name only.

I attempted to summon Bahamut to test it out. “Grade 5 Summon: Bahamut!”

He didn’t appear. I clicked my tongue and shook my head, frustrated.

We’d been had.

Because of Tsukuyomi’s Toy Box, I’d also had a Summon Limit placed onto me. I knew what that meant. Something mechanical like a game system wasn’t what determined the rules of this world.

Given our situation...the rules of this world had very obviously changed just a second ago!

“Well, Shinobu, this seems to be where the real battle begins.”

According to Far-Sight, the dryad’s HP bar had shrunk by about five percent. Kind of a misleading bummer, since its screams had been so exaggerated. It was a good first shot, though. Had it not taken even a single bit of damage from that, we wouldn’t have had anything left to work with.

“Shinobu...? Why is this happening? What’s going on with the Ancient Flower, and what’s this about a Summon Limit?”

“As far as I can tell, something *really* doesn’t want me to clear this event.”

“What do you mean?”

“Somebody’s actively watching this situation play out and adjusting the system in response. I don’t think the governing system of this game is a machine or a God or something. I can’t help but feel a very strong *human* will from this, along with malice.”

“Hm... You might be onto something with that.”

We glared down at the Ancient Flower.

“Whatever. I don’t know what’s at play here, but if they want me to solo this thing, then I will. It’s just...”

We headed toward the core of the dryad with Flight Magic.

First Raid Event: Ancient Flower.

The level cap was supposedly 50 at the time this event originally took place. At the moment, I was above level 80 and was in possession of broken skills and summons in the form of Release of God’s Might and Gabriel.

“I didn’t overcome the game scaling for nothing!”

†

Alice Cecil

The coldness of the snowy forest pierced through the fabric of my clothing. I was hiding within the frozen battlefield, the thin warmth of my breaths showing up as white puffs.

“Grade 2: Normal Fire!”

“Grade 2: Wall of Flame!”

Monsters like the Snow Spirit Jack Frost and white wolves blew around the area. As we’d planned, Ms. Isabella and her team of mages were clearing the straight path along the forest.

I was not to move.

I simply lay down along the thick trunk of a large tree in the forest, still, focusing my body on the gun set nice and firm on a tripod in front of me.

“Our magic...isn’t working!”

“There they are! The Wendigos!”

The extermination team was putting its efforts toward Area of Effect Magic, under the pretense of, well, extermination.

Master Shinobu had known these things would show up from the very beginning.

The Abominable Snowman: Wendigo.

A high-level monster, it was known as a mage killer because its fur was resistant against magic. The northern mages hated it.

Gauging it with my eyes, I guessed around three hundred of them were mulling about the path.

“Grade 3: Sword Dance of the Salamander!”

Ms. Isabella shot her spell, but to no avail. Aside from the few she’d managed to hit, the other three hundred weren’t slowed in their tracks at all.

“Urgh...!”

Seeing her grimace, it seemed she really couldn’t unleash consecutive Grade 3 spells, as she’d told us beforehand. But that didn’t make her any less impressive, since Master Shinobu and his followers were really just outliers in that regard. For people like us, Grade 3 was so harrowing that it couldn’t be used without Ritual Magic.

I’d been waiting for this moment.

Master Shinobu had left me here specifically to deal with the Wendigos.

Ms. Isabella followed her procedures and slowly but surely backed up. Once the Wendigos were convulsing enough, I placed my finger on the trigger.

I pulled it, setting off a deep boom.

Bam bam bam bam bam!

Firing a few hundred shots every minute, the M2 Browning set fire to its steel bullets.

The Wendigos' heads blew off. Their stomachs burst open, and their internal organs went with them. Their arms and legs bloomed flowers of red meat that fell to the snow, one after the other.

They clustered together, bathing in the rain of giant 12.7-millimeter bullets powered up with magic. The bullets were traveling at supersonic speed, several times faster than usual because of the weapon strengthening applied to them.

I would've hated this were I in the Wendigos' position.

—You leveled up!

—You leveled up!

—You leveled up!

Oh nice, my level went up.

My leveling had come to a halt around level 20, since I'd already gotten every bit of EXP I could from the monsters that surrounded the northern city. I was glad to see that the supposed strongest monster outside of the city really was strong.

I looked around at the fallen Wendigos. They had no idea what happened to them. Their pole-like frames made for the perfect targets for my machine gun.

Unfortunately, by this point, the ones still standing had figured out what was going on. The more hotheaded ones settled on a full-frontal attack, rushing toward Ms. Isabella's team.

This move made them even better targets for me.

“Eeek!”

“Bwaff!”

The rushers fell while screeching. They didn’t matter anymore, so the real issue was the ones who’d escaped into the forest in all directions.

“Grade 2: Normal Fire!”

“Grade 2: Wall of Flame!”

The mages sent magic after their backs. Some of the Wendigos toppled, while the others kept running, so the effect wasn’t perfect. They weren’t known as magic-resistant mage killers for nothing.

I’d finished sweeping away the forthcoming Wendigos, so I swapped my weapon on the tripod for an anti-materiel rifle.

Precise long-range shots followed.

“Gwuh!”

“Ab... Buh...!”

One kill per shot. I pulled the trigger at each head I saw between the trees, which were barely even obstacles to me. There was no need for me to falter, since this was the exact situation I’d been training for this entire month. All I had to do was disassociate while fervently shooting each and every head I could find.

The melee team that had been hiding in the forest finally came out and confronted the Wendigos. There were fewer than a tenth of the monsters left, so the only thing I would need to do was support them during their scuffles.

A few minutes after repeating my brain-blasting work—

—You leveled up!

Mission complete.

As soon as the last Wendigo’s head was blown off, I took my eye away from the scope.

Now that most of the monsters were defeated, we just had to survey the area for any stragglers. Then the only thing left would be to wait for Master Shinobu.

After I removed my gun from the tripod and climbed down from the tree, Ms. Isabella called out to me.

“That was amazing! You suppressed them with such power!”

I had to laugh bitterly at her sighing in awe. “No, I’m not amazing at all.”

The real amazement here was these weapons that Master Shinobu had granted me. They could fire way more consecutive shots than bows could, with more power and precision. My own abilities didn’t even really come into play. Anyone could become a high-level warrior if they used these weapons after they were powered up by Master Shinobu.

“I should’ve expected nothing less of a servant of Master Shinobu Iijima. You’re just as humble as he is.”

“I’m really not being humble. I’m just telling the truth. Anyway,” I changed the subject. “I’m going to go look for stragglers now.”

“But aren’t you more suited for mid-to long-range combat?”

“It’s definitely dangerous for me if anything gets too close, but I don’t think that’s likely to happen...at all, to be honest.”

Master Shinobu had instructed me to use the midrange heavy machine guns to scatter the small fry. My real strength would be the super long-range shots the anti-materiel rifle was capable of. But even if the machine guns were just for small fry, I couldn’t think of them as anything less than tools of the gods.

“Hmm... You may say so, but Master Shinobu Iijima tasked me with taking care of you. Mr. Nathan, Mr. Joachim!” Ms. Isabella clapped her hands together, bringing two adventurers running to us. “These are the most capable melee fighters on our team. They’re A-rank adventurers, so they’re perfect as guards.”

One of them was the man who’d heckled Master Shinobu during the selection exam. To be frank, as soon as he’d insulted my master, he’d already been categorized as the type of person I dislike most in my brain.

Naturally, I didn't want to work with him either.

But since I was leaving the unit assignments to Ms. Isabella, it wasn't my place to complain.

And so, about an hour had passed since we had separated from Ms. Isabella and the others and walked deeper into the forest.

I couldn't sense the Wendigos or any other monsters, so it was probably safe to assume we'd successfully completed our city protection mission.

"So, Little Miss Alice?" One of the men sneered down at me.

"Yes, sir?"

"You don't have to answer so curtly," he said with a fake pout.

"We're currently tracking down monsters. We don't know when they'll come at us, so please keep the personal talk to a minimum."

"Again with that. You're so boring, Ali-girl!"

"Could you please stop with the nicknames? I don't believe we've gotten that familiar."

Nathan and Joachim shrugged at each other and rolled their eyes.

"Aw, come on, Lil Alice! Do we really look that scary to you? Is it because we're adults?"

"Or maybe it's because we're A-rank adventurers? You're so intimidated by how great we are? No need to hold back around us, girly. If you want, you can come play in my bedroom tonight, how 'bout that? We're very respected by our juniors as their dependable A-rank older brothers, see?"

"Yeah! We're just laid-back, powerful big bros who'll smile and give you some pocket change if you pour us some drinks."

I couldn't listen to them anymore. My hair was already standing on edge after their gross nicknames. The words they were saying, the leering gazes... Everything was just so unpleasant and disgusting.

"Hey." With a sudden, rough change in tone, Nathan blocked my path, his

hand stretched out toward me.

I lightly jumped back to put some distance between us. “What are you doing?!”

“You’ve been ignoring us. Don’t think you’re so high and mighty just ‘cause we think you’re cute. We were just pampering you to get your legs open.”

What scum. I didn’t think there were any good men in this world aside from Master Shinobu. I felt like I’d met nothing but people like this since I’d left my Domie family in the forest.

“It seems I made a mistake working with you two. Thankfully, I’m done scoping out the area, so let’s part ways here and return to Ms. Isabella.”

Nathan smiled gleefully. “We’re not going back to her. Neither are you.”

I couldn’t even ask what he meant before I was hoisted in the air and thrown backward.

My back hit the ground. Joachim was cackling disgustingly over me.

“I snuck up while Nathan was distracting you. Silent step techniques, suppressing my presence, handless combat techniques... Melee may be my forte, but my skills make me geared more toward assassin work.”

After a moment, I asked, “What do you want from me?”

“Those people you’re with—they’re Gods, aren’t they? You’ve got strange weapons too. I’ll get straight to the point—give us your ‘in-game items.’”

They tricked me! I completely understood what their goal was as soon as he said that. They’d even lured me out to this remote area because... No. They’d been waiting for this moment the whole month.

What should I do?

These guys were only somewhere between levels 25 and 30, but that was still higher than me. That wouldn’t be a problem so long as I had my weapons and some distance, but I couldn’t do anything sprawled out on the ground. They were far too close.

Joachim grinned at the panic coloring my face. “C’mon! Give us the in-game

items already!”

“In-game items? I don’t...have any.”

It was true. I wasn’t given anything except the guns. That’s why I was mystified when the two of them started laughing even harder.

“You know what that means, Nathan?”

“It means it’s torture time!”

“It’ll be different from messing up those high-class ladies just for fun. Now we have a purpose.”

“Even if she really doesn’t have in-game items, these weapons of hers should bag us a fair price.”

“In that case, why don’t we start with the fun, less-painful part first?”

I heard the clanks of their belt buckles coming undone.

It was obvious what was about to happen. Their glares were full of scorn and sadism... I’d seen them before. They were the same looks I’d gotten at the magic academy, vilifying me for being a useless, indigenous savage. An unbelievable amount of hatred from one person to another.

†

Shinobu Iijima

Flying through the farthest part of the northern territory with Flight Magic, Gabriel launched the first attack.

Her full-power kick exploded into the tree of the Ancient Flower, accompanied by a shrill noise. A crater opened up in its outer bark with pieces flying every which way. The giant monster wobbled a few large strides backward.

Cerberus, in his beast form, took advantage of the opening to breathe fire at it. He aimed directly for the core, the dryad. Too busy with Gabriel’s unstoppable barrage of attacks, it took the flames head-on. Once the whole core was engulfed in flame— “Grade 5: Flame of Abyss.”

Tsukuyomi's Bomb Magic added even more fire to top it off. I wasn't going to stay quiet either.

"Grade 5: Holy Nuclear!" I sprinkled a spell full of light atop the explosion of darkness.

With that, we'd hit it with physical, Holy, Dark, and Fire magic. *How do you like that?!*

Just as I checked its HP, the vines crawling all over the humongous tree began to slither, gathering into one spot to form a giant whip. It swung at me, the sound of the wind being sliced following it. I kicked downward to air step away, barely managing to evade it.

"Damn, it's fast! I can't dodge it at that speed every time!"

I had to let out a dry laugh after complaining to myself. Sensing something behind me and turning around, I saw ten vines of identical size rushing toward me.

I don't have enough time to dodge.

Without a moment's delay, I created a physical wall with magic. It took all ten giant whips at once, but I myself didn't lose any HP and wasn't in pain. This was because of Cerberus's skill, Substitute.

There were several reasons why Cerberus was called the Gatekeeper, but it was mostly because he was a frontline tank. His most efficient and practical ability was being able to take on attacks aimed at his allies.

Wait... This is bad.

I clicked my tongue and shook my head after checking my stat screen. That one attack had shredded Cerberus's HP down to half. Had I taken that on myself, I would've been dead for sure.

One-hit death.

The only person on this whole field capable of withstanding that attack was Cerberus. Everyone else would die instantly.

I was almost stumped. *Jesus... This was what a counterattack from a raid boss was like? And also...*

“This is just insane!”

The HP bar to the upper right of the Dryad had only gone down a few millimeters after two direct Grade 5 attacks. If the whole bar was a meter long, then there were still ninety-five centimeters left to go. I'd had us go all out from the get-go to try and fight unfairly, but if this method wasn't going to properly whittle down its HP, then we'd go crazy if we kept it up. Plus, just one hit from the vines had taken out half of our collective HP.

“I underestimated this thing. We're in trouble.”

If this came down to a battle of endurance, then we were seriously doomed. If we forced Cerberus to keep tanking all the damage, Gabriel's and my MP was going to dry up real fast healing him. I also wasn't confident we could deal damage to the Flower in between tens, maybe hundreds of vine whips. No one's MP could handle tens or hundreds of Grade 5 spells either.

Gabriel noticed me panicking and spoke with a grave expression on her face. “Master Shinobu. I'll—”

I cut her off knowingly. “Do you plan on using Grade 6: The Final Judgment—Armageddon?”

“Yes, sir. That's our only hope for escaping these dire straits.”

Grade 6: The Final Judgment—Armageddon. A spell that opened the gates to Heaven and shot a gigantic laser beam called “the Final Judgment” down to the earth. All enemies would be defeated without question. Every upper-level archangel was able to use it, but the downsides were immense. The beam itself exchanged the archangel's soul for God's wrath, meaning...

The archangel would die.

Event bosses were immune to it, and it would only deliver a set amount of damage to raid bosses, so no player actually bothered to use it.

But... Wait... That set amount of damage was scaled up every update. Wouldn't it be able to deal the maximum amount of damage to this Ancient Flower, since it's from an old event? But...

"This is an order. Don't cast that spell no matter what."

"But sir, I have determined that this is the only realistic path to our victory."

"Think about it. Raid bosses aren't supposed to be able to counterattack us, but this one does. Do you know what that means?"

"I believe I do."

"Tsukuyomi's Toy Box of Rotting Death had a limit put on it, so we don't know how far that signature move of yours will be allowed to take effect. There's no guaranteed path to victory for us."

"However, Tsukuyomi's Toy Box still had some effect. In the same manner, there's a high chance that my Armageddon will still deal a set amount of damage to it."

"I understand, but..." I trailed off for a moment, then steeled myself and spat it out. "I need you. For future battles... No, I just don't think of you as a disposable game character anymore. So...I don't want you to die. I'll never let you."

We'd traveled together, ate together, laughed together. Even if she really was just a game character, my heart wasn't so simple that I could think of her that way.

"...That makes me very happy to hear, Master Shinobu."

Strange for her usual stone face, Gabriel had thin tears lining her eyes.

"I needed to tell you that. Now you understand—I can't throw any of you away."

Don't make me say this. It's so embarrassing.

I had to though, since she was instantly willing to sacrifice herself the second I let her do as she pleased.

Tsukuyomi called out to me next. "Then what should we do, Shinobu? All I can

see happening from here is our MP running out before we even get its HP down halfway.”

“We still have our trump card.”

Tsukuyomi giggled and Gabriel’s eyes widened at my words.

“I see...” Tsukuyomi laughed. “So *that’s* what we’re doing. The costs are extreme, though, and even then, we don’t know if it will be enough.”

“The only thing we can do is try. We’ll just have to weigh our options after the fact.”

Cerberus included, we all nodded at one another and glared at the giant beast together.

†

Alice Cecil

The first thing Joachim and Nathan did was disarm me, then they tied my wrists with rope. It was only natural, since they were taking me captive. It was quite disgusting to see them carrying the guns Master Shinobu had given me while the lower halves of their bodies were exposed.

“What do we do with these? We could sell them, but maybe we should use ’em ourselves?”

Nathan played with the gun while thinking about it, accidentally setting off a deep, heavy gunshot.

“We don’t need them. They’ve got some kind of magic buff on them, but they don’t seem to apply unless the little girl is using them.”

“Yeah. As far as I can tell, all they do is spit out metal stones at a decent speed.”

“I’m sure these would work well for, say, B-rank adventurers...”

“Then these are just long tubes that are useless to us. Okay, then we’ll say they’re in-game items from Gods and sell ’em to one of those grand nobles who like strange things.”

“They’ll sell for a high price for sure.”

They turned their vulgar leers and vulgar smiles to me.

“Now then, without further ado.”

“Time for the fun part.”

“Stop this,” I muttered.

“Don’t tell me it’s your first time. Haven’t you done it tons of times with that man?”

The blood rushed to my head and I yelled at him. “No!”

“No? No to what? There’s only one thing men and women—poles and holes—can do together.”

“Don’t lump him in with you. He’s completely different from you all!”

Their filthy smiles got even wilder.

“Me first!”

“Stupid, it might be her first time. I go first!”

“Then how about we do it together?!”

“It’ll tear if we do that! Wait, that might be fun.”

“Yeah, you like that kinda thing, don’t you?”

I couldn’t handle hearing such a horrible conversation. But it bought me some time.

Proper ladies carry razors with them.

That’s what Lady Tsukuyomi taught me. Apparently, she held a razor blade under her tongue at all times so that if an unpleasant fellow ever captured and forced a kiss on her, she could give him a painful retaliation.

Okay, so she was crazy. But at least razors were useful for cutting through rope, so she had me carry one too. Not under my tongue, obviously—I was a normal human being. But honestly, I’d never thought the razor under my wristband would come in handy at a time like this.

When I cut the rope and stood up, I armed myself and leaped toward my

stolen knapsack. That would have been the perfect form for stealing their weapons in a surprise attack, but unfortunately, these two were way more experienced than I was.

So, on to plan B.

“She got outta the rope?”

“Was she hiding some tool on her?”

I tore open the knapsack, pulled out what I needed, and glared at them.

“Master Shinobu is different from you all. He’d never look down on someone as being less than him. In fact, he even respects and bows his head to people weaker than him if he can learn something from them.”

I had been so shocked when Master Shinobu lowered his head to Ms. Isabella. But thinking about it, he even treated someone like me as an equal human being, so that must have been how he was by nature.

“Thanks for the input,” one of the men scoffed. “So what’re you gonna do about *us*?”

“Your prized weapons are in our hands, you know.”

They threw my guns behind them and pulled out their own sword and knife. I’m sure that was the best decision they could make as first-rate adventurers—use their trusty weapons over ones they’d never used before.

“Indeed, they are. I don’t mind if you come at me fairly.”

I was going to go for their weak points. I threw what was in my hand at them, and a torrent of light exploded out.

A stun grenade.

No magic involved. I really had no idea how this thing worked. As far as I knew, this thing used physical light to steal away the opponents’ visions.

“Wha—?!”

“Agh?!”

They shielded their eyes and buckled over. Humans would naturally make their bodies form an arrow shape after taking a stun grenade. They'd stand still for a complete, frozen moment.

In just a few seconds, I didn't attack but secured my weapons.

My finger was then on the trigger of the M134 Minigun.

"Sh-She got the weapon! W-Wait! Wait, wait, wait!"

"L-Let's talk this out! We can't see, so let's talk! We'll work it out!"

I took a few more steps back to gain distance. I was fairly safe at this distance already, but the more I gained, the more of an advantage I would be at, so of course I'd take it.

"Weaklings like me have our own way of fighting. This is what happens when you look down on us."

"Okay, fine, fine, just put the weapon down!"

"W-We were just joking earlier. We weren't really going to do anything horrible to you!"

"Hm? Joking? Did you just say you were...*joking*?" I asked, allowing myself to sound a bit confused.

Joachim took the bait. "Yes! We were just joking! Don't take things so seriously! We never intended to do any— AGH!"

A steel bullet chocked full of magic shot from the muzzle of my gun.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It seemed you enjoyed jokes, so..."

The Minigun fired off magic 7.62-by-51-millimeter rounds. At an extreme speed of several thousand per minute, they spilled from the gun with a juggling sound.

"I pulled the trigger as a *joke* as well."



Their blood sprayed and their flesh went flying.

“Ah, ah, aaagggghh!”

“Gruh, h-hah-brah!”

You couldn't even call their sounds yells or screams anymore.

The two men became lumps of raw meat in an instant.

†

Shinobu Iijima

For better or worse, this was the final phase. If this didn't work, then all we could do was wait for death to take us.

I gathered all my magic in my palm and announced the name of my super large-scale explosion spell to the giant monster.

“Grade 3: Suicide!”

A spell that converted all of one's magic power into a life force explosion. I'd follow it up with a Recovery Orb, an item I'd gotten with each level up, and fully heal myself to evade death.

An endless cycle of death and revival.

This move boasted the greatest amount of attack power in the game and was the sole tactic for ganging up on an enemy. It had served me well during the tutorial and in the 13 Floors to Agartha. People knew it as something you'd spam in difficult positions. The situation I was currently in was, undoubtedly, a hugely difficult position.

I was walking a tightrope, because if I got the timing for the Recovery Orb wrong, it would be insta-death.

But this is my only chance!

“Gabriel! Tsukuyomi! Cerberus!”

My soul was linked to my summons. This suicidal move had become even more powerful than before since their lives were also being exchanged for explosions.

I used a Recovery Orb the second one cast of the spell finished.

“How do you like that?!”

If this didn't work, I'd be out of cards. I looked up at the dryad, half praying.

Nice, it worked! Its HP bar moved a few centimeters this time!

I'd say it did about sixty percent of the damage Tsukuyomi's Toy Box had done.

I had roughly sixty Recovery Orbs left, meaning I should still have plenty left over by the end of this. There were two possible scenarios: either the Ancient Flower's HP bar would run out, or I'd mess up the timing and end up killing myself and all my summons at once.

I'd never wanted to use this tactic ever again, but I was set on it this time.

“Grade 3: Suicide!”

Release my magic, then recover.

Release my magic, then recover.

Release my magic—then recover!

“Grade 3: Suicide!”

Once more, release my magic, then recover.

In the video game, all I'd had to do was tap the screen at the right time. But in this world, one mistake meant immediate death.

I put my heart and soul into focusing, aiming for those tight few seconds, and using my Recovery Orbs perfectly. This maneuver only lasted a moment, yet each time felt like an eternity.

Once my clothes were drenched in cold sweat, I finally noticed that the dryad's HP bar had been reduced to just a few millimeters.

“This is the end! Grade 3: Suicide!”

The few millimeters of blue shrunk from right to left. I balked when they disappeared.

The color of the whole bar then changed to red, and once again, all the way to the right, a tiny bit went away.

“No way... It had a second HP bar?!”

However, the color behind the damaged part was clear. This time for sure, if we made it through, we’d win.

I only had twenty-something Recovery Orbs left. The Ancient Flower’s HP bar required over forty of them, so it didn’t take much calculation to figure out that I didn’t have enough.

Well then, what are my options?

For a moment there, I considered not using the Suicide tactic anymore.

I clicked my tongue and cursed. A few kilometers up in the sky flew a score of Ancient Ice Dragons. They were probably here to see what all the ruckus on their turf was about.

God, they couldn’t have picked a worse time.

They were the rulers of this part of the northern territories, and their Recommended Level was around 50. I could see about ten of them. If the Ancient Flower took advantage of me resting for a moment, it would suck the Dragons’ life forces and grow even faster. I’d be officially screwed if that happened.

Then what are my options?!

“Grade 3: Suicide!”

I continued my cycle of self-destruction magic and recovery.

You bastards leave me with no choice but to spam this!

But what about afterward? Once my Recovery Orbs ran out...

Release my magic, then recover.

Release my magic, then recover.

The attacks just wouldn't stop. The number next to my Recovery Orbs kept going down.

The Ancient Flower's HP bar went down at the same speed as ever.

It was obvious. I was going to run out before defeating it.

Death.

As the reality of that word began to dawn on me, it felt like an icy hand was squeezing my heart dry.

Shit.

Shit, shit shit shit shit!

Realistically, my only option was to use normal attacks to get its HP down once my Recovery Orbs ran out. But would I really be able to do that while dodging the heavy blows from the vines? Especially after the Flower sucked up the Ancient Ice Dragons' life forces and got stronger?

"Fuck thiiiiis!"

Half out of desperation, I self-destructed even more.

That's when the inevitable came to fruition.

The red of the Flower's HP bar had gone down to about sixty percent, while the number next to my Recovery Orbs had gone down to 1.

"The final blow... Grade 3: Suicide!"

My final recovery ended, and the light of the final explosion settled down.

The only thing left in my vision was the giant monster, calmly standing there.

Yeah... I'm dead.

As I looked around me, Gabriel shook her head. "Master Shinobu, it may be pointless to do so, but I, Gabriel, will now use my last resort."

Is she really planning on sacrificing herself?!

“Not that—anything but that!”

I couldn't hear the end of my sentence over the mechanical voice that played in my head.

—You have dealt a set amount of damage to the enemy, therefore you have leveled up!

...Huh? Leveled up? What?

Level ups are only supposed to happen after an enemy is defeated.

Wait, does it work differently for raid bosses? I mean, I really did bring down its HP all at once. Am I getting EXP for that?

—You leveled up!

—You leveled up!

—You leveled up!

The level up announcements just wouldn't stop.

The number of Recovery Orbs grew greater and greater.

Before I knew it, I was level 99, and I had sixteen Recovery Orbs.

I have no idea what's going on, but I'll take it.

My stats rose too, so the explosions from here on out should deal more damage. In that case...

Spam! Spam! Spam!

“Grade 3: Suicide!”

I did everything the same as before, except this time with significantly more firepower.

Nice! Its HP is lowering way faster than before.

But it was only just barely enough. Would my Orbs keep up? The only road for me was to push through.

“Grade 3: Suicide!”

Release my magic, then recover.

Once more, release my magic, then recover.

“Grade 3: Suicide!”

Releasing magic burst after magic burst, then recovering myself.

The final spurt was upon us. Just a few millimeters of the HP bar left. As for my Recovery Orbs—just one!

“This is the eeeeeend! Grade 3: Suicide!”



Everything around me was enveloped in a blinding light, whiting the place out.

The light died down, and I was able to see the core of the Ancient Flower and what it looked like.

The dryad's red HP bar shrunk from right to left until it vanished entirely.

We won.

The dryad's core, in the shape of a human, had a smile on its usually unchanging face.

Hey, why is it smiling?

The first thing that came to mind was "form change," a typical phrase applicable to RPG final bosses. But, betraying those thoughts, the Ancient Flower had a kind expression on its face.

It turned to me and said, "Thank you...for killing me."

Ah, right...

That's the story of the Ancient Flower. It's of a species not native to this planet, having flown down from space.

It was a strange being that couldn't even really be defined as a monster.

The first place it planted its seed in was the garden of an old couple, alchemists who lived in the grand forest. It then immediately set out to devour the whole planet, as it had done to countless other planets.

But on a whim, it decided to wait awhile before growing. For you see, the old alchemist couple took interest in the Ancient Flower for being a never-before-seen type of dryad. After a mutual understanding with it, they came to treasure it. Before long, the three of them became a sort of pretend family.

The Ancient Flower had lived alone in space for most of its life. This brief period of time had been filled with happiness.

However, by nature, the Ancient Flower was a terrible being, only intent on

eating planets, birthing the next seeds, consuming the life forces of all around it, then moving on to the next celestial body. In the end, it wasn't able to fight against its natural instincts, to lose all reason and devour the entire region, eventually consuming the entire continent.

With one last string of reason, before it consumed the entire planet, it transformed itself into a seed and flew into space. After it searched for a planet full of life, it ended up returning to this one, leading to "Raid Event: The Ancient Flower Foretells a Sweet Death."

Perhaps the reason why it had granted living beings sweet dreams and ecstasy before stripping them of their lives is because, ever so faintly, the memories of its happy times remained in its heart. Maybe the sweet deaths were a twisted representation of that.

While I was lost in thought, the huge body of the Ancient Flower became completely wrapped in light. It dispersed into countless shining fragments and melted into the air.

—Raid Event: The Ancient Flower Foretells a Sweet Death has ended.

—Your EXP reward has already been granted to you by OBSERVER: TM.

So that sudden surge of EXP was my reward being given to me in advance?

I would've died without those level ups.

And what in the world is "OBSERVER: TM"?

"Well, whatever. A win is a win."

I flopped on the ground with my arms out, letting my exhaustion take over.

"I'm just...tired."

†

Alice Cecil

—You leveled up!

—You leveled up!

The voice rang in my head as I made sure the two A-rank adventurers were fully immobile, and I was finally able to take a breather.

It's kill or be killed.

It might have been in self-defense, but that didn't mean I felt nothing.

But I don't want to be a burden on Master Shinobu anymore.

I didn't have time to stand around in a place like this.

I turned to my shadow and spoke to it. "You can come out now, Lady Tsukuyomi."

A hand slid out of the shadow, followed by Lady Tsukuyomi's cold, prim face.

"When did you notice, Alice?"

"Well, believe it or not, I know that Master Shinobu is a worrywart."

"Is he?"

"Yes. Those two men had been glancing at me suspiciously from time to time. Master Shinobu isn't stupid enough to think they *wouldn't* attack me."

Lady Tsukuyomi raised her eyebrows, impressed. "But, how did you know it was me?"

"It definitely helped that I've been training my magic flow this past month. I knew you could hide in shadows and that you're generally the best suited for stealth operations. And these past few days, whenever I looked at my shadow, I could feel the magic wavering."

She smiled at me. "Seventy points."

"What do you mean?"

"The me right here is just a shadow of the real thing that can only wield the lowest Grade 4 spells. Just a puppet, in other words. So, it's not right to call me Tsukuyomi. You still can, though, as I'm sure it would get confusing."

“...Grade 4 sounds pretty impressive to me.”

Ignoring my sulking, Lady Tsukuyomi continued to speak, as loftily as ever. “I was the one who provoked those men in the first place, so I accepted Shinobu’s request to make up for it by doing this.”

She put her finger to her chin and licked her lips. I’d been thinking this for a while, but even though this person didn’t look that different in age from me, her mannerisms were all rather sexy.

“By the way, Alice, what level are you now?”

“26.”

Lady Tsukuyomi gave a big nod and smiled wide. “Indeed. You’re still a shockingly shitty small fry.”

“That’s pretty mean, you know.”

“Even the maids at Izanach who peel the potatoes are at least level 30.”

Okay, hold on. A normal person at that level would be considered a super talented A-rank adventurer. I chuckled at the absurd difference in worlds we lived in.

“But, well, I suppose I’ll praise you. Now you’re finally good enough to get close to even our lowest level maids.”

“Is that really a compliment?” I was genuinely confused.

She looked shocked and covered her mouth with both hands. “Did it not sound like one? You’ve been upgraded from a mere pet in Izanach to someone who’s allowed to peel potatoes. You evolved from unproductive to productive. It’s not an exaggeration to say it’s revolutionary for your reasons to live.”

“Uh... Is that really a compliment?”

“Yes, it is, Alice,” she giggled. “Now you’re a true member of Izanach! Rejoice, as I’ve come to accept your existence.”

Her smile was so pure, kind, and beautiful that anyone would have gasped seeing it.

The same went for Master Cerberus—these people seemed insane at first but

would sometimes let these little moments of the kindness within them peek through. It was rather unfair.

“Oh, it looks like my main body successfully exterminated the Ancient Flower as well.”

“Of course they did. Master Shinobu is there.”

Her next giggle sounded a bit bitter. “He may look like an undefeatable superman to you, but he actually panics quite often.”

“What? There’s no way. He’s like a god.”

“Looks like he still has some work to do with you,” she shrugged. “Ah, right. You’re level 26 now?”

“Yeah, seems so.”

“Shinobu leveled up sixteen times during this extermination.”

“...All at once?”

“That’s right. So now he’s level 99.”

Wow.

Just when I thought I’d gotten a little closer to him, he went off even further ahead.

All I could do was laugh.

Chapter 3: OBSERVER: Tatsuya Mikagami

Shinobu Iijima

Past the snowy terrain, along a grassy road, small clouds dotted the sky.

A lot had happened, and Alice and Gabriel were with me. We were traveling by carriage back to the Adventurer's Guild headquarters in Amrogild.

It was nice to see scenery that wasn't covered in white for once. I didn't grow up in a snowy place, so the lack of snow itself was enough to make me feel like I'd gone back home.

"Man, being level 99 is super handy," I mused absentmindedly.

"That it is, Master Shinobu," answered Gabriel. "You even obtained just enough Recovery Orbs to defeat the Ancient Flower as well..."

"Yeah, that's suspicious no matter how you look at it." I'd thought about that a lot since defeating the Flower. But the more I considered it, the more one theory kept coming up. "Whatever it was, I'm pretty sure it was trying to get me to use up my Orbs. I had the perfect number of them."

"As you mentioned earlier, it appears as if this is the very intentional will of *something*."

"If there's a governing system to this world, that probably has something to do with it."

The only clue I had was the entity called "OBSERVER: TM." They must have set this whole thing up.

Alice suddenly pulled the trigger of her anti-materiel rifle. The sound of the explosion boomed.

A few seconds later, she turned to me with a happy smile.

"Master Shinobu! I leveled up!"

“Yeah? What’d you kill, Alice?”

“I saw a siren over there, so I shot it in the head!”

“A siren? But... I’m pretty sure we’re over ten kilometers away from the sea.”

“Yes! It was flying about twelve kilometers away, over the water!”

My voice caught in my throat hearing that. As we’d intended, Alice was now able to nail precise, long-range shots. But over *ten kilometers* away?

*Seriously, is she Go*go 13?!*

That’s how disgusting her shooting abilities had become. In fact, I was pretty sure even Go*go 13 couldn’t shoot things that far away. Sure, her weapons were buffed by magic and so their ranges were greatly expanded, but still.

“So now I’m level 29!”

“Nice” was all I could say. I poured some tea out of a flask and took a sip. Alice looked sad as she watched me do so.

“You’ve been working hard,” I sighed. “Great job.”

When I patted her head, a smile bloomed brightly on her face.



She's always looking for validation and really wants to be praised. I guess that's what happens when your whole family gets murdered and you get horribly bullied at school.

"How's your weapon debuff training going, Alice?"

"Well...I'm now somewhat able to do it with curse-breaking magic, but what's the point? All it does is make my weapons weaker."

"That's the reason I gave them to you."

"What do you mean?"

"You know that most melee and mage classes use magic and skills to raise their defense, right?"

"Of course. Depending on how useful the skills are, one could even take on enemies much higher level than them."

"For melee classes, defense granted by skills will often be automatically raised by one's spirit and magic. As for mages, whether they put up physical or magic barriers, both will become defensive walls for them after they cast their spells."

Alice listened intently with an "mm-hmm." Her wagging tail was so cute that I had to resist the urge to grab it.

"Now, here's the question: if someone wasn't buffed with magic or fighting spirit and then they got hit by an attack from afar that they couldn't sense, what would happen?"

"They would have no means of defending themselves." She took some time to ponder that. "Oooh! You even thought that far ahead, Master Shinobu?"

"You may have a base defense stat, but depending on the situation, it might only be enough to bluff."

We hadn't tested how useful this would be in a real battle yet, but Alice had tried some practice shots on me. I knew they were coming so they had only felt like pinpricks, but if she'd shot at me while I was unaware, I probably would've fainted from the pain—level 99 or not. I'd probably had some sort of defensive skill active at the time. At this point, Alice could most likely aim directly for someone's eyeball and blind them, at least temporarily.

Gabriel tapped me on the shoulder as I stared out the window. "It's in sight now, Master Shinobu."

"Yeah. Amrogild feels pretty nostalgic at this point."

The first thing we had to do was report our completion of the quest to Ms. Kaori.

Our carriage sped on to the Adventurer's Guild headquarters.

†

When we arrived, the receptionist was extremely polite to us. Members of the Crimson Moon Brigade treated their top brass with the utmost respect, so it was only natural. Against all odds, I was now a member of the Brigade too, after all. But that didn't stop me from feeling creeped out by having someone I didn't know bow their head so low to me.

Ms. Kaori had gone out for a bit, so we were taken to the fancy parlor to have a meal and wait. As we drank our tea, a reincarnator from the Brigade came in.

"Terribly sorry for the wait. Our guildmaster was out on urgent business."

"No problem. I'm grateful for the delicious food."

"Please come this way. Our guildmaster has finished her preparations."

We got up and followed them. As we progressed down the hall, I had to tilt my head.

"I thought we were going to the guildmaster's office?"

"We are going to the large underground meeting room. We will be introducing you to the members of the Crimson Moon Brigade."

In that case, should I really report what happened with the Ancient Flower to Ms. Kaori? I still wasn't sure how much I could really tell her. I'd logged in way after everyone else, and I was the only player who'd participated in a raid event. There were too many suspicious things happening to me. Even if it didn't set Ms. Kaori off, the other grand guildmasters would be a different story.

We began our descent down the stairs to the basement.

"This staircase sure is long."

“The basement of this guild doubles as a bunker against magical bombs. Most basements in this world are equipped with similar tough material.”

No seriously, this staircase is super long. Judging by the height of the building itself, the basement was probably three or so floors down.

We made it to the bottom, passed through a long tunnel, then opened a door to a wide room. Inside was a round table and two other doors. We were instructed to take a seat.

From one of the other two doors, men with swords and spears marched in all at once.

“Master Shinobu,” Gabriel’s brows furrowed. “What is this situation here?”

“I’d say they seem pretty ready to kill us.”

The sound of all the doors being locked from the outside resounded throughout the room.

“Okay then, Gabriel.”

“Yes, Master Shinobu?”

“I’m sure you’ve predicted several different scenarios, but it looks like we hit bingo with the worst one possible.”

Alice’s eyes darted wildly around the room. “M-M-Master Shinobu... Why is this happening?!”

I grabbed her hand to stop it from shaking so hard. Its tremors calmed down quite a bit.

“I told you—I never really trusted the Brigade to begin with.”

This situation was also within my expectations. It tracked that Ms. Kaori was nowhere to be seen. There were many reasons why this could’ve been happening, but I figured I’d just come out and ask.

“Is Ms. Kaori safe? Or did she put you up to this? Which is it, Mr. Saito?”

The bald guy I’d wrecked at arm wrestling glared at me and gave a vulgar guffaw, just like last time. “Mr. Imabayashi ordered us to bully you and put you in your place, so prepare yourself. That’s the short version of it.”

Damn, this guy might actually only have one brain cell. I didn't think I'd find out the mastermind was that bastard so quickly.

“So what happened to Ms. Kaori? I don't think she'd agree to something like this. I also don't think she's on good terms with that bastard.”

I glared back at Saito, but he didn't budge. Not surprising, since this situation was overwhelmingly in his favor. His killing spree was mere moments away.

“As you predicted, our guildmaster...or rather, our *former* guildmaster doesn't get along with Mr. Imabayashi. Not surprising, since she goes around parading as a policewoman or whatever. It's no wonder that none of us liked her.”

“Oh, right. You said you transferred to the Crimson Moon Brigade from the bastard's guild. He sent you here to ruin things from the inside, didn't he?”

“You piss me off, stupid brat. Don't you know that the smarter you are, the more people are gonna hate you?” He clicked his tongue roughly. “Still in your rebellious phase, I see. You need to learn how things work in reality. The twenty people around you right now are all level 99 wild beasts. I'm sure you can play many roles with your summons, but against twenty of us? There's no escape for you.”

Twenty at level cap?

I was fairly certain that there were only about thirty level 99s in the Brigade as a whole. Even if they mobilized, it was hard to imagine they could gather this many people in such a short amount of time.

“I think there's too many of you here.”

“Most of us are from Mr. Imabayashi's guild. There's about twenty more outside that door.”

So forty? But I thought the five grand guilds were all at odds with one another?

If the Crimson Moon Brigade only had thirty members, then how was the bastard able to dispatch forty whole level 99s? That should be more than their total number of units.

“Shocked at our numbers? Then I bet you'll be even more shocked to hear

that Mr. Imabayashi's guild has even more at the level cap. Those of us right here are just a fraction of his power."

That meant... *That fucking bastard! He must have found a quick leveling method on his own!*

"I think I get what's going on here. Now get to the point. Is Ms. Kaori safe?"

"No need to worry. We had to get a little rough with her to get her cuffed, but we didn't hurt her. Not even sexually!"

Sexually? No, wait. This is that bastard's guild. Of course all the members would be just as scummy as him.

But even so, in this case, they had attacked a fellow reincarnator, not even the natives they hate so much. How on earth did doing this even occur to them? I doubted I'd ever understand.

"No, really. Relax. Apparently, Ms. Kaori looks like your mom, yeah? If any of us laid our hands on her, Mr. Imabayashi would kill us."

My head clouded over the instant he said that. I could feel vomit climbing up my throat, as well as a heavy sense of lethargy. It was a horrific feeling that I couldn't do anything about, the same that I'd had when I learned that the bastard had only seen Megumi as a sex object.

As much as I hated to agree with that repulsive bastard, hearing that Ms. Kaori resembled my mom...I had to agree.

Ah, so that's it. That was why I couldn't help but come to like Ms. Kaori, despite her not being completely honest with me.

"Our former guildmaster Kaori Shinozuka has a message for you, by the way."

"A message?"

"I'm sorry that I couldn't protect you. I'm so sorry that you ended up in danger because of me."

The vision of Ms. Kaori's face stricken with grief, tears flowing down her face, crossed my mind. I could feel something cold drip from my lips down my chin.

"Ha ha ha! You're so mad that you're biting your lips raw! That's it! That's the

face I wanted to see on you!”

Even I could tell that a jet-black, fiery emotion was flowing from the pit of my stomach. I wasn't sure whether it was because I'd thought that Ms. Kaori was a nice person or that she resembled my mom. Whichever it was, the hard truth was that a good person was being subjected to an unfair fate by that bastard.

I hated that truth so, so much.

“You're right.” My voice was coarse. “I want to destroy all of you, right here.”

“You *want* to? But you can't? I see, I see! Insolent as you may be, even you can see the difference in strength at play. You're finally starting to be a little more respectful.”

More gleeful words oozed from his vicious grin. “You'll never be able to win against forty level 99 beasts, not in a million years. You can't even beat me, much less Mr. Imabayashi. *This* is the power of an organization, of political influence. The power of *intelligent adults*.”

I wanted to punch his smug mug so bad I almost couldn't contain myself.

But this was a test of self-restraint. I was also level 99, and I had Release of God's Might. Even if I fought here, I could still... No, I couldn't say for sure that I'd win.

“It's true. I don't know if I could win against you or not.”

“You don't know? What're you spouting? It's obvious what's about to happen. You're gonna get ganged up on, have your limbs torn off, and get thrown at Mr. Imabayashi's feet for a future of eternal torture. That's the only fate that awaits you.”

So they really were going to ruin my entire existence. A sadistic, perverted leer was plastered on Saito's face. The smile looked so much like that bastard's that if my unpleasant feeling were a stat, it would've been maxed out.

“That's only going to happen if I let things continue as they are. I'm gonna go ahead and refuse the eternal part.”

“Excuse me? Do you even hear yourself? There's no future for you aside from becoming our prisoner. Whatever, I'm not gonna listen to you. Right now, I'm

just excited to see your face when I piss all over your head.”

It's about time I wrap this up. I'd never had to use it up to this point, thankfully, but a situation so dire that I needed it had finally appeared.

Open status menu. I selected the Key to Agartha from my inventory.

The golden key appeared in my palm.

Use the Key to Agartha. Transport me and all my allies here to the second floor, please.

Saito squeaked. “What the...? Your body's transparent...? What's this light? Hey, wait! Where are you going?!”

“I'll be back soon to kick all your asses.”

“But, how?! How are you escaping?! We already made sure you couldn't telepooooort!”

Saito's screams were our background music as the scene changed to Agartha.

†

The 13 Floors to Agartha: Floor 2.

Last time, the floor was the inside of a cave where Legendary Goblins made their nest.

However, this time, we were on the bare rock face of a mountainous terrain, on which stood a stone palace that looked straight out of Ancient Greece.

“Master Shinobu, where are we?” Alice looked even tinier in an area like this.

“I'd mentioned it to you before, but this is the dungeon called the 13 Floors to Agartha. The difficulty level is Extreme.”

“These...are the 13 Floors?”

“Yup. It's the best place to level up, and there's even a chance of obtaining special skills if you clear a floor.”

Extremely broken skills, at that. The risks, in turn, were stupidly high. My number of remaining Recovery Orbs was a solid *zero*. But even this situation was several times better than the certain death we had been facing just a second ago.

Looking around, the theme of this floor appeared to be Greek mythology, so maybe the boss here would be a god, like Zeus or somebody?

Alice yelped and pointed at something far off. “Over there! I think that’s a tower.”

Using Far-Sight Magic, I could see a tower way in the distance that was so tall that it literally scraped the sky. The tower itself was very slim, so there was no way I could see it with my bare eyes.

“Your vision really is superb. Thanks for spotting it,” I smiled and nodded.

Her cheeks flushed, and her smile in return was lovely. “Hee hee! I got praised!”

I had her take another look around, but nothing else caught her eye. *Guess that means our only option is to head for the tower.*

Just as we started walking, a *ding ding ding* rang in my head, followed by an announcement.

—Welcome to the 13 Floors: Floor 2!

—On this floor, you will climb the tower, nest of the demon lords, and aim for the top.

—Every demon lord that has appeared thus far in the game spawns here, so please make sure that you are fully prepared before challenging it.

A hoarse noise resembling a laugh squeezed out of my lungs. I’d thought we were going to be fighting Greek gods, but instead, we were going into a nest full of demon lords?

“Wh-What was that, Master Shinobu? I heard the voice of God too!”

“It’s saying we’re about to do a boss rush.”

“Moss lush?”

“Meaning we have to fight ultra strong monsters, one after the other.”

“Oh, I see! I understand now!”

A ‘demon lord’ was a specific concept within the game. It was a powerful race often attributed to bosses. As far as I could remember, there were quite a few of them in *La Vita*. All of them were strong, but I’d defeated each one at least once during the story or event quests when I played. I was willing to bet that I could one-shot the older ones, not that I expected this floor to send those out to me. Perhaps they’d come at me in droves, or maybe they’d be powered up for this dungeon.

But considering we were only on the second floor, it was hard to imagine that the difficulty level was so high that it was physically impossible to beat. I’d expect that of the first or last floors, or maybe the fifth or tenth, even. I had Release of God’s Might and I was level 99, so there was a distinct possibility that I could beat this floor with ease.

The only problem was Alice. Just like last time, it didn’t look like this floor would let us leave without clearing it. It definitely wasn’t going to be easy getting her through this when she was only around level 30.

“Nothing we can do except press on. Cerberus.” I summoned Cerberus in his beast form. He bowed his head immediately. “Your role is to be a shield for Alice. Prioritize her over me, please.”

“As you wish.”

Letting the voice of God direct us, we walked toward the tower.

†

“All right, what’s gonna come at us? Demons? Snakes?”

As soon as I opened the door to the tower, everything in front of me went dark, replaced by moving dots, similar to that of TV static with the noise to match.

It cleared up in an instant. I stood there, blank and mystified.

I’d envisioned demons and snakes, but not—

“I really didn’t expect to find myself in Shibuya, of all places.”

The public square in front of Hachiko was in front of me.

I pushed down my urge to panic and checked my surroundings.

No people. Half of the buildings around us were destroyed. Several of them were smoking, so they’d probably been set on fire.

For a second, I thought I’d returned to the real world, but the scene was so unrealistic I couldn’t believe it. It looked like a war had happened, and there weren’t any people.

I saw an even more unbelievable sight nearby.

“...What is that?”

Lying down in front of where the train station opened up was the demon lord Astaroth. The Grand Duke of Hell was one of the pivotal, tough boss characters that hunted dragon monsters for fun. Its head was nowhere to be seen, and its body wasn’t moving. The dragon it was typically depicted riding on was in a similar state, lying nearby and completely still.

Using the corpse of this dragon like a chair, a young man sat with his legs crossed, gazing up at the sky.

“If you ask me what’s going on here, then my only answer is that I’m Tatsuya Mikagami.”

The man jumped down with a flourish and landed with a light tap.

He had silver hair and an eye patch. His outfit was a simple hoodie and jeans combo. His face was beautifully built and rather androgynous.

“Nice to meet you, Shinobu Iijima. I’m an Observer, so I’ve been watching you for a while now. It’s a little weird for me to say ‘nice to meet you’ at this point. Ha ha.”

Tatsuya Mikagami...?

Ms. Kaori had mentioned that name. He was supposedly the number one ranked player in *La Vita Online*, a med student, and a player for several national

sports teams. Superman, in other words.

He was also the man who killed player killers, had gathered enough guild coins, and made it to the world outside.

So why is he here on the path to Agartha?

Why are we in Shibuya?

Why did he kill that demon lord?

And what did he mean by he'd been "watching me for a while now"?

I had so many things to ask, but no idea how to phrase any of it.

"Oh, right," he said. "I'll give you and the girl the EXP for these bosses."

He sharply snapped his fingers, and a voice echoed in my head.

—You leveled up!

—You leveled up!

—You leveled up!

Once mine stopped, Alice started panicking and babbling. "The level ups... They just won't stop!"

"What on earth...?"

"It's still going... It's...going up so much!"

I couldn't hear her version of the voice of God. *But didn't this guy say he was "giving" us the EXP?*

"Care to tell us what's going on, Mr. Mikagami?"

"The Recommended Level for Floor 2 is 120, you know? Miss Alice here just passed through a boss rush at level 29, so it's no wonder she's leveling up a ton."

"She 'passed through'...?"

"Yup. This last one followed me all the way to Shibuya, but the rest are all littered across Floor 2. I hope you forgive me for erasing them along with the

whole Floor. They would have just gotten in the way of our conversation.”

“I see. You’re the person behind the Ancient Flower event too, aren’t you?”

His face lit up in surprise, and he began clapping his hands together. “I’ve seen you do this several times, but you really are quick on the uptake. Good job!”

“I saw the words ‘OBSERVER: TM’ during that event. You just called yourself an Observer, Tatsuya Mikagami. And considering you were able to transfer EXP to us, an obvious alteration to the game system, wouldn’t it be weirder if I *didn’t* assume you were associated with the devs?”

“Right, exactly! I intervened in the Ancient Flower event and took away all your Recovery Orbs.”

“So that really was your goal. I would’ve died as a result...and wouldn’t the world have ended?”

“No, no. That city and the surrounding areas were the only active spaces for the event. Remember the wall? Had the Ancient Flower expanded, it would’ve pressed against the wall so hard the flower would’ve destroyed itself.”

His words and way of speaking were so light they reminded me of bubbles. “I made it so that you’d level up just enough to win, and even arranged things so that no one else would get hurt.”

“But...what if I’d made a mistake during battle? Had I missed even a single one...”

“Well, the whole place would’ve been destroyed.”

I clenched my fist and ground my teeth.

“Stop fucking around.”

“Fucking around? I’m being very serious here.”

“I’m fine with you targeting me alone for whatever reason, but that city had tons of people in it!”

My intestines wouldn’t stop churning as I remembered Ms. Isabella and her team.

This guy was the same as the rest of them. He didn't have goodwill toward the people living in this world. He seemed to consider them nothing more than game data.

I'd only spent a little bit of time with Gabriel and the others, but to me, I couldn't see them as anything other than human beings with blood flowing through them.

"Doesn't seem like you and I are going to get along," I spat.

"Heh heh, I don't care about your feelings. I just can't overlook cheating."

"Cheating?"

"I honestly can't believe your love for Megumi Iijima is so strong that it got you all the way here. I didn't think your irregular log-in would take you through the tutorial either. It was pretty bothersome for me that you received Recovery Orbs after the tutorial, even though I'd made sure to delete them from existence. The game becomes thoroughly unbalanced because of them."

"Megumi...?" I couldn't hear anything else. "What do you know?"

Right. Ms. Kaori had told me this guy was the one who gave her that photo of Megumi too.

"What do I know? I know everything. I'm an 'Observer' and an 'Executor' who exists to keep this game fun, fair, and square."

"Sorry, but I have no fucking idea what you're talking about."

Mikagami smiled. "In other words, from my position, because you're able to head to Agarthia due to a bug in the system, I have to kill you."

Gabriel didn't hesitate to launch herself toward him.

A crystal sword appeared in Mikagami's hand with a snap of his fingers. He dodged Gabriel's onslaught with a twirl, then swung his sword at her.

She had to evade with several flaps of her wings after taking the attack.

The next moment, Cerberus fell to the ground. He'd taken the hit for Gabriel through Substitute.

Oooh boy...

Mikagami had completely depleted my tank's HP in one hit, even with Release of God's Might. *At least the Ancient Flower was nice enough to leave half of it!*

The man pouted in Gabriel's direction. "Could you watch your manners a little more, Gabriel? I may not look like it, but I'm not indestructible. Getting punched hurts!"

I brought Cerberus back with Revival Magic, but it ate up a ton of my MP.

This guy is unbelievably skilled.

I could tell just from his one hit to Gabriel that I wouldn't be able to win against him.

"You're really making a lot of assumptions here." I tried to stay civil.

"How so?"

"You're saying I'm cheating or whatever, but all I've been doing is desperately trying to stay alive with what I've been given."

"Well, it doesn't matter whether you asked for it or if you wanted it. In this case, the problem is that you expect me to see it that way. Anyway, Shinobu, I'm thinking we should play a game now."

"A game? Aren't you gonna kill me?"

He chuckled at himself, catching me off guard. "I wouldn't mind killing you in the end, but remember, I'm an Executor. I have to make sure the game progresses fairly."

I gestured for him to keep going.

"Don't forget—I gave you a proper reward for putting your life on the line during the Ancient Flower event. I mean, it did involve you having to use those Orbs to survive, but I wanted you to get rid of those anyway, so that was the best course of action."

"...I didn't get any Recovery Orbs from those level ups a minute ago either."

"During the game, sometimes tons of them would be given out as part of welcome campaigns for newcomers. You can change that to the number of Orbs you receive through level ups too."

“Increasing the level cap past level 99 hasn’t been implemented yet, so the number of Orbs must not have been set for the upper levels either. Is that why I didn’t receive any?”

“That’s right. I think you’d be happier if you died here, though. No, really. I know this because I’ve been observing you this whole time.”

“I’d be happier if I died? I told you to stop fucking around!” I ended up shouting at him.

He shook his head and sighed. “I’d like to tell you the reason, but that would go against the ‘game’s objective,’ and I’m trying to keep the game fair. It pains me to say so, but hey, I can at least answer most of your questions. Go on, ask.”

“Why do you know about my sister? Who is she to you? No, who is she to this game as a whole? What on earth is this world in the first place?!”

“I can’t answer any of that because of my position. Some things have already been found out, though, so all I can say is that you’re in a very special position yourself.”

“Just *who* are you?” I took a breath and asked. “You were supposed to have obtained a Log-Out Ticket, so how are you here?”

“I wasn’t enough. I couldn’t go there, couldn’t go here, so I ended up back at this place. I can’t say any more than that.”

“Then what happened to the others who got Log-Out Tickets?”

“They logged out. I can’t say more, but...if you’re curious, you can always get one and see for yourself. As an Observer, I highly recommend that to you specifically.”

Okay. He doesn’t intend to answer literally anything, then. He got his point across that he’s a thickheaded jackass. And when I said *thick*, I meant there was no breaking his iron mask.

“Then I’ll ask a different question, Mikagami. What game are you and I about to play?”

“It’s simple. You’re going to fight me with your lives on the line—or as long as your HP and MP last, that is. Just get one hit on me, and you win. And don’t

forget that you die if you get a Game Over.”

Is he saying he's confident that we can't even get a single hit in?

I felt cold sweat running down my back as I watched him laugh fearlessly.

“What'll happen if we win that game?”

“The point here is to punish you for taking advantage of bugs in the system, nothing else. Same as the Ancient Flower event, after you overcome the danger of death, all I'm going to do is prevent you from straying from Agartha's set path. Ah, wait. Unfairness and rewards should be exchanged equally, right? So, if you manage to clear this one, I'll give you something else aside from the EXP from earlier. After all, there's a much higher risk of you failing here compared to the raid event. That's the only way I'm going to keep things balanced.”

“Then I'm going to land a hit on you now and end this game.”

Tsukuyomi appeared out of Mikagami's shadow and swung her grim reaper's scythe at him.

Right before its blade sliced his neck, the whole motion came to a complete stop.

Mikagami turned to me and smiled. “Shinobu? Could it be you haven't trained your dogs properly?”

Looking closely, he'd halted Tsukuyomi's scythe with just his thumb and index finger.

He stopped an entire blade with just his fingers?! I can't believe this!

“Shinobu,” Tsukuyomi grunted, “this one's pretty strong...!”

Her hitched expression matched mine. I'd already gotten a glimpse of how powerful this guy was when he took out Cerberus in one hit, but reality was starting to set in.

This guy's insane!

“Ha hah! I can't believe you let your data do things like this. I won't deny your existence or anything, but I'd appreciate it if you all wouldn't get in the way of a conversation between two *humans*. So, Shinobu, are you sure you don't mind if

I defeat Tsukuyomi here?”

“W-Wait! Mikagami, don’t!”

He was already swinging his sword. Cerberus’s head got sliced off.

“You...! Mikagami!”

Tsukuyomi took a few steps back to get away from him. I left Cerberus’s revival to Gabriel.

“Telling me to ‘wait’ and ‘stop.’ You all were the ones who came at me first.” Mikagami shrugged.

I shot a glance at Alice. “Mikagami... Based on what you said, Alice doesn’t have anything to do with this, right? At least let her go, if nothing else.”

He took a second to think about it, then nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. Okay, I promise I won’t lay a hand on her.”

“I want you to promise to let her go back to her world after all this is over.”

“Wow, you really don’t trust me, do you? All right, then. Regardless of whether or not you win this game with me, after it ends, I’ll transport her to the Great Sage Isabella’s mansion in the northern city. I just can’t guarantee that she won’t get hurt during our little scuffle.”

“Hear that, Alice? Get as far away from this place as you can. Immediately.”

“But Master Shinobu...!”

“Just go!”

After a moment of hesitation, Alice ran off along the streets of Shibuya.

There was no turning back from here.

“Why don’t I explain the rules to give her more time to run?”

“Rules? I thought I was just supposed to get a hit in on you.”

“About that...as you saw with Tsukuyomi just now, I’m pretty sure your attacks won’t hit me, no matter what. It wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t explain that to you in advance.”

It was true. Tsukuyomi had launched the perfect sneak attack. If that was how

this guy reacted to surprises, then actually landing a hit on him would be a monumental task.

“To start, I’m not a god that can do anything he wants, nor am I indestructible. If I were, this wouldn’t make for a good game. However, I wouldn’t mind if you considered me the strongest player in the whole world.”

“...Okay?”

“My class is Swordmaster, and my level is 130. Another important thing to mention is that I have the Evil Eye of Liquid Wisdom, which can see through all magic, and the unimplemented, extremely broken skill Clear as Still Water, which renders all status effects ineffective against me.”

“The Evil Eye of Liquid Wisdom... Is that the ability to visualize magic flow so you can dodge simple magic attacks? Are you serious?”

“Yes. Clear as Still Water is like the ultimate version of the final attack of a martial arts master from a manga. Every attack within my field of vision can be dodged because of some nonsense like ‘the logic of the art of war’ or something like that. You and I are currently thirty levels apart, so you might as well assume that you won’t be able to land a direct hit on me, with or without magic.”

“...You’ve got evasion boosts, then.”

“That I do. Usually, no one would be allowed to equip Liquid Wisdom and Still Water at the same time because of how unfair it would be. I mean, these things can suppress all magic, physical attacks, and unified attacks. Oh, and I should mention. I don’t have a way to defend against ranged explosions, so don’t use those, please. It wouldn’t make for a good game.”

“No Area of Effect Magic? That sounds a little too favorable to you.”

“You’re the ones who get to win the whole game just by landing a single hit on me. If you want, why don’t I get rid of that rule and we do a pure, fair killing game? I don’t mind, if that’s what you want.”

“Fine,” I said after a moment. “No Area of Effect Magic.”

Mikagami clapped his hands together. “I’m sure she’s far enough by now. Let’s begin.”

“Yeah. I’m going to beat you down, then you’ll let me out of here. After that, you need to promise me that you won’t meddle in my affairs ever again.”

He tilted his head and chuckled. “Oh my. You look like you know a way to win.”

“I’m not stupid enough to give up before I even try.”

“Interesting. Part of why I explained the rules was so that you could have some time to think, so that’s good, but... Well, go on, give it a try.”

†

About twenty minutes after the battle began, all we were doing was desperately running around Shibuya.

Gabriel and I were the only ones who had the ability to revive others, and our MP was down to twenty percent already.

We were just getting one-sidedly sliced by Mikagami. Not even joking—his battle prowess was broken as all hell. With each swing of his blade, one of us was struck down in a single hit. Or rather, Cerberus was the one to die every single time. Even if we attacked him together, Mikagami would dodge everything, not even letting us step on his shadow.

This was the power of someone 30 levels higher than me. Not to mention him being gifted with the unfair Evil Eye of Liquid Wisdom and Clear as Still Water skills, which both boosted his evasion.

He was so powerful I could only think of him as a monster.

“You’re not gonna win if you keep running around like that!” he yelled as he chased us between the buildings on Main Street.

We paid him no mind, sliding into a certain building we’d had our eyes on the whole battle. It had broken into just the perfect shape. It must’ve been a department store or something. The smell of cosmetics pierced my nose.

“Master Shinobu! Don’t worry about us, just keep running!”

The sound of Tsukuyomi getting sliced rang out at the same time Cerberus yelled. He fell to the ground next to me as her damage substitute.

Tsukuyomi's scream followed. *Damn it, they were both done in!*

Sure, we could fix this since Gabriel and I could revive them, but hearing my comrades get cut down one after the other wasn't good for my soul.

But we weren't running around like this for nothing.

Gabriel and I skidded to a stop at the center of the floor we were on. Turning to face Mikagami, we were now in a dueling stance.

"What, no more tag, Shinobu?" he smiled.

"We're gonna run out of energy if we just keep running forever."

With only twenty percent of our MP left, it was clear that running would get us nowhere.

"Seems like you have a plan, then? Go on, show it to me."

Gabriel jumped in front of me to take the next slash from Mikagami's crystal sword.

"Master Shinobu...I wish you luck."

As she fell to the ground, I began casting a Dark spell. "Grade 4: Dark Matter."

This magic would surround the opponent in darkness, blinding them.

"Ha ha! Didn't I tell you that status effects wouldn't work on me? You already forgot?"

I knew that. I wasn't stupid.

Opening my inventory, I threw an item out and squeezed my eyes shut.

A stun grenade.

Often called a flash-bang, it was capable of stealing an opponent's vision away. I'd spent my guild coins on it.

Even with my eyes shut, I could tell that the violent light encapsulated the

whole area.

“If magical status effects don’t work, then how about you get your eyes dug out by a modern weapon?!” I shouted.

“I can’t...see...!”

Yes! It worked!

Whether his vision would fail had been a gamble. Since it used light as a means of violence, it would obstruct his vision using physical attributes rather than magical. I’d figured it would be akin to stabbing his eyes with knives, and bingo!

When I opened mine, Mikagami was standing there looking thrown off-balance. “So I can’t see now. What does that do for you?”

“Clear as Still Water allows you to dodge any attack within your vision. You shouldn’t be able to dodge if your eyes don’t work.”

“I see how you got there. The logic is reasonable, but you didn’t think hard enough.”

He pulled the skull-shaped necklace off his neck and threw it right at me lazily. “My vision is now dead. However, as I just demonstrated, I can still see you. Thanks to Evil Eye of Liquid Wisdom, I can see the flow of your magic. It was originally intended to allow for evasion of simple magic attacks through a sixth sense. But, if you think about it, it’s only natural that I’d be able to use it to sense you, since you’re moving around full of magic power. You’ve even buffed your physical abilities with it to boot.”

He shook his head, disappointed. “*This* was your trump card? That’s so sad. It seems I expected too much of you.”

“I’d be glad if it worked, but I don’t expect to be able to hit you with this alone.”

“Yeah? Got something else up your sleeve?”

“Don’t you find it strange? Weren’t you wondering why I haven’t summoned as many summons as I possibly could yet?”

A grin floated up his face, though his eyes weren’t focused on anything. “Now

you've got me excited! What're you gonna do?"

"Grade 5 Summon: Bahamut!"

Mikagami whipped his head around and yelled out. Seemed he finally realized what kind of situation he was in.

"Don't tell me you're going to destroy this whole building with Bahamut's giant body?!"

"This building was already half broken in this perfect shape! Of course I'd use it!"

I jammed my middle finger up and bared my teeth at him in a nasty grin. "This building's going down. Do it! Try to dodge all the flying rubble and rocks! This counts as a physical attack too!"

Freshly summoned, Bahamut ripped through the roof of the building and demolished the pillars. The whole structure began to wobble side to side.

I was a mage, so I could cast a barrier to avoid being buried alive. Plus, I had plenty of ways to escape, like transporting to another dimension.

But what about Mikagami? He couldn't use magic since he was a swordsman. The sole fate that awaited him was getting buried under the rubble like anyone else.

Though, I didn't think he'd die just from this. He probably had a way to dig himself out of the debris too.

But if a piece of the building hit him, that would mean I got a hit in.

This was the first plan I'd come up with after it was established that I couldn't use Area of Effect magic. No magic? Then I'll hit him with an Area of Effect physical attack.

If you can counterattack after this, then come at me.

The ceiling and floor collapsed at the same time with a thunderous *boom*, and the building began to crumble.

I teleported outside from under the rubble. The crumbled building looked just like a scene on TV. I laughed bitterly—this plan was pretty crazy, even for me.

With that, I've won Mikagami's game.

Just as I thought that, I froze up on the spot and sputtered out a whisper.

“...You've gotta be kidding me.”

Mikagami appeared in front of me by Spatial Transport Magic. There wasn't a single smudge of dirt on his clothes, nor any injuries from the rocks to be seen.

“But how...?”

“Same as you. I put up a barrier with magic.”

“But you're a Swordmaster... You shouldn't be able to put up a barrier that can protect the space within it.”

“I already told you. I have broken, unimplemented skills equipped. Including one that makes a romantic idea like a 'magic swordsman' a reality.”

“Wha—?!”

I'd never heard of such a thing. He'd explained some of his abilities to be “fair” or whatever earlier, but leaving this one out was nothing but unfair! Wasn't I playing this game as punishment after getting verbally attacked for “cheating” in the first place?!

“Isn't this a little bit extremely bullshit, Mikagami?”

This was explicitly the type of situation I'd use the word *cheat* for. But as unsatisfied as I was, it was the simple truth that I'd been beaten.

“I know how you feel,” he said with an even tone. “It's an unofficial skill to most players. I didn't plan on using it initially, so... To be honest, I'm not sure if I can call this fair or not.”

“Not sure? About what?”

“Shinobu, I really didn't think you'd go that far. And it's not like I don't feel *anything* about using an ability you didn't know about to escape that predicament. It's not fair.”

“Does that mean this is my win since you broke the rules?”

“No, checking her scales, that was apparently just within the rules. That’s not how I feel, though, so maybe we can call this a draw?”

What does he mean by “her scales”? I got stuck on that unfamiliar phrase, but the last thing he said bothered me.

“...A draw?”

He nodded. “The game is over, and I will remove myself as a threat from your situation. However, I will also be confiscating your Key to Agarthia since you obtained it unfairly from the system and I won’t give you any extra rewards. Those are the conditions of our agreement. Does that work for you?”

“I don’t like it.”

“I can’t do any more than that. If you deny these terms, then I’m left with no choice but to kill you. Would that work?”

“Getting killed is out of the question too.”

“As I thought. So, we’ll call this a draw.”

I looked straight at him and put both middle fingers up. “No draw, and no getting murdered! I’m gonna beat you and end this game!”

I lunged toward his eye patch. He flew backward after getting attacked directly in the head.

The next moment, a *bang* from a gun rang out—after the bullet itself. This bullet had traveled faster than the speed of sound, after all.

In other words, Alice had just shot him from afar with her anti-materiel rifle.

Mikagami could only manage a “*What?!*” after realizing what had happened to him.

“I win, Mikagami. I got one hit in. On your face.”

“How...?”

“I didn’t think I’d have to use my real trump card either, but as they say,

always come up with a plan B. I contacted Alice through Tsukuyomi's shadow clone."

"I got that part, but...didn't she shoot me with a bullet you buffed with magic? If so, then Liquid Wisdom should've detected it, letting me dodge it with Still Water."

Surprisingly, he actually looked a bit panicked. I nodded softly. "You're exactly right. Clear as Still Water lets you dodge any physical attack within your sight, and Evil Eye of Liquid Wisdom visualizes magic flows for you. These two skills work together to allow you to dodge any magic spell."

"Yeah. So I should've been able to see her weapons buffed by magic..."

He trailed off, seemingly having figured out what Alice did. As proof, he threw his hands up in the air in a surrendering position.

"I got it. Alice can debuff the magic off of her weapons."

His mystified expression broke and he started chuckling. "...Ha ha, ha ha, ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

His laugh gradually growing louder, he eventually buckled over and had to hold his stomach. "Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha! This is incredible... *You're* incredible! You thought that far ahead?!"

"You're the incredible one. Just how messed up are those skills of yours? It took all this effort just for me to get one hit on you."

"That just makes you even more amazing. I think it means you have the ability to struggle with all your might to survive. You actually won against me... Heh heh, ha ha, ha ha hah!"

"...So I win, right?"

"Yes, no doubt about it. I was a player like you once, but this is the first time I've ever been beat so innocently. All right... I like you. Let me tell you something good. About your sister..." Mikagami's face suddenly turned serious, and he whispered in my ear. "Your sister is going to die as soon as she manifests in this world. That's what the world has decided."

"Huh...?"

He turned his back to me and walked away, leaving me with a light wave of his hand. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions, but in my position, I’m not exactly allowed to leak information or show any bias toward anyone, you see.”

“Hey, wait a second!”

“We probably won’t ever meet again.”

“So hold up!”

No matter how much I pleaded with him, he wouldn’t respond.

Before I knew it, my allies and I were left in a wide grassland outside the city that held the headquarters of the Adventurer’s Guild.

+

“What was his problem?”

We didn’t go back to the Adventurer’s Guild, instead opting for the northern city. The first thing we did was take a breather and get some warm food at the inn.

“If this world really does have a governing system,” Gabriel replied, “that man must be involved with it.”

“I think you’re right. I just don’t get what he’s after, though.”

“He said things about him being an ‘Observer’ and an ‘Executor’ or whatnot.”

“As far as the ‘Executor’ part goes, he’s probably supposed to regulate people—like me—who obtained certain powers in ways that the devs didn’t intend. Cheaters, essentially. Though, in my case, I didn’t exactly get a choice in the matter.”

“It’s hard to understand what an ‘Observer’ is supposed to be as well. He claimed to have been watching you for some time now.”

“It sounds like it’s his job to monitor or supervise the players, but yeah, who knows what it really is.”

A message window popped up in front of me, accompanied by an announcement in my head.

A new present has been delivered to your Present Box.

A present?

Opening up my menu, an item called a “Communication Crystal” was listed. As soon as I pulled it out, a face popped up on the surface of the ball.

“Hey! Short time no see, Shinobu.”



But, you just told me we'd never meet again, Mikagami!

I wanted to bludgeon him with that rebuttal so bad but managed to suppress it.

"What is this?" I fought to keep my voice level.

"I told you I'd give you a reward, but it totally slipped my mind. It's not quite a give-and-take situation, but keeping things fair is important to me."

Right. He did mention something about that. Suspicious as he might have been, I was always open to receiving good stuff.

"So, what're you gonna give me?"

"Well, what do you want?"

"A Key to Agarthia." I took no time deciding. Keys to that dungeon had been periodically delivered to my Present Box up to that point. Losing that advantage would seriously put a damper on my plans.

"Those will still be sent to your Present Box every so often, same as always."

"Wait, what? I thought the whole reason you attacked me was to prevent that from happening!"

"I was just trying to purge you because you weren't receiving them through an official method. But any player I bother for similar reasons, even just once, will be given the Keys officially from then on. And since you finished the tutorial...or rather, since all of the players have logged in, that rule can start coming into play."

"All of the players? But Megumi still hasn't logged in!"

"My position won't allow me to explain."

There it is. His catchphrase. Not that I'd expected him to explain anything.

"Whatever. At the end of the day, I get the Keys, right? Then give me Clear as Still Water and the Evil Eye of Liquid Wisdom too."

Mikagami might have been thirty levels higher with an evasion rate of one hundred percent, but I predicted I'd get similar parameters with the same skills. I'd be able to defeat the bastards who'd captured Ms. Kaori too. Getting these

skills would give me an undeniable advantage.

“Hmm. Giving you those doesn’t seem very fair to me. You’re not supposed to be able to equip them both at the same time, anyway.”

“Ugh, you’re so useless. What *will* you give me, then?”

“Let’s see. If you really want something nice and broken, then I’m able to give you items and skills with limited uses. For example, one that can make you almost invincible in certain regions undersea, or one that will make you unable to die within a set one-meter field.”

“Seriously useless.”

“That’s what being fair is all about.”

Okay, then. What should I do...? Huh? Wait a second. He’s making it seem like he’s on the flexible side when it comes to requests. And he is telling me that he’ll give me broken items, even if they can only be used in specific conditions. Maybe...?

“Um, Mikagami? Will you be giving me this reward as soon as I ask for it?”

“I mean, the fairness of the reward is guaranteed, after all.”

“Then...”

Having heard my request, Mikagami chuckled playfully. “You really are interesting. Good choice.”

†

A couple days after I received my reward from Mikagami, we finished our preparations and launched our attack on the headquarters of the Adventurer’s Guild, where the Crimson Moon Brigade had made their base.

“The guildmaster of the Crimson Moon Brigade is confirmed to be safe,” Tsukuyomi reported. “Location secured. Ready when you are, Shinobu.”

It seemed they still hadn’t handed Ms. Kaori over to the bastard yet. Thank god, because I wouldn’t have been able to handle it if she’d been hurt while we weren’t able to help her.

Tsukuyomi had released five shadow clones for recon in advance. They took

about half a day to discern the situation, finding out that twenty level 99 otherworlders were in the building. What made it even more strange was that no humans of any other level were in there.

Twenty level 99s wouldn't be a problem for us at this point, though.

I'd stationed Alice some ways away in the watchtower of Amrogild, so she was ready at any moment to snipe the headquarters. For the record, thanks to Mikagami's EXP sharing, Alice was now level 53.

Where were we at the moment? Right at the front entrance of the Adventurer's Guild, of course. More precisely, the plaza with the fountain near the center street that faced the guild.

They'd beaten us, so now it was our turn to beat them. Punch or be punched, that's my creed.

"Get 'em, Alice."

As soon as I raised my right hand, the front doors of the headquarters were blown to pieces, fragments of wood and splinters spilling everywhere.

The anti-materiel rifle was apparently originally intended for use against tanks, and in modern day was used to blow up trenches. Destroying doors was a piece of cake for it.

"What was that? What was that? What the hell was that?!"

A reincarnator fumbled out to inspect the calamity—a tank in heavy armor, at level 99. No idea what his name was.

Gabriel stood directly in front of him.

"You're...?! Gabriel, the summon?!"

"Yes, my name is indeed Gabriel."

"Did that brat finally come back for revenge?! You're just some summon for solo players. You'll never be able to break my level 99 defense. I specialize in it!"

A single uppercut. That was all it took to send the man flying into the air with a mischievous *whew* that echoed around the plaza.

Whoa... He's really flying...

The man rose about a hundred meters up before gravity brought him all the way back down. Gabriel was right where he'd left her, and with one kick, she launched the man straight into the guild.

"Lots of bracken staaarch!"

With a death cry that sounded like it came out of a cartoon, the man slammed into the wall of the guild's entrance. He twitched, convulsing, and made sounds like those of a bug. *I'd say he's probably been rendered unable to fight after that.*

"How did she do that?!"

"She took down Mr. Nakajima in one hit...?"

The guild members started crowding around.

Who could blame them for being confused? We were now level 125.

Plus, Mikagami had given us twenty Keys to Agartha and Recovery Orbs each. We weren't supposed to use the Orbs outside of Floor 2 of Agartha, though. It was pretty obvious what I'd done, right?

I'd used my tried-and-true self-destruct plan against the boss rush.

As expected of the highest level dungeon, it had been supremely good for leveling. I was also currently using Release of God's Might, giving Gabriel, Tsukuyomi, and Cerberus strength so immense that they were actual demons to level 99s.

I shuffled out of my hiding spot and declared war against the otherworlders.

"Come at us, weaklings! We're gonna round you up and beat you into your places!"

Kaori Shinozuka

“What’s going on?”

I was being held captive on the upper floor of the underground prison. I could hear a commotion full of screaming and explosions from above.

There’s no way to be sure, but...did somebody come to rescue me?

I couldn’t think of anyone who’d bother to do that. I might have been one of the five grand guildmasters, but as one could see, being so strict about rules only made people treat me like this.

So what’s this fight about? There hasn’t been a reason for war between the guilds in two hundred years.

A reincarnator named Isoyama rushed down the stairs, breaking through my confusion. He was a sword user, like me. Though to be more precise, he was an upper-class Swordmaster. But we were both level 99. He had a rough personality, which didn’t mesh with mine at all.

“Hey, Shinozuka! You put that brat up to this, didn’t you?!”

“Who...?”

Was he talking about Iijima? I shook my head to deny it. Mr. Imabayashi had his eyes on him, so Iijima really should’ve just forgotten about me and gone to live quietly somewhere. If he really was here, then he was a stupid kid.

“Mr. Saito gave us an order. If that brat comes to attack us before we bring you to Mr. Imabayashi, then we have to kill you.”

“You’re going to...kill me?”

“We know more than anyone else how strong you are. You’re like the bomb in our stomach in the middle of an unwanted situation.”

I’d thought he was going to pull out the key to this cell, but instead he pulled the sword off his back. It seemed he was going to slice through the bars themselves and take me with them.

Would I be able to stop his blade with my bare hands?

I was bound with a rope sealed with magic and couldn't move, so that wasn't likely. I thought up as many routes of escape as I could, but ended up arriving at accepting my fate.

It's been four hundred years since I was reincarnated here.

After the longest time, the end was finally upon me. If I had any regrets, it was probably that I'd never gotten the chance to challenge the Agarthan event and obtain a Log-Out Ticket the proper way, even though the update was so close.

"...I want to see my family."

My family, whom I was so, so proud of. All of us had such a strong sense of duty and took our jobs as police officers seriously. We loved to drink with our colleagues. Every time we did, the whole place would turn into a huge, wonderful banquet.

I want to drink with my family one more time... That had been my wish for the past four hundred years that I never told anyone. I could only laugh bitterly at the fact that this was the moment it'd finally slipped from my lips.

"Then what are you waiting for? Just go see them."

A high-pitched voice hit my ears, and a girl rose up from my shadow wearing gothic lolita clothes.

"Who are you?" I was too shocked to say anything else.

The girl snapped her fingers, releasing the rope from my body. With another snap, a broadsword manifested at my feet.

"This sword belongs to our pet, a black dog."

A sword...that belongs to a dog? I couldn't help but think this girl said some weird things.

She sighed melancholily. "I'm just a shadow of my real body. I won't be very helpful in battle in this dimension, so don't expect anything."

“What do you mean...?”

She pointed at the sword and nodded. “I mean you need to figure out the rest for yourself.”

I didn't hesitate to grab the blade and direct it at Isoyama.

“Huh?!” he squeaked.

He hauled his sword over his head and swiftly brought it down. Sidestepping to dodge it, I swung at him diagonally.

Watching him fall without even a scream, I turned back to the girl.

“If I said, ‘three successive generations of champions of the Metropolitan Police Department kendo tournament,’ would you know what I mean?”

“No, I wouldn't, and I don't care to know either.”

“My family has trained in swordplay since the Edo period. Then we became a family of police officers.”

“Is that so? I didn't want to know that. I really don't care.”

“My class in this game is Master Samurai. My whole family is crazy about kendo. We've always made a living with swords.”

“What an annoying woman you are. You seem to want my opinion that badly, so I guess I'll give it to you: you're quite skilled.” She shrugged.



Shinobu Iijima

“What’s with these brats?!”

Five or so reincarnators decorated the ground of the plaza with their immobile bodies. Fifteen more faced us.

“You’ve got some nerve, Iijima. We didn’t expect you to come at us by yourself.”

His words had vigor in them, but his face told a different story. Saito, who had evidently been put in charge of the Crimson Moon Brigade, seemed to have noticed that in just a few days, our positions had flipped.

“Oh, come on. I’m not by myself.”

Raising my right hand, the man next to Saito let out a gross squeal.

Damn, Alice is good.

She was a whole ten kilometers away, yet she’d still pinpointed that guy’s eyeball. He fainted with blood gushing from it, but he wasn’t dead. It was safe to assume that she’d taken half of his vision.

“A sniper?! F-From where?!” Saito’s eyes darted back and forth.

“We didn’t find anyone within the surrounding two kilometers, sir!” his subordinate yelled back.

Yeah, that’s ‘cause she’s not two kilometers away. She’s ten.

Her sniping didn’t stop. The screams of men reverberated around the plaza.

“Gah!”

“Ugh!”

“Gwah!”

All of them pressed their hands to their right eyes and fell to their knees.

Beautifully done, Alice.

Every bullet had hit the intended target, every single time.

“What?! What?! What?! Whaaaaaat?!” Saito was bumbling about so much that his underlings only naturally followed suit.

“Gabriel, Tsukuyomi, Cerberus—now! Take ‘em down!”

With my sign of approval, the trampling began.

Gabriel relentlessly punched each and every otherworlder, while Tsukuyomi dominated the battlefield with her scythe. Cerberus used all three of his heads to bite three people at a time, looking like he was headbanging.

“Ah, ah, ah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A cacophony of screams and raining blood. The number of able-bodied people decreased, and Alice’s bullets continued to land.

“Wh-Wh-What the hell are these guys?!”

“My attacks won’t hit them!”

“I hit this dog, but it didn’t take any damage?!”

So this is the power of level 125... Even I was taken aback.

Without Release of God’s Might, we probably wouldn’t have won with quite as overwhelming of a margin. But simply getting our levels up and physically punching the enemy really was a solid tactic.

It was easy to tell who was winning. By that point, all of them had either fainted or held their hands raised in defeat.

I walked over to Saito, my steps clacking loud enough to ring around the plaza.

“I told you I’d be back to beat your ass.”

“Iijima... What are you? What on earth are you? What happened to you?”

The only real answer was that I’d leveled up. Though, I guess the EXP grind itself was a bit of a cheat. After being blessed with the chance to level up in Agartha, I was starting to understand why Mikagami called me a cheater. I

wouldn't have been able to do so without the Recovery Orbs, after all.

"D-D-Don't kill me! Please, don't kill me!"

I pulled out my knife. He really looked like he was begging for his life as tears streamed down his face.

"But you tried to kill me."

"I-I'm sorry! I'll apologize for that! I'll never attack you again, I promise!"

"Forget about me. You also tried to make Ms. Kaori go through a fate worse than death."

"M-Mr. Imabayashi was the one who ordered us to do that..."

"Last question: how many people have you killed in this world? Don't leave out a single person, including both reincarnators...and non-reincarnators."

He paused after hearing my words. He seemed to be counting in his head.

"Uh, uh, um..."

"What's the matter? How many have you killed?"

"I don't know, sir. I stopped counting after ten."

I stabbed him in the neck with my knife.

I must have hit an artery, because his blood spurted out at an intense pressure. His body hit the ground with a thud.

I sighed softly. "You said you'd never attack me again, but sorry, I can't trust you."

Pulling out oilpaper, I began wiping the blood off of my knife.

†

Ayumu Imabayashi

The round table room in the imperial palace of the Holy Empire of La Vita.

Sitting around it was Tiger's Eye, who controlled La Vita Empire's Imperial Court, Dragon's Roar, who controlled the Holy Church, Soaring Deities, who

controlled the Border Union, and my guild, the Lions of Patriotism, who controlled the Merchants' Alliance.

The Crimson Moon Brigade was not currently in attendance. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it would never attend again.

"The Crimson Moon Brigade has collapsed," whispered the guildmaster of Tiger's Eye. "The boy in question, Shinobu Iijima, was the one to suppress them."

"Apparently, he invaded the place to save Kaori Shinozuka just as they had begun to fight internally. He is reported to have defeated twenty level 99 reincarnators." The guildmaster of Dragon's Roar had fear written all over their face.

"After that," added the guildmaster of Soaring Deities after a pause, "the newly reformed Crimson Moon Brigade announced their secession from the Council of Gods and accepted Shinobu Iijima as their new member."

"We've discussed him plenty beforehand, but Shinobu Iijima has turned out to be quite the monster rookie right since logging in, hasn't he? So, what shall we do, Mr. Imabayashi?"

"We've finally gotten rid of that woman who was loud and proud about giving the natives rights every single day," I answered through my teeth. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"That's not what I'm referring to. A human has become capable of felling twenty level 99 people at once. Because we've been following your lead, we've now made that human our enemy."

The other two guildmasters turned their accusing eyes to me.

Nothing can be done about these fools. You all were the ones who strung up the guildmaster of the Crimson Moon Brigade and framed Shinobu as the enemy of all our guilds just because I said I'd give you paid items. Why would you suddenly turn your backs on me only after finding out that Shinobu is decently strong?

"Why don't we leave that discussion for after we talk about what to do with the new Crimson Moon Brigade?"

The Brigade didn't have any able fighters left. What these guildmasters were afraid of was the Brigade threatening our positions with Shinobu in their ranks. So long as they didn't change their view of him from "something to be wary of" to "an imminent threat," there wasn't a need for us to change course.

The guildmaster of Tiger's Eye spoke up. "But this photo... Is it really your foster daughter?"

Another one spoke. "You said Mikagami told you he 'recommends living in a way that would fit her eyes,' but have you had any ideas about that since then?"

The only grand guildmasters whom Mikagami had visited were the Brigade's and me. The stupid woman went and told these dolts about the photo, so I'd known they were going to bring it up here ever since. There was nothing more aggravating.

Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell any of you idiots.

I hadn't told any of them about the "Key to Agartha" that Mikagami had enlightened me about recently either. "I'm not sure what he meant by what he said about my foster daughter, but I'm sure we'll find out once she logs in. But just as we planned before, bring her to me."

And so, we moved the topic on to exploiting the natives efficiently and splitting the profits between our guilds.

†

I walked down the hallway with light taps.

We hadn't discussed anything particularly important, yet the meeting had run on for so long.

I still had to get the low-level battle slaves we'd taken in from the Crimson Moon Brigade up to level 99. As far as our progress through Agartha was going, we still hadn't figured out how to pass Floor 6 yet. We'd formed suicide corps to tackle it and already had over ten deaths. The horrid monsters in that place... They made my head hurt.

That being said, we still had plenty of slaves left. If we just cycled through trial and error, it would be entirely possible to conquer all thirteen floors.

I was climbing into the carriage waiting outside of the palace when one of my attendants ran over to me.

“Floor 6 of Agarthia has reportedly been completed!”

“Who finished it?”

“The level 99s led by Saejima, sir. The ones who you’ve noted to have exceptional battle prowess.”

“Saejima... I see. The foreigners, then. I should’ve seen that one coming.”

“Yes. I still can’t believe that this game was popular among a mercenary group on the way home from France... And, um, I have an important announcement to make.”

“What is it?”

“The level cap was confirmed to have been raised after completing Floor 6.”

“Amazing! Make sure you reward them!”

I’d agreed to give the mercenaries several billion yen from my pockets as their reward. Extremely strong men who would never betray me no matter what... With the level cap increased, we may as well have achieved godly status.

My attendant climbed into the carriage with me, and I lightly pumped my fist in exaltation after overcoming such a difficult hurdle.

†

Megumi Iijima

Where...am I?

That day...

That day, everything had been swallowed up by flames. Shinobu grabbed me and jumped out of the apartment.

What happened after that?

I tried to move my body, but nothing responded.

Everything was dark, either because it was night or because my vision was blurred. The scent of antiseptics wafted by.

I can see a light from a monitor, so...am I in a hospital?

But I still knew that this was a dream, because there was no way a man in a hoodie and jeans would be standing in the middle of a hospital room at night. Besides, this was probably my private room, so a person I didn't know wouldn't be allowed in here.

He's wearing an eye patch, so maybe he can't see very well?

And his hair...is silver?

Yeah, this must be a dream. A weird one too—why would a guy with a face like a celebrity's be standing in a random hospital room at night?

The man closed in on my ear and whispered softly.

“Rest easy. Your brother's doing well. I'm sure he'll make it back to this world.”

He placed his palm on my forehead. “Now, go back to sleep. I doubt your brother will get swallowed up by Agartha. As an Observer, I can tell.”

Something flowed into my head with a flicker, and I lost consciousness.

The last thing I heard was...

“Thank you for giving me one last chance, Ms. Megumi.”

Epilogue: And So, the Summoner Proceeds to the Next Brink of Death

The Crimson Moon Brigade, located at the Adventurer's Guild headquarters.

As we ate at the bar near the entrance like usual, Ms. Kaori jogged over to us looking ecstatic.

"Amazing, Shinobu! More people want to join our guild now!"

"Congrats on that. It must be expensive managing the Adventurer's Guild."

"Not that one—the reincarnator guild!"

All the otherworlders around us turned their eyes toward her.

It'd been decided that I was going to be in Ms. Kaori's care for the time being. As it turned out, the reason her members disliked her so much wasn't just because she was so strict about rules, but also because she had a penchant for shouting out the word "reincarnator" at the top of her lungs. Whether impulses like this were a good thing or not was still up for debate.

"But Ms. Kaori, why would anyone want to join another reincarnator guild? Most reincarnators have been taken by that bastard's guild, the Lions of Patriotism that control the Merchants' Alliance."

"It's all thanks to you. You took down twenty level 99s head-on. You've basically become a legend at this point."

Whoops. Looks like I'm standing out too much again. Not that I had much intention of hiding it anymore. If Ms. Kaori's guild could add to my overall strength, I'd take it gratefully.

"Ms. Kaori, about what I asked of you..."

"Oh, right. *That.*"

She pulled out a photo of a woman who looked like Megumi. This was a

different photo than the one she showed me before. Ms. Kaori had obtained this one as a reward for a “certain incident” from Mikagami. “You fit her eyes, therefore I recommend staying yourself” were his parting words when he’d left it with her.

Apparently, he’d said something different to the bastard.

The nobles in this world knew of things called “magic photos.” They could come in the form of crystal balls, plates laced with magic, or even paper. Paper was their basic form, so equating them to something that existed in modern Japan would make them photographs.

The expression I was making as I gazed at this new magic photo was indescribable.

“She really does look like her... Have you located her?”

I might have been Megumi’s blood brother, but even I couldn’t tell whether this was her or not. Mikagami’s statement that Megumi would die upon logging in had been weighing on my mind. So as soon as I saw this photo, I knew I had to investigate it.

“This woman is allegedly a genius mage who resides in the greatest port town in the world—the southern city, Abrasil.”

“Abrasil... In the south? Isn’t that...?” I trailed off as a bad feeling set in.

Ms. Kaori responded with a grave expression. “It’s where the Lions of Patriotism have made their base. Mr. Imabayashi’s stronghold.”

That’s what sealed it for me.

The time had finally come for me to face that bastard in person.

Afterword

That concludes volume 2! How was it?

I heard that GC Novels has reached its eighth anniversary. Being a long-running company isn't its only feat—their headliner, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, is a very popular work, and they've produced hit after hit from web novels. I feel it has been eight years of steady advances and explosive growth as a label. I'm sure it wasn't a smooth road, but congratulations, nonetheless.

Writing this reminded me that it's been about six years since I started working with *Micro Magazine*. Man, that's a long time. Thinking back on these past six to eight years brings up tons of memories of past industry news. It fills me with emotion.

Recent years have entered us into the fast-paced era of online novel publishing, not to mention e-book adaptations. Scenery really does change, doesn't it?

Back then, not many web novels would get to be published, so money couldn't be made from them. But recently, there's been a rise of ad revenue restoration sites. So maybe one day someone could make more than a few million yen with promotional videos alone, don't you think? Seeing authors and their works have that kind of momentum really makes me feel the generation change. Maybe in the future, authors will be able to make a living just by publishing online, even if the physical release gets canceled. I've seen for myself that different publishing sites have different popular works at the top, so even if a work is good, it might not climb the rankings on its specific site. It's so interesting...you can completely miss a good novel depending on what site it's on. It must be the same logic as print novels and comic imprints getting popular for different genres each.

Now that I think about it, when society switched from flip phones to

smartphones, within just six to eight years, suddenly everyone had smartphones. Five or ten years really is enough time for an entire era to end.

Writing about being nostalgic for the past and surprised at the present really makes me sound like an old geezer, doesn't it? When it comes to work, I believe it's always important to be young at heart, so no matter how old my body gets, I'd like to challenge myself with many things, intent on progress and experimentation.

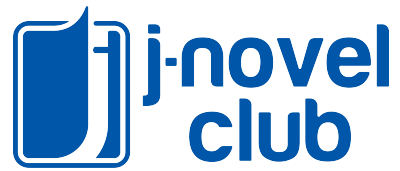
On that note, I've recently been challenging myself by drafting webtoon stories, fighting every day with my editors over this and that. I've also been writing the scripts for comic adaptations of my works, and even completely remaking scripts for scenarios of mine that ended up getting novelized. So, if any of you are wondering, "What ever happened to that Arata Shiraishi guy from the web novel sphere?" please check me out on Twitter (now X) to see what I've been up to! I'm hoping to keep working in the entertainment business from here on as well, so let's just say I've been studying a lot and coming up with different strategies. It's been an almost decade-long journey for me. Sometimes I feel like I have to go back and learn the basics from scratch and fix my scenarios to keep up with the times, as if I'm an amateur again.

GC Novels hitting eight years made me reflect on the past and look forward to the future, so I wrote down what came to mind.

Lastly, my thanks.

My illustrator Yuunagi—thank you very much for the beautiful illustrations in this volume as well. For me personally, seeing Mr. Mikagami's design for his debut in this volume made me extremely excited. I couldn't help but squeal, "Yuunagi is so talented!"

And my editor. At this point, we've been working together for a long time, haven't we? Thank you very much for everything until now, and I'm in your care from here on out as well.



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The Invincible Summoner Who Crawled Up from Level 1: Wrecking Reincarnators with My Hidden Dungeon Volume 2

by Shiraishi Arata

Translated by Jasmin Thairintr Edited by Ruuri

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