











Prologue:

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Prologue: Agartha and Mikagami

Nothing but white.

The white horizon continued on, leaving whoever set foot in it no choice but to believe it was endless. Said horizon blurred within that space, highlighting the only being there: a lone man sitting in a chair.

He was a young man, with beautiful facial features and white hair that framed them. Dressed in a hoodie, jeans, and an eye patch, he brought the wine glass on the table into his palm.

Numerous screens appeared around him, displaying the Japanese people living in the present world of *La Vita Online*—the *players*.

This man, Tatsuya Mikagami, gazed at the video feeds absently. There was no trace of emotion in his eyes, as if he were staring at ants crawling through the sand along a road.

"Those who merely live as their desires lead them..." Mikagami whispered.

Certain windows displayed players currently making their ways through the 13 Floors to Agartha—the members of the Lions of Patriotism, part of the Merchants' Alliance.

"And those who struggle to maintain their humanity, even in a world like this." He shifted his eyes toward the woman who led the Crimson Moon Brigade, part of the Adventurer's Guild.

"And, of course, the man in a special position. The brother of the scales of this world."

He nodded emotionally as he looked toward Shinobu Iijima. "Shinobu... You really will fight to the end to protect your own life and your beloved friends, won't you?"

An ironic smile donned Mikagami's face, as if he were laughing at his own joke. "All of these players have very human motivations, yet none of them will

expect what awaits them."

This twisted smile of his was also aimed at his past self.

Tatsuya Mikagami was born special. He hailed from a family of doctors that dated back to the Edo Period under Tokugawa. One could say their genius genes bonded with *more* genius genes to form a lineage with an impressive pedigree.

As a result, Mikagami was blessed with intelligence, beauty, and athletic ability. He made it into the medical department of a national university, making it only natural for him to have achievements on that level.

When he was young, he couldn't understand why other people were so useless compared to him. He would realize why when he came of age: it was because he was *special*.

Therefore, it was his duty to pay his dues to society. Noblesse oblige, a phrase originating from French nobility. Mikagami had this as his life motto before he'd even heard of it.

There exists a manner of thinking in which those with power must set the standard for society as a whole. In modern day, this indicated that those with power...or rather, those raised in blessed environments should stand above society as its precedents.

Aligned with this ideal, Mikagami had not killed those in *La Vita Online* in vain. He had also never wielded violence as a result of being overcome by his whims. Such actions were not elegant; his aesthetics simply would not allow them.

That was why the actions he took to obtain Clan Coins in order to clear the game were unique. As a PKK (player killer killer), he kept his activities limited to the bona fide murderers known as PKs (player killers). He successfully fulfilled the conditions to escape the game.

But upon taking the leap, he ended up astounded. Why? Because...

Ha ha, of course I can't see that far ahead. You'd be asking too much of me.

Mikagami completed his goal gorgeously and efficiently, without betraying his own convictions and even managing to maintain his dignity.

And yet, what awaited him were the words of a lone girl. They were so carefree, so innocent, and more than anything, they were correct.

Regardless, a situation outside of Tatsuya Mikagami's expectations had occurred.

What came after was him returning to the world of *La Vita Online* as an "Executor" that would protect the game's progress, as well as an "Observer" that would assist the girl.

Or perhaps he was merely a single man who longed to meet the lover he'd left in Japan once more.

"The whole thing really is in poor taste. I still can't believe the conditions for someone to win the game are...those."

Bringing the glass to his lips, he gulped down wine with a flourish.

"It's spiteful, through and through."

The players he watched through the screens were nothing more than clowns being herded around without exception. Such was the fate of those who pressed the wrong button early on. It was the simple truth—people whose cognitions were mistaken at their cores could not possibly arrive at the correct answers intentionally.

The same went for Mikagami in the past.

He looked down at the photo lying on the table. "A chance meeting between the brother and sister? Will that move the hand along the clockface of this world?"

On that photo was a girl of this world, who bore a strong resemblance to Shinobu Iijima's sister, Megumi.

"Agartha... The time of transformation... Let's see what happens."

Chapter 1: The Whereabouts of His Sister and the Port City Abrasil

Shinobu Iijima

In the lobby of the Adventurer's Guild headquarters, the bar was bustling with chatter.

I sat at a round table, with Ms. Kaori facing me on the other end. She pointed at the photo of the girl who shared a heavy resemblance to my sister.

"So what are you going to do, Shinobu?" she asked, her tone serious.

The girl in the photo was named Luna Smith. Raised in a countryside town, she honed her magic skills to the point where she was now somewhat famous for being a genius mage at just fourteen years old. She had invented a new type of rune, which revolutionized how magic circles were used.

There was a problem with that rune, however.

On a certain circle for Holy Magic, no matter how you looked at it, the rune written on it was the Japanese character for "holy." Unsurprisingly, she became a hot topic among the players.

"The chances of her not being related to my sister aren't high."

"Shinobu... Are you really planning to face Mr. Imabayashi head-on?"

"Yes, I am. Considering the strange obsession he had with my sister, there's no telling what he'd do to this girl."

We were currently located in a merchant's city, the home base for that bastard. If he laid eyes on this girl... The only fate awaiting her would be getting locked up, restrained, and sexually abused.

She'd been enrolled in the magic academy, but had apparently sensed danger and gone into hiding. Ms. Kaori's sources had deemed her missing. There was a

chance she'd already been captured, but given that there was a high probability she was related to my sister, I couldn't overlook it.

"You might end up fighting him."

"I would've had to eventually either way. And it's unfortunately to be expected."

"That's true... He very obviously antagonized you before, so the situation does call for it."

"The first thing I need is information. I don't plan on jumping right into his lap."

The bastard's mug popped into my head. I *really* hated the fact that he was officially registered as my foster father.

"Putting that aside..."

Ms. Kaori stood up and gently sat herself in the chair next to mine.

Ah, I forgot to mention, but Gabriel was sitting on my other side. She just hadn't said anything. She was probably keeping quiet since we were having an important discussion between human players. Alice and Cerberus were taking a walk outside; Alice most likely didn't want to be in the way.

"Ms. Kaori? Why'd you move seats?"

"Because of the girl."

"What about her?"

"She looks like you, very beautiful. I wanted to get a closer look. I couldn't see well from that angle, since the photo was facing toward you."

"Yeah, but you didn't necessarily have to sit next to me." She could've just picked up the photo and looked at it that way.

Ms. Kaori ignored me and smiled coolly. "This girl really does look like you." Very beautiful... Just like you."

I didn't know how to respond. Why was she repeating the word "beautiful" so much?

Call me a doting brother if you want, but personally, I did think Megumi's face

was well put together. My appearance, on the other hand, was decidedly average.

"Um, I'm not really sure what to say... But thank you."

"You know what I think, Shinobu?"

Ms. Kaori pulled her chair just a bit closer to mine. Our seats were already pretty close, so her movement had our shoulders almost touching.

"You're...getting very close, Ms. Kaori."

"I'm doing it on purpose," she said bluntly. What on earth is wrong with her?

I still didn't know how to react. "What is it you want to tell me?"

"You're aware that among the players in this world...there aren't many sane Japanese people left, right?"

"Well, it *has* been several hundred years since they obtained impossibly godlike powers. I can imagine that would drive even the nicest of people insane."

That apparently signaled her to get even closer to me. *No, really, you're getting super close here... Oh. Ms. Kaori's eyelashes are actually very long.*

Wait, what in the world is this situation?

Our shoulders were already pressed together, and one slipup would lead to my upper arm touching...her chest.

"And yet," she continued, "you're still sane."

Her sweet breath tickled my nose. Ms. Kaori grabbed my left hand with her right.

We were now holding hands.

"Uh... Ms. Kaori?"

"Which means you're the only sane Japanese man left in this whole world."

"I really, really do not know how to respond."

She paused the conversation by taking a deep breath, then continued. "I can finally be honest with you—I like younger men," she said with a straight face

and stared at me intently.

Finally be honest with me after what? I wondered. I couldn't focus on anything else other than my own heart beating out of my chest.

"Um, Ms. Kaori... I don't know what to..."

"I'm sure you're confused since I'm pushing you so far. I would be too, if I were in your position."

"...I see."

"That's right."

The tension in the air was palpable.

All right, then. How am I supposed to interpret this? Was she just messing with me? Or was there really a slim chance that she was being serious?

I might not have known how to respond, but one thing I did know was that Ms. Kaori was extremely attractive. There was no denying my instincts.

Thinking back, she'd been acting this way occasionally ever since I saved her. It was particularly bad today.

"I thought I told you not to joke around, Ms. Kaori."

"Joke? Do you think I'm joking?"

"Wouldn't it be bad for an adult policewoman to be in a relationship with a high schooler?" This was the main reason I thought it was a joke.

Ms. Kaori hailed from a family of police officers and had a strong sense of justice. That was why she was able to stay relatively sane in this world, despite everything. There was no way she'd be interested in some high school kid.

She then took my face in both her hands, as if she were enveloping it. I could feel her warmth in my cheeks.

She then brought her face closer to mine.

"C-Close! That's too close! This...isn't good!"

There wasn't even ten centimeters between us. Her eyes were right there, and the tips of our noses were just about to touch. I could smell her light, sweet

breaths mixed with the sweet scent of her perfume. A unique scent, different from that of Gabriel's or Tsukuyomi's. I was starting to get dizzy from my heart beating so fast.

"Listen, Shinobu."

"Y-Yes?"

"Everything is fair game after you graduate from high school. Do you understand?"

"Ah, I do. But so long as I haven't, this goes against Japanese laws, right?"

"No, this is fine even if you haven't graduated. It's platonic, so there's no issue, legally speaking."

I couldn't come up with a rebuttal. Just as I was beginning to actually panic, someone came in to save me.

"Master Shinobu! Mr. Cerberus is so good at Frisbee! Please praise him!"

Alice had entered the guild through the entrance, chatting gleefully. Cerberus had recently been spending more time in his puppy form, so he was practically her pet. In truth, he was tasked with guarding her, which he was doing diligently.

Oh, thank god! You saved me!

"R-Really? Then, I'll go see what he's up to!"

I carefully extricated myself from Ms. Kaori and hurriedly walked to Alice.

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Kaori Shinozuka

I watched Shinobu's back as he left with Alice through the entrance, then turned toward Gabriel. "Ms. Gabriel, may I ask you a question?"

"What is it, Ms. Kaori?"

"Shinobu's noticed, hasn't he?"

After deliberating for a moment, she confirmed. "He appears to be on the

fence about it. I imagine he half believes that you are pranking him."

"I'll ask to make sure, then: most people would have noticed, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Should there not be any issues with occupation or age, then they would have. I have a question for you too, Ms. Kaori."

"Anything."

"Your exceedingly obvious method of pushing him made even *me* embarrassed. Were you yourself not embarrassed doing so?"

Against all odds, I was a woman as well. Remembering my own actions instantly made my cheeks flush red. It was true—those actions had been deplorable. I knew that.

However, I didn't have even a sliver of romantic experience. I had been raised as a one-track-minded muscle head. To explain, this was the only way I knew how to go about these feelings, and the only way I could act out.

"Of course...it's embarrassing..." I whispered in a voice so quiet that even I could barely hear it.

I don't have a choice, though!

I said that thought next, my voice sounding like the buzz of a mosquito.

Ms. Gabriel chuckled at my humiliation.

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Shinobu Iijima

We found ourselves making our way south to the best port city in the world, Abrasil. Gabriel, Alice, and Cerberus were with me.

I don't have to tell you what our goal was, right? We were scoping out the bastard's guild, the Lions of Patriotism, which controlled the Merchants' Alliance. Or perhaps it was more like we were gauging their power. If we were to launch even a short attack, we needed to get a feel for his situation at the

bare minimum.

We were also looking for information on the girl who looked like Megumi. It was possible that she just happened to look like her, but having Megumi's appearance in the land where that bastard ruled was a recipe for trouble. Should he find out about her, he'd throw all reason out the window and hurt her any way he could.

Abrasil was about seven thousand kilometers from the headquarters of the Adventurer's Guild. It would've taken a lot of power to cross that distance with Flight Magic, so we ended up using something of an unconventional method.

Ms. Kaori's guild, the Crimson Moon Brigade, had a handy item. It was called the Transport Gate, but it wasn't an item or facility produced by *La Vita Online*'s game system. It was said that it had been created by a civilization that existed in this world's past. Ms. Kaori just happened to obtain it a while back. She hadn't told anyone except for those she trusted in the Brigade's upper echelon—certainly not players from any other guild. It had become a secret escape method for her if war ever broke out between the guilds.

Therefore, the person registered with the Gate was Ms. Kaori herself. She could travel to any place she'd previously been thanks to its Teleportation Magic. No one knew why this had been part of a past civilization, but it could've been an unimplemented game mechanic that existed within its data.

Once we passed through the Gate, we ended up in a forest.

Ms. Kaori had said she wanted to join us, but politely refused when the time came. Because of recent events, the inner workings of the Crimson Moon Brigade were in shambles. Tons of people had joined because I'd taken down twenty level 99 players, but at the end of the day, these newcomers weren't of high quality yet.

They were players who hadn't joined any of the big guilds, so their levels were fairly low. They couldn't be counted on in battle, so Ms. Kaori leaving the guild for a period of time wasn't wise. If the bastard's Lions of Patriotism attacked it without her there, the whole Brigade was sure to collapse.

"Um... Master Shinobu?"

Alice called out to me as we walked along the forest path to Abrasil. Cerberus was walking a short distance behind her, his tail wagging. He really has become her pet, hasn't he?

"Hm? What's up, Alice?"

"Is Lady Tsukuyomi not joining us?"

"I left her in Izanach to take care of some things for me."

What we'd been working on—my last resort, Amaterasu—was at last in its final stages. I'd left the fulfillment of her remaining summon conditions to her younger sister, Tsukuyomi.

Thinking back, I was pretty sure we'd been working on this ever since I completed the tutorial. Gabriel and Tsukuyomi had been doing their best behind the scenes—it meant a lot to me.

Amaterasu's summon conditions required us to gather tons of materials, so I'd been having my familiars go and collect them from dungeons every chance I got.

Summons had to stay within a fifty-kilometer radius of the summoner. I really panicked when I found that out, since it dashed my plan to dispatch as many summons as I could to a bunch of places around the world. But in the end, Ms. Kaori had been able to pull some strings in the black market for me, so it worked out.

Gabriel and Tsukuyomi were, of course, a big help too. Summons in our home base, Izanach, were able to go where they pleased, regardless of my own location. So when it came to mana, I made sure to have the two of them working at full force to build it up whenever they had a free moment. Thanks to that, my wish would be granted in a day or two, when the required amount of mana would be met.

"Man, that Transport Gate really is useful." I turned around.

The Gate in question had been some ways away just a bit ago. Two pillars had stood there, both of them about three meters tall, with a five-meter space spread between them. What did it look like? If I had to describe it in the easiest way, I'd say to think of a door that could go anywhere from a manga that

starred a national cat-shaped robot. This door worked the same as that one, where it connected places. It transported us several thousand kilometers away and had me saying, "Damn, that's good" without realizing it.

Those pillars had then disappeared. More precisely, the light was camouflaging them; it would appear again if one were to touch it.

"Transport Gate..." I mumbled to myself. "Can I ask something?"

"Yes, Master Shinobu?" Gabriel answered.

"With this, we can go anywhere Ms. Kaori has been before, right?"

"That is what she claimed."

"Hm. That might be useful for us."

"How so?"

I simulated a few scenarios in my head and nodded when I concluded they would probably all work. There was definitely plenty of room for more thought, but the potential was undeniable. If we use this right, we just might be able to corner the Lions of Patriotism and that bastard in one fell swoop.

It was a slippery slope, and a lot of things were left uncertain. But it would definitely be useful. Maybe we should launch that attack at the same time as this gauging we're doing here? Or maybe not. They've gotta be wary of my actions by now. Would that make it necessary for us to alert them of our presence in Abrasil? At any rate, unfortunately for Tsukuyomi, it was looking like she'd have to keep working on Amaterasu's case without rest.

The air changed while I was lost in thought.

All traces of emotion had vanished from Gabriel's face, and the atmosphere had chilled. Cerberus began growling at our feet, and Alice's cat ears pricked up a moment later.

"It was quiet, but there was a scream. A woman's."

I wanted to pat Alice's head for her good reporting skills. She might have sensed it a bit late, but it was almost at the same moment as everyone else. She was over level 50 at this point, so... Yeah. Combined with her superior sensing skills as a demihuman, she was just about ready to hold her own. *To think she*

was once a dying child in a slave market.

Across from us, a woman appeared. This harpy dressed in rags ran at us with bloodshot eyes.

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There were five of these harpies running at us. They weren't alone either—a bunch of other demihumans were with them. Ones with elf ears, ones with fox ears, even a lizardman.

I could see about twenty demihumans, all of them female, dressed in beat-up clothing and handcuffed. You could tell just by glancing at them that they weren't being treated very well.

"They're probably slaves on the run," I noted, and Gabriel agreed.

In Japan, our image of harpies was that they had sharp bird talons on all their limbs. Their lower halves and part of their top halves were completely bird-shaped. One would say they looked more like your typical monster than a demihuman.

But in this world, harpies were basically just humans with wings.

"Master Shinobu, what will you do?"

I put my hand to my chin to mull it over. We could make out some armored men running after the women. They were probably the slavers chasing after ones that slipped out during transportation. There was only about a ten percent chance that I was wrong.

"You can ask me that, but..."

Any one of us could've easily beat up those slave merchants, but I hesitated to make that decision. What it came down to was: *ethically, would it really be okay for us to save them?*

From the perspective of a modern Japanese person, a slavery system was unthinkable. But this was the world of *La Vita Online*. Whatever my own morals were, it was questionable whether I had the right to push them onto others in this world. What if these people had been made slaves because they were being punished for crimes they'd committed, particularly heavy ones? What if

they were specifically serving the people they'd wronged? In that case, using my strength as authority wouldn't feel right.

"I'd like to assess the situation first."

But how should I go about doing that? Do I just stand and watch until the right moment? Or talk it out with them when they calm down?

"Are you not going to help them, Master Shinobu?" Alice looked troubled.

"It wouldn't be right for me to butt in when I don't have all the facts."

Her face took on an even lonelier expression after that. She herself had been treated horribly in a slave market, so it was understandable. But it's not like I'd saved her by beating up the person selling her.

"Aaah!"

A harpy that looked to be about ten years old fell down in front of me. The people chasing her yelled when she did.

"There! I'll get that brat! You guys go on ahead!" shouted one of them.

"Leave it to us!" another responded.

The man ran at us. "You there! Get out of our way if you don't wanna pay for it!"

He got on top of the little girl on the ground. "You damn brat! Do you know how much trouble you're causing us?!"

Her face was drenched in despair. His, in turn, was colored with joy and malice.

She screeched. He hadn't even hit her yet. The man looked even more gratified.

Click. Alice undid the safety device on her weapon and placed her finger on the trigger.

"Hold right there, Alice. Master Shinobu does not wish for you to do this."

Alice puffed out her cheeks at Gabriel's words, but took her finger off the trigger reluctantly.

"Lemme tell you, brat! Three of us died when you harpies attacked our kingdom!" The man swung his right fist down toward the girl. "We're breaking the Demihuman Slave Pact by doing this, y'know! We went through all that trouble of kidnapping you, so you owe it to us to make us money!"

Just as he attempted to bring his fist to her head—

"All right, that's enough."

My leg did a nice roundhouse kick to the man's face.

"Bwaaaugh?!" He sounded like a cartoon character as he flew ten meters away. White specks and blood flew through the air, so his front teeth had most likely broken.

Gabriel went next. More accurately, she'd moved even before I did.

Apparently hearing him say "we're breaking the Demihuman Slave Pact" was her green light to be as violent as possible.

The knife she threw sliced across the space, leaving a trail of blooming blood flowers in its wake alongside the sounds of men screaming.

Alice turned to me. "So you *are* going to save them?" she said with an accusatory tone.

"I wouldn't have if we didn't figure out the situation. But now we know."

"So you would've just stood there and watched if that man hadn't said anything?"

I shrugged, a bit heartlessly. "All's well that ends well if we manage to escape. I would've stopped their attacks on the demihumans without killing them either way."

"But you wouldn't know the situation in that scenario. Yet you'd save them?"

"I would've stopped his fist right before it hit the girl. Just knowing that there are people out there who will hit little girls is enough information."

I smiled at Alice, and she returned it. She then cocked her gun and pointed it at the men.

Bang, bang, bang.

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To sum up the demihuman women's story, they had fallen prey to the slave hunters invading their villages in the borderlands and were in the middle of being taken to Abrasil. The kidnapping had been completely unlawful.

Once they'd made it to the port town, there would've undoubtedly been horrible things awaiting them. That was why they made a run for it when the watchman wasn't looking, which brought them to the present.

"Please be careful on your way back to your hometowns," I told them.

They bowed their heads to us over and over. I summoned a Grade 3 beast to protect them. It wouldn't be good to let them near Abrasil, no matter what, so I set them off toward the next big town over. They'd separate from my summon there and planned to hire an adventurer to guard them all the way home. I gave them a good sum of money for their travels and to hire the guard, of course. I had a ton of it stored in Izanach, so it was no skin off my back.

I didn't think it was right to save the natives for free, but it was too late to turn back at that point. Just saving them and then leaving them with nothing but the clothes on their bodies would've been cold of me.

"You're amazing, Master Shinobu. I really respect how empathetic you are!" Alice called out.

"Is it really that great?"

"You didn't even know them. Hardly anyone would do something like this."

"It was too late to turn back. You were in a similar situation yourself, weren't you? You were treated horribly as a slave."

"Yeah, that's right."

"Meeting those people... If I'd just left them alone, it wouldn't have been good for your mental health. You're family to me."

"Family...? I'm family? I'm family to you?!"

"I'll ask you. Have you considered us to be anything else this whole time?"

Alice giggled. Her ears fluttered and her tail wagged excitedly. Super endearing. As long as she's happy.

Wait a second. I thought dogs were the ones whose tails wagged, not cats. I wanted to raise this issue, but decided it would be better to let it go.

The demihuman women began murmuring among themselves. Strangely, their eyes were all aimed toward the sky.

Following their line of sight, I saw a female harpy land from above. She wasn't wearing worn-out clothing and looked to be in her late twenties. Her determined gaze and brave, light armor suited her well. Judging by the sword in her possession, it was obvious she hadn't been captured by the slave merchants.

"What's going on here? Where are those damned slave sellers?"

Now on the ground, the woman looked around confused. The other harpies ran over to her.

"Lady Mimi!" one of them chirped.

"Oh, Myur, it's you! Are you all right?"

They seemed to be old friends. After putting together the situation from the women's stories, Mimi walked over to me.

"Myur just told me everything. I thank you for saving my brethren who were kidnapped from our country."

It bothered me that she didn't bow her head even once, and her eyes were filled with suspicion. She hadn't even introduced herself to me, so it was hard to believe she was being genuine with her thanks.

"My name is Shinobu Iijima. Just think of me as an unremarkable adventurer. And you are?"

She debated it for a moment before nodding softly. "It really isn't a name that humans are worthy of hearing, but you did save my brethren. My name is Mimi. I am a harpy and a member of the Royal Guard."

I could sense daggers from her words and demeanor.

"I'll preface with this," she continued, "but I only have bad impressions of humans. You all were the ones who attacked my kingdom first while we Royal Guards were away."

I supposed I couldn't blame her. Demihumans were historically races that were oppressed by humans.

"So, Ms. Mimi, am I right in assuming that you've come chasing after the slave merchants to save everyone?"

"That's correct."

The harpy called Myur approached Ms. Mimi. "My apologies. Lady Carolla was taken by a different slave transport than me..."

Upon hearing that, Ms. Mimi placed her right index finger at the tip of her nose, the universal signal for telling someone to shush. "Are you *trying* to publicly humiliate our kingdom?!"

The harpy hastily shook her head in protest. "Lady Mimi, you know as well as the rest of us that humans are powerful. We don't even know where our princess is, so wouldn't it be better for us to ask for help?"

"We already have people working on it in Abrasil! Besides..."

Ms. Mimi glanced at me briefly, then looked back at Ms. Myur. "He already saved you without payment, and even gave us money for the road. Yet you want to ask for more?! Do you have no sense of pride or shame?!"

"B-But..."

Ms. Mimi ignored Ms. Myur's stammering and turned to face me. "As you've heard, the harpy kingdom is in a state of emergency at present. We have no money, so no means of thanking you. After everything is over, you may contact us by letter or Communication Crystal."

Er, I don't exactly want any thanks in the first place. They'd be confused if I told them that, so I just smiled wryly. "Ms. Mimi, it's too late for me to abandon you now. We may be able to aid you or give you information, depending on the circumstances."

This was partly out of goodwill, and partly because it would be beneficial for

us. The people the harpies were chasing were slave merchants, which could lead to useful information on the girl from the photo who looked like Megumi. There was a good chance that the bastard would resort to kidnapping to get his hands on her. Since she was potentially already captured, there was merit in following the slave sellers' routes.

"Um, Master lijima, was it?"

"Yes, what is it?"

Ms. Mimi furrowed her eyebrows. She then said this to me in a tone that sounded like a teacher scolding a child. "Haven't you ever heard of 'a little learning is a dangerous thing'?"

"I'm not sure what you're referring to."

"We're chasing after people who kidnapped the princess of a demihuman kingdom. That should tell you enough about how tough of a foe they are."

"I don't mind."

"Master Iijima, I thank you for releasing my brethren. However, this issue belongs to our kingdom alone."

"I suppose that's true."

"You do not need to interfere any further. I don't want to subject our savior to danger either. It would be a different story if you were an A-rank adventurer or above, but judging by your clothes...you can't be any higher than a D-rank."

Man, how long has it been since I last heard that one? Since I first arrived in this world?

Back then, I was treated as the most pathetic adventurer possible because of this outfit. Ms. Mimi wasn't treating me the same way, so was this her way of showing respect? She probably specified "D-rank" to call me a veteran, giving me the bare minimum of compliments. I had the impression that she was the type of person who would be polite to even someone she hated.

I took note of Gabriel flicking her eyes at me and nodded. We didn't need to prolong our stay here and waste any more time.

"In that case, we'll take our leave."

"We will pray for your safe travels."

And so, after some fuss, we parted ways with the demihumans and set off toward our goal, Abrasil.

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"We're attacking from the front, Master Shinobu?" Alice's anxious words made me laugh. It wasn't strange for her to interpret the situation we were in that way.

We were at the headquarters of the Merchants' Alliance—the home base for the Lions of Patriotism. The building was about ten stories tall. I'd compare it to medieval European architecture; it was obviously high-quality. It wasn't just tall, but massive all around. It was so huge that it looked strange among all the other buildings, an obvious display of wealth.

"Nah, we're not attacking. We're conducting reconnaissance."

That was why we got fake adventurer ID cards from Ms. Kaori's guild. My card stated that I was an A-rank adventurer named Chan Muchen. I had them give me an East Asian feel because of my black hair.

There was also a reason I was designated as an A-rank instead of S-rank. In this world, S-ranks were generally level 40 and up. They were obviously weak compared to the players, but by natives' standards, they were ridiculously strong. I didn't want to be labeled as such because I would stand out too much.

"But in this city, aren't there a lot of godlike people like you, Master Shinobu?" Alice shuddered at the thought.

I shook my head. "Remember, we're only doing recon. There's nothing to worry about."

As I waltzed through the door to the Merchants' Alliance, Alice's face contorted with fear.

"Aw, don't be so shocked," I consoled her.

"But...this is..."

"We're not even using our main bodies right now."

To explain: the versions of us in this place weren't our real bodies—they were like the doppelgängers created by Tsukuyomi's ability to control shadows. She'd started to be able to produce these at level 120 when one of her original skills evolved.

Among other things, her stealth skills had also evolved, making her something of a monstrosity now, but we'll save that for later.

The reason we were using these doppelgängers was simple: we wouldn't stand a chance against the bastard's Lions of Patriotism if we were to get caught.

That said, these forms came with certain restrictions as well. First, by nature of being doppelgängers, their physical capabilities were low. While they possessed our actual abilities, they were only about as strong as level 50. Not nearly enough to withstand a battle against players.

Our real bodies were back at the inn, vacant and in deep sleep. Our consciousnesses were astral projections, occupying these vessels. Gabriel and Cerberus remained with our real bodies to prevent any affronts to them.

"Let's get going, then."

"M-Master Shinobu! Wait for me!"

It's in God's hands from here. We crossed through the lobby crammed with people and headed straight for the reception desk.

We finished our investigation of the Merchants' Alliance, then made our way to the Adventurer's Guild.

"It's just as Ms. Kaori told us it'd be," I remarked.

The lobby of this one had a bar in it. I was seated at a table with a cup of tea in my hand.

We'd learned two main things at the Merchants' Alliance. Number one was that although said guild was associated with the Lions of Patriotism, it functioned as its own separate entity. Similar to Ms. Kaori's Crimson Moon Brigade and the Adventurer's Guild.

Okay, well, maybe a little different. The Crimson Moon Brigade filled the upper echelons of the Adventurer's Guild headquarters with players, but the Lions of Patriotism kept the Merchants' Alliance as a completely lower-level organization. The leader of the Merchants' Alliance headquarters wasn't even a player. Their position allowed them to have a means of contact with the parent organization, the Lions, but nothing else.

Number two was related to that. As of that moment, I had no means of contact with the Lions of Patriotism. The bastard was probably keeping his guild and the merchant's separate because of his wariness.

The rest of the five grand guilds followed Ms. Kaori's formula, for better or worse. For example, every successive leader of the Holy Church would be one of the members of the upper echelons of Dragon's Roar, who controlled it. Ms. Kaori currently operated as the guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild headquarters. So long as the natives didn't find it suspicious, the players were able to be in the public eye in ways like this.

That bastard was different, however. For four hundred years, his approach was to use a native as his puppet to do his bidding. He was able to get exactly what he wanted that way. According to Ms. Kaori, he was wary of war breaking out between the players—to the point of throwing away his opportunity to move as he pleased, as well as suppressing his lust for power.

I had to sigh. "It'll be kind of hard to fight with the Lions when we don't even know where they are."

"They're quite troublesome enemies with how thorough they are. They hid themselves because they predicted this would happen, didn't they?"

My own father had been killed because of the bastard's thoroughness. It started with the extensive loans from his banks, and then eventually his company had to declare bankruptcy. In Megumi's case, the bastard never ended up sexually assaulting her in any way. Crazy as he might have been, he wasn't stupid.

"If push comes to shove, we could probably find players the Lions put within public reach if we use Brainwashing Magic on the Merchants' guildmaster, but..."

The Lions apparently had hideout shelters hidden around the world. Not even the members themselves knew where all of them were, and intentionally so, to prevent information leakage. Finding the bastard himself would be a game of cat and mouse.

At any rate, we wouldn't be able to find him if we couldn't get ahold of any of his members. That made it all the more appealing to use Brainwashing Magic on the guildmaster and get him to fess up. If we did that right off the bat, though, the bastard would find out just how gung ho we were.

"So, what are we going to do, Master Shinobu?"

"For now, we'll just do what we planned."

"Um... You mean searching for the girl who looks like my lady, your sister?"

I had some opinions on Alice calling Megumi "her lady," but she probably wouldn't stop even if I asked her to.

"That's right. It'll be two birds with one stone."

"Two birds with one stone? I know we're going to investigate her case, but what's the other thing?"

"We're going to find out where the Lions of Patriotism are hiding."

"But didn't you just say that would be impossible?"

"The main goal of their guild is to make money. So doesn't that lead you to believe that they'll use criminal organizations to make money efficiently, in addition to the Merchants' Alliance?"

"That does seem likely."

"In which case, if we track down a criminal organization, there's a high chance it'll lead us to the Lions."

Alice cocked her head, so I kept going. "If the Lions' goal is to steal the profits from these organizations, then those transactions will have to take place somewhere. Make sense so far?"

"Ah... Yes."

"For such an ambiguous institutional system, it's possible that when you open

up the lid, it'll turn out that the Merchants' Alliance itself is also a criminal organization. Isn't it a bit hard to believe that unlawful organizations in this city aren't under that bastard's control?"

"As long as back market trade is occurring, you mean?"

"Exactly."

"B-But how are we supposed to track down a criminal organization?"

"Follow me." I slowly stood up.

"Wh-Where are you going, Master Shinobu?"

It would be faster for her to see it than for me to explain, so I didn't answer.

I led her to one corner of the lobby, then pointed at the bulletin board placed there.

Alice looked sincerely mystified. "The Adventurer's...request board?"

Alice gazed at the request board for a solid five minutes, occasionally darting her eyes to me and then back to the board.

"Hmm..." She scrunched her face up. She didn't ask for help, but she clearly wasn't understanding. Seemed like she wasn't even getting the starting point, so it was about time I explained it myself.

"This is what we're going to do." I pointed at a flyer on the board.

"It's...asking us to search for a girl who went missing while gathering herbs for her village."

"Yep. That's the one."

The title of the request was exactly that, and the details written on it said the girl had gotten lost in the forest near her village, a fairly safe area. Depending on the situation, it was possible she'd been the unfortunate victim of a goblin kidnapping.

"So we're supposed to go search around a goblin nest for this?"

"That's how I'd interpret it."

At a first glance, it wasn't any different from your perfectly average

adventurer request, but this one had a catch.

"Take a good look at the rewards and requirements."

"Uh... Wait, huh? Why would that be what's required for a goblin nest search? It's not like we're gonna be hunting ogres!"

Alice had every right to be surprised—one of the strange things about this request was that they were looking for strong adventurers ranked C or above. And the rewards were extraordinary; they rivaled that of A-rank monster hunt requests.

Thinking rationally, the only reason it could've been like this was if there were a lot of *circumstances* involved.

Ms. Kaori had told me about this flyer in advance, so I'd come here specifically for it. That was why it was a little painful for me to explain all this to Alice as if I knew everything.

"This is a request to gather strong fighters to rescue either a noble or rich girl who was captured that can't be revealed to the general public."

"How do you know that?"

"Ms. Kaori told me."

"Oh, okay. That makes sense since she's in charge of the Adventurer's Guild. But why did the requester use such a roundabout way of calling for help?"

"It's simple. This whole city is run by criminal organizations, the guys we're after, right? No matter how bad things get, the guards and security here pretend they don't see it. Their only choice was to ask individuals for help."

"But I don't think normal people can win against criminals."

"Even if they get the girl back, the chance that they'll run into trouble is still high. So they made a very bold move by putting this request out there, albeit in code. Seems to be a sort of warning."

"A warning?"

The existence of the players was information that couldn't be known to anyone except those with central power among the natives. In which case, since

this request was putting pressure even on the average person's level, they were really making a statement here. According to Ms. Kaori, it was common knowledge that there was an even more powerful entity that stood higher than the Merchant's Guild and crime syndicates in this city. Some sort of military organization from a large kingdom was controlling things behind the scenes...was what the average person believed here. In the end, they all agreed that going against such an entity would be a terrible idea.

"First thing we gotta do is hear what this requester has to say."

I pulled the flyer off the board and walked with Alice to the reception desk. That was where we encountered the harpy we'd met half a day before.

"Master lijima?" She opened her eyes wide.

"Ah, Ms. Mimi. Thank you for earlier."

"Right, you'd called yourself an adventurer earlier..."

Glancing at the paper in my hand, her eyes widened. "What in the world are you thinking?! Do you understand the gravity of that request?!"

Don't tell me... I locked eyes with Alice.

Ms. Mimi charged right up to us. "I thought I told you! You can't just throw yourself into danger as you please! And besides, it's written on there that only powerful C-rank adventurers or above are qualified!"

Bingo. This mission was to rescue the princess of the harpies. "Er, so that makes you the requester, Ms. Mimi?"

"Take a guess! We're acquainted at this point, so I won't berate you for this, but you need to return that flyer immediately!"

As she said, we were acquainted. Things would get even worse should this rescue mission be set into motion, then inevitably backfire on us.

"I can't do that. I can hold my own, believe it or not."

I couldn't just let this princess die either. I said as much to Ms. Mimi, and her expression clouded over with confusion.

"You can hold your own? Are you...really a C-rank adventurer?" Her gaze was

blatantly asking me how that was possible with black clothes like mine. Adventurers in this world apparently carefully crafted their appearances. I supposed it wouldn't be good for them to have their rewards lessened by clients because of how they looked.

"Anyway, things will go much faster since you're here," I changed the subject. "Would you please come to the reception desk with me?"

"Well then, things will go faster for me as well. I can't put our savior in danger. Ah, and even if you *are* a C-rank, I will be refusing your offer."

"Aw, don't say that. Humor me."

She gasped. "You plan to raise an issue with the receptionist if I refuse just because you're a C-rank, as listed on the flyer? That's what you want?"

It was getting pretty bothersome to answer her, so I just gestured for her to follow without a word. She reluctantly walked with us.

"No matter what anyone says, even if you're C-rank, I won't let you take this! The receptionist will surely have a thing or two to say about that, but..."

I placed the flyer and my ID card on the desk when we got there.

The receptionist perked up immediately. "Oh, my deepest apologies. I'll prepare the meeting room for you. Please, come this way."

"The meeting room?" Ms. Mimi echoed. She tilted her head and glanced at my ID card. Her eyes became round circles, as did her mouth.

"You're...an A-rank adventurer?"

If I had to be ranked, I'd actually be considered S-rank based on ability, but saying that would just throw more things out of whack.

"That's... That's...impossible... Absolutely impossible. That card must be fake!"

She desperately looked toward the receptionist, who picked the card up, turned it over a few times, then shook their head.

"This was created directly by the guildmaster of the headquarters of the Adventurer's Guild. It's a special identification document indicating special

treatment. Not many of these exist in the world. This man is, without a doubt, a first-rate A-rank adventurer."

"What...?"

For a few seconds, Ms. Mimi looked stunned; then her expression changed. She stood up straight and extended her hand out in an attentive stance, followed by a swift, deep bow. The highest form of respect.

"I'm terribly sorry for being so rude to you this whole time. I misjudged your abilities and, moreover, tried to order you to stay away from my people because of the danger."

I paused for a moment, then shrugged to let her know I wasn't bothered. My ID card really was fake, after all.

"And so..." She straightened up. "If you're A-rank... Then, what level are you?"

I'm level 125. If I actually answered that way, I'd likely just get called a liar, so I chose to avoid the headache.

"Uh... About level 30."

"That's incredible! No wonder you're an A-rank!"

I could only meet her reaction with a wry smile.

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After talking with Ms. Mimi for a while, I promised to relay the details to the others at a later date, and then we parted ways.

Alice and I then walked around the city to avoid getting tailed. Going in and out of streets and alleys, I ensured that we weren't leaving foot traces behind us while using see-through Stealth Magic.

Under my fake name, I also met with the leader of the Merchant's Guild. Those who worked at the Adventurer's Guild knew Ms. Kaori had made the ID card as soon as they looked at it, as they reacted when they saw her insignia on it.

However, it wasn't like this was enough to *really* hide my identity. I'd purposefully been moving to be discovered. Not guarding against potential

trackers would be too risky, so we did what was necessary.

After walking for about an hour, we entered a dark alley.

"All right," I grunted. "No one's around."

"Yes sir, I don't sense anyone."

"Let's go back to our bodies, then."

We'd been using Tsukuyomi's doppelgängers to be careful. Even though things turned out fine in the end, it was better to be safe than sorry when stepping into enemy territory.

"You told me to count to ten in my head to go back, right?"

"Yup, that's the way."

I began counting to ten in my head. Alice must've finished counting already, because her body was swallowed up by her shadow and vanished.

My own consciousness rapidly ran down into sleep.

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Five days later, a moonlit night was upon us.

I'd been busily roaming the city and surrounding areas with Gabriel and Cerberus for the past five days; secretly meeting with Ms. Mimi, and scoping out the movements of the slave merchants without even a proper break.

All that work paid off, since I found the institution the princess had been taken to. All that was left was to raid it, though that was just something extra in addition to my real goal.

The real reason I'd been walking around Abrasil with my summons out was to give the bastard a good show. If I didn't, I wouldn't be able to move freely, even with Tsukuyomi's powers. Not to say that searching for the girl who looked like Megumi as well as the bastard's whereabouts wasn't important.

Having settled into the room at the inn, I nodded at Alice's signal.

"Master Shinobu," she started. "Our countermeasures with Grade 4 magic are perfect."

She was now over level 50, making her able to use Grade 4 magic. I'd left this job to her as a form of practice for her. She was using Spatial Cut-Off Magic to soundproof the room in my stead, and I'd had her cast anti-spell-type magic to block off any potential eyes and ears.

"Just checking, but there aren't any magic items in the room either?"

"I checked when we first received this room, eight hours ago, four hours ago, and then ten minutes ago. At no point in time has there been anything suspicious."

I nodded in approval. To be on the safe side, I went ahead and cast my own Grade 4 spells. Doing so wouldn't double the effects or anything, and it wasn't that I didn't trust Alice either. I was simply covering all my bases. It would be the worst for us if the Lions of Patriotism found out about any communication between us and Tsukuyomi. Magic concerning information leakage only existed up to Grade 4. I'd checked to see that setting in the game had persisted even now, four hundred years after I'd played.

With this, I'd done every possible thing I could think of to prevent disaster. To further supplement this, I'd told Tsukuyomi beforehand to speak in code. I also checked the room for magic items myself.

"Okay then, let's get started."

I put my hand on the communication crystal that was on the table. Tsukuyomi in Izanach showed up on the surface. Gabriel was next to her, bowing with a cool face.

"It's been a while, Tsukuyomi."

She smiled at me, while Gabriel just bowed again silently. She'd probably figured that I'd mainly be speaking to Tsukuyomi this time around.

"It's a beautiful moonlit night, Shinobu," Tsukuyomi spoke, as loftily as ever.

"It really is. There's not a cloud to be seen; it's really pretty."

"Me, Tsukuyomi, on a moonlit night..." She began giggling, and just when I started wondering what was so funny, she burst out laughing. She'd always been a weird one, so maybe her sense of humor was weird too.

"How's the plan going over there?"

"I finished the investigation you tasked me with. There have been many instances of mysterious disappearances within the Lions of Patriotism's domains, but it's been particularly bad recently."

"I heard it's normal for entire villages to go missing."

"Indeed, especially in the last ten years. It's not just ten or twenty thousand people either. I was able to collect documents that confirmed the occurrence of human hunting since the Merchants' Alliance took over. That's about where I'm at right now."

"Good. I'll have Ms. Kaori go and pick them up from you, so give them to her."

At present, Ms. Kaori was contacting Dragon's Roar, who were in control of the Holy Church. We didn't have the numbers to face off with the bastard's guild and those who sided with him. So we decided to alert Dragon's of the danger, since they seemed the most likely to understand. Dragon's Roar had apparently been the most moderate of all the grand guilds. We were hoping that even if they didn't side with us, they'd stay on the sidelines during this war.

We had a few things to appeal to them with: First, reminding them of the number of level 99 players I'd defeated. Twenty people was unbelievable, so the Lions of Patriotism possibly had a crazy leveling method up their sleeve. Second, many people had been going missing around Abrasil, and third, because of the first two points, the Lions were surely trying to grow much more powerful before the Agartha event was implemented. Throw in the bastard's penchant for violence and we had a solid argument against him.

If he really was expanding his forces before Agartha, then it spelled bad news for the other guilds. Once he monopolized the power-ups from the event, they would no longer stand a chance against him. Anyone could predict how perilous things would get once he had the strength to suppress all the guilds. Everyone knew he was insane, so Ms. Kaori had determined it best for us to use that to our advantage.

We wouldn't be able to touch on him having Keys to Agartha, though.

Nothing above level 99 had existed for the past four hundred years in the world of *La Vita Online*, after all. Mentioning this without any proof would just be

absurd. Sure, we could use me as an example, but I had my own reasons for not doing so.

"Understood, Shinobu."

"Aside from that, keep working with Gabriel and Amaterasu. And of course, don't do anything out of line for now."

"You're working us to the bone. My sister was only just released and yet this is how you treat her?" Tsukuyomi didn't look pleased, but without her, we'd be out of luck. Not Gabriel, not Cerberus, not even Amaterasu—we wouldn't be getting anywhere without Tsukuyomi.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have you work at full force until I have that bastard howling."

"You should really treat ladies more nicely."

"This was bound to happen after we gained access to the Transport Gate."

"Time is money at the end of the day... But still."

"How's Amaterasu doing?" I asked.

"She keeps whining about wanting to see you. I'm sick of it."

"Not that, I mean her abilities. Is she as broken as ever?"

"As broken as you remember."

"Yeah... Her abilities are so fucked up, they obliterate the whole point of being a summoner."

All kinds of players called for her to be nerfed because of this. The devs listened and actually did it, so now there was a limit to how long you could use her for. Couldn't be helped, since letting her use *that* repeatedly would be actual cheating.

"Checking to make sure, but has there been any interference from the Lions so far?"

"None. No shadows or physical ones."

I nodded, relieved. If Tsukuyomi was right, then our true goal hadn't been uncovered yet. The enemies weren't worried about me and were letting their

guards down. I'd lived with the bastard for over ten years, so I knew his general personality. I was making a show of acting sketchy around Abrasil, so it would definitely be a problem if he didn't let his guard down. From his perspective, this would be a blade from another dimension, a suprarational hit.

I never would've been able to achieve this without the Transport Gate. I could only be grateful to Ms. Kaori for not clueing the other guilds in on it.

"I'm counting on you." I grinned.

"I know. You just focus on your work over there. You won't be able to fight with the Lions of Patriotism if you don't find out where they are."

"Okay, I'm gonna hang up now."

"Wait, Shinobu."

"Hm? Yeah?"

"Since you're calling me on a moonlit night, why don't you try calling my sister during a sunny day?"

She started giggling as soon as the words left her mouth. She was probably joking about how she was the goddess of the moon and Amaterasu the sun, but I didn't understand why that was so funny.

I sighed and looked at Gabriel next to her.

"Heh heh. Heh heh..." Gabriel was chuckling too. "Amaterasu on a sunny day... I didn't think Tsukuyomi would get me like this... Heh heh ha ha hah!" She was laughing hard enough that her shoulders were shuddering.

I thought you were staying silent on purpose! Was it really so funny that it broke your mask?!

Beside me, Alice looked just as confused as I did as to what they were laughing about. *Oh, good. It's just my summons with a weird sense of humor.* I sighed in relief.

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The Lions of Patriotism's Agartha Expedition Leader, Taiga Kagura Floor 3 of Agartha, in the attack team's base camp Inside the dark tent, I gazed at the steam rising from my coffee while lounging on the bed.

I don't believe in anything but American dollars.

I wondered when that became my catchphrase. Probably when I was a mercenary in Europe and my entire unit, comprising foreigners, was thrown away as a scapegoat during a mission. The moment I realized that our lives were cheaper than paper, I punched my superior and left the team. If I was going to put my life on the line, then I would need something of equal value in return, simple as that.

Since then, I had worked as a bodyguard for the mafia and yakuza, and even took on assassination jobs. Anything with a good enough reward.

Even when working in Japan, I requested to be paid in American dollars. They all thought I was weird because of that.

But money was my faith, and the dollar was my god.

Before I started worshipping the dollar, there was only one reason I'd been a mercenary: I'd always been bored of daily life. I lived with fog in my head all the time. I could liken myself to being in a video game, controlling a character called "me" from a higher perspective.

I couldn't feel alive. I couldn't get serious about anything.

My daily life was that boring, like a sepia-tinted dream, as if it were someone else's problem. I was just killing time until death. That was my life.

But a turning point would interrupt that daily routine.

When I was in middle school, I ended up in a bank that was being robbed and was taken as one of many hostages with the barrel of a gun thrust at my head. For the first time in my life, I felt my life put in danger.

No... I don't want to die...

That was all I could think for a good minute, so I don't really remember what happened. What I *did* remember was what happened after I was shot in the shoulder, then pinned down by the robber.

After I stole the handgun from him and blasted all the bullets into his head, the memories from my new life began.

Bathed in his blood, with extreme pain in my shoulder, I thought...

Ah, I feel so...alive.

But as soon as my usual daily life started up again, the fog in my head returned.

It didn't take me long to figure out that I couldn't feel alive if I wasn't toeing the line of death.

After that, I registered with the foreign mercenary unit, then returned to Japan postfallout.

As it turned out, making a living through violence in the world of outlaws wasn't that fulfilling of a reason to stand on the brink of death. If the way of the outlaw was to eat the weak, then most of their work would involve fighting—you guessed it—the weak.

Life became empty yet again. The same sepia days I'd lived during my school years, where I controlled a game character in third person. I could barely handle it. Maybe that was why I ended up addicted to video games again, like I was when I was young.

And then, four hundred years ago, that incident changed everything.

I was confused upon arriving in the world of *La Vita Online*. It didn't take long for the player killings to begin in several areas, when I'd be allowed to dance as wildly as I wanted.

You see, most of my time in the mercenary unit was spent training, hardly ever having been deployed for actual battle. The brink of death simply wasn't common in that day and age on Earth.

In this world, however, it was everywhere.

In this world, I can get as close to death as I want.

I could put people's respect for me on the line, my entire existence on the line, and throw myself into whatever challenge I wanted.

When those first player killings happened, I was living with every fiber of my being.

The others were killing for Clan Coins to get home with, but I wrapped myself in the fray, aiming for the killings themselves. I'd even come face-to-face with the beast called Tatsuya Mikagami and fought him as much as I could.

I'd go so far as to call that period my golden age.

Unfortunately, it came to an end.

The player killers who'd won left *La Vita Online*, and even Tatsuya Mikagami, who I'd only ended up in a draw with, disappeared into thin air.

The next three hundred years were nothing but hell.

The only people remaining were those who didn't choose to kill other players. Nothing but a bunch of cowards. I was left dejected. They wouldn't even grind to the level cap, only leveling up just enough to put a safe margin between them and the natives. Then came the gentleman's pact or whatever between the five grand guilds, who agreed to not opt for war unless absolutely necessary.

My head fogged up once more.

I aligned myself with Imabayashi's faction. If I wasn't able to live near death and my head had to be filled with mist, then I was at least going to worship my god, the American dollar.

A voice from outside my tent broke my reverie.

"Mr. Kagura, come inspect this."

"Seems fine to me."

A giant hole stood smack-dab in the middle of the grand forest. After cutting down the trees, a hole five hundred meters wide and thirty meters deep was dug. I nodded at it.

Inside the hole were a million zombies, which made for an extravagant scene. It reminded me of a cauldron full of the dead.

"How did all these zombies end up outside after escaping?"

"The hole probably wasn't deep enough at the time. Eugh, it's gross no matter how many times I see it." I sighed deeply after mumbling.

"We can't complain, though," my subordinate noted. "These are our battle weapons for getting through Agartha."

"Are we really going to use a hundred thousand zombies during the seventh floor? Only so much fuel consumption should be allowed."

"There's nothing we can do. It's the safest method available to us. Thanks to it, our main job is just to guard the zombies as they make their way through. We'll be safe."

Safe. There's that word again.

Though to be fair, brinks of death involving monsters didn't excite me, so I preferred the safe method in cases like these.

Humans and monsters... I was always thinking about how different the values of their lives were from one another. Probably because I considered monsters to just be game data.

"Imabayashi sure is crazy." I purposefully averted my eyes from the mess below.

"Ha ha. You're the only one who can say his name without an honorific, Mr. Kagura. You're incredible."

"Those're just the terms of my contract."

I looked back down at the zombies. They were all humans Imabayashi had kidnapped from around the world, including demihumans. Before they were

sent here, he'd had necromancers turn them into zombies with magic.

The reason it was important for them to become our weapons was because they were all Zombie Sorcerers—the lowest form of undead-type mage zombies. Naturally, they couldn't use high-grade magic.

That was the point, though. All we needed them to use was Grade 1: Magic Ball. This spell would only do one or two points of damage, but get this: those numbers were fixed. In other words, if a million zombies used that spell all at once, they'd deal one or two million damage. No matter how evil the monsters were in Agartha, none of them had over a hundred thousand HP up until now.

This had been our method for getting through Agartha, and it had been a surefire one.

Which was why we were completely stumped when Ouroboros on Floor 7 revealed itself to have *two* hundred thousand HP.

Thankfully for us, Imabayashi continuously sent us more of these damage dealers from La Vita. He was probably causing an uproar by doing so, since he was most likely making entire populations from villages, towns, or even cities disappear.

But even for our high-level necromancers, it was difficult for them to hide tens of thousands of zombies in their shadows. Imabayashi's current headache was the wasting of Keys to Agartha due to the zombie transportation.

That aside, this zombie attack was an all-purpose plan. Normally, level 100 tanks would have around ten thousand HP, which gave them a massive advantage during PvP.

"I just don't like this method." I couldn't hide my disdain.

"Ha ha. Feel bad for the zombies all you like, but in the end, they're just natives."

"That's not what I mean. It would've really fired me up if my opponent used this plan against me, but I don't like being the one to use it while I stay safe on the sidelines."

"...You really like playing with death, don't you?"

"That's just who I am. I don't feel alive in safe places. It's kind of an illness."

I'd never been to a psychiatrist before, but even I knew I'd get diagnosed with some sort of mental illness.

That reminded me. "Whatever happened to the last three who went for leveling after the cap was raised?"

"They ran into a ton of goblins during Floor 2 of Agartha and were all decimated."

"Couldn't they just have leveled up the safe way outside of Agartha?"

"It was Mr. Imabayashi's idea, so no one could say anything. You know how he is. He just yells at us to hurry up and level, whatever it takes."

"That guy really likes to make other people do his bidding while he sits in his little safe spot, doesn't he?"

For me, all I needed was the dollar. If I couldn't satiate my lust for the brink of death, then I would sacrifice myself to the god I believed in.

Checking the time, I shook my head. "I have other work to do. I'll leave the zombie surveillance to you."

I turned with a wave and walked deeper into the forest.

After walking around for twenty minutes, I made sure that no monsters would appear in this region. But this was Agartha; there was no telling what could happen in this unknown dungeon. It was only natural for people to be scared. No one would usually walk this deep into the forest. Not even me.

So why was I, then? The reason was simple and clean: there was no better place to hold a secret meeting with someone on Floor 3 than here.

"Okay then, that should be far enough. How about you come out now?"

A girl bloomed from the shadow of a large tree after my words, in a literal sense. She wore black gothic Lolita clothes, and her long black hair looked like silk.

Sad to say, but I had no interest in little girls. Had she looked ten years older, I

would've thought she was a fine woman.

"Tell me your story, goddess of the moon." I looked her straight in the eyes.

Her face, built like a perfect work of art, smiled coldly at me.

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Shinobu Iijima

It was late at night, the day after I'd called Tsukuyomi over the crystal.

I didn't have any of my summons with me, just Alice. This was, in part, to give her some battle experience without them around.

The day had finally come when we would launch our attack on the slave merchant's facility. As soon as we met with Ms. Mimi, Alice had a question.

"This time for sure we're attacking from the front, Master Shinobu?"

She sounded just as worried as she had when we'd headed toward the headquarters of the Merchants' Alliance the first time.

"This time for sure."

She was making it sound like it was my idea to do this, but I actually hadn't been the one to come up with it. All I did was take on the request at the Adventurer's Guild, meaning the one to blame was Ms. Mimi of the Royal Guard.

Along with us was a fellow A-rank adventurer. Alice had been given a fake ID of her own that claimed her as a B-rank.

"Ms. Mimi," I called out. "Is that really where all the slaves are being kept?"

The object of my vision was an image of a fancy building that could be easily mistaken for a grand noble's mansion, or maybe a reception hall. It was splendid to look at.

"The slaves are demihumans of precious blood, so they're being kept in such a place."

I was going to ask why, but I already knew. If the slaves were of high value, then the people buying them were sure to be VIPs themselves. Prettier things

would sell for more if they were meant to be dirtied only after the fact. It was imperative that the ones to harm them be their new owners, no matter what. It wasn't hard to believe that, until the slaves reached their new masters' hands, they would be handled carefully and treated like royals or nobles.

"Now then, Master lijima and Master Hannibal, please do as we discussed."

As I nodded, the other A-ranker opened his mouth. "Iijima, you're level 30, right?"

"Yes, just about."

"I'm level 35. I seem to be older than you too, so you'll be following my orders on the field."

Alice tried to argue, displeased, but I stopped her. With both his level and age being higher than mine, it was reasonable to let that be the nature of our relationship.

"Anyway, Ms. Mimi," Mr. Hannibal changed the subject. "I'm gonna get straight to the point, but could we delay the attack by about ten minutes?"

"Why, Master Hannibal?"

He smiled. "Just a bit ago, I was in contact with the carpenter who built this mansion."

Ms. Mimi blinked at him, not understanding.

"He gave me the floor plan. We don't have much time, but we should all memorize it first."

"How thorough of you!" she exclaimed.

He hadn't declared himself leader for nothing. Ms. Mimi nodded in agreement. This information really was invaluable.

Alice, meanwhile, still looked upset. "You put scouts in the mansion with magic, right, Master Shinobu?" she whispered to me. "Isn't that way more impressive than a map?"

I'd set up several camera-type scouts inside with magic so I'd known the inner workings of the mansion from the beginning. But here's the thing, Alice. That's

Grade 4 magic. You can't exactly go around saying that.

"Let's keep that on the down-low, Alice."

I wanted Mr. Hannibal to keep up the good work for my sake too. He was participating in this mission because he didn't like how the upper echelons of this city operated. His family had been killed by them simply because he'd refused to do an illegal request.

That was part of why he'd named himself the leader—he had a good reason to. I didn't want to intrude.

We all turned our eyes to the floor plan Mr. Hannibal laid out on the table.

+

The Vagrant Grand Sorcerer Abraham

I learned how to read at two years old.

My parents were overjoyed at the time, then proceeded to be creeped out when I deciphered a magic tome at age four.

Once I cast a Grade 2 spell at nine, they forced smiles onto their faces, and the mage assigned as my personal tutor vanished.

At first, I wondered why no one else could do things the way I could. But when I graduated from the magic university at ten years old after I repeatedly skipped grades, I realized something.

It wasn't that everyone else was stupid. It was that I was simply too capable.

After that, I would come to bear a depression that was common with geniuses.

No one could match me. I would live my days receiving nothing but praise and admiration. And of course, the overwhelming *loneliness* that came with it.

After such a life, at twenty years of age... I believe it was when a position for me was prepared in the upper echelons of the magic learned assembly that I first heard it.

I heard of a certain rumor—of the Gods.

A secret truth about our world only permitted to the elite. Apparently, there were humans called "players" that possessed devastating amounts of magic and had been controlling society from the shadows for four hundred years. As preposterous as it sounded, when I thought about where the national-level weapons could've possibly come from and the feelings of peculiarity and crookedness I'd been harboring regarding the structure of our society...the pieces came together, especially when taking into account the entities called the five grand guilds and the territories they reigned over. In fact, I simply could not come up with a reason why our world ran the way it did without factoring in such entities.

I wholly welcomed them. Up until that point, I knew of no one who paralleled me. No matter how high I climbed, nobody awaited me at the top. But it turned out even greater beings existed, far greater than me. The fact that these otherworldly monsters were out there was purely uplifting.

I resigned from the magic assembly and aligned myself with the Adventurer's Guild. Wandering unexplored regions around the world known as the "poles," I defeated legendary monster after legendary monster. Slipping past death, polishing myself, twenty more years would pass by before I ended up at the present—in Abrasil, with the ultimate strength in hand.

My magic had surely been polished to its limits. Just how much of it would be able to affect the Gods? That was what I was here to find out.

"Demihuman women sure are good-looking."

Twenty women were lined up before me in the main hall of this mansion, ready to be shipped off at any time. A large man who looked like a brigand gave a vulgar smile while leering at them.

They were first-rate products in a first-rate mansion.

I sighed in awe when I first laid eyes on the many works of art decorating the place, thinking, this really is an establishment owned by Gods. But the tiny workers like this one certainly had no refinement to them.

"What do *you* think?" He grinned at me. "Mr. Abraham, former S-rank adventurer?"

I let out an exasperated breath in response. I had no intention of conversing with him.

"They sure are leaving us hanging, aren't they, Mr. Abraham?"

Did this man not have a crumb of knowledge in his brain? There were five other guards in the room with us. The fact that he was choosing to speak to me, the one with the most high status of them all, even when I was plainly indicating rejection, made me huff again without realizing it. As a sign of compassion to this useless man, I decided to remain silent.

"We're allowed to taste test normal slaves before they're shipped as a bonus, but we can't with these ones. Serious blue ball!" The brigand cackled while he leered at the beautiful women.

He walked toward one of the harpies among them. "Ah, I really can't take it!" "Stop that."

He'd reached his hand out to her shoulder with a look filled with lust, so I stopped him. I couldn't let him do as he pleased. I drew my wand and was ready to cast a spell at a moment's notice.

"I-I'm just joking!" he sputtered. "No firing any shots around here!" "It's up to you whether you live or die."

I was in charge of guarding the mansion—the slaves were included in the products under my protection. Should this man make any wrong moves, I wouldn't hesitate to use magic against him.

"Come on, it was just a joke!" The man raised both of his hands up in surrender, so I put my wand away.

"Mr. Abraham," he started again after taking a breath. "I have a question."

"What?"

"Is it true that you're able to cast Grade 3 magic?"

I didn't answer. The truth was, I could use higher than that. Did he think I

would reveal all my cards to him, a person I didn't even trust? The quality of the Adventurer's Guild had surely fallen if someone like *him* was considered an Arank.

"You're so quiet, sir. We're working together, so we should get along."

There was no point in responding.

He sighed even deeper than I had. "You're a boring guy, y'know that?"

Despite that statement, he clearly had no intention of ending the conversation. He opened his mouth yet again, all while knowing it was a fruitless effort.

"Oh, speaking of women we can't touch, do you remember that one brat? The one we were told would get us tortured and killed if we even laid a finger on her?"

I did, in fact, remember that girl. According to this mansion's owner, a special order calling her the "highest of the highest" had arrived. We already weren't allowed to do anything messy with these products, but her treatment in particular was exaggerated. The order was so thorough, stating that men couldn't even be in the same room as her, much less touch her. She'd been shipped off a few days prior as a special delivery, meaning she was undoubtedly related to the Gods in some fashion. Of course I remembered her.

We heard a dry thunk from outside. Then the breaking of glass.

That was when the brigand shuddered. When I looked more closely, I saw a small hole had been made between his brows.

"Hwah...?" His eyes rolled back into his head as blood gushed from the hole like a fountain. He crumpled to the ground nicely, starting with his knees. An instant death, for sure. A second later, a piercing scent tickled my nose. The smell of gunpowder.

It was the same scent as the one from all those years ago when I'd watched fireworks in the capital. Why was it here?

The brigand had died from a single hit, by an attack that very clearly was not magic, but a physical one. It wasn't an arrow either. What in the world...?

That was when I found a small lump on the floor. "A shard from a stone? No... A metal ball?"

More noises echoed throughout the room.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Light popped from outside, accompanied by the same sound of glass shattering. One by one, the other men in the room had holes appear in between their brows.

This sound was the harbinger of death.

Thud, thud, thud. The lives of these men dissipated as they fell.

Bang.

A final dry noise. The signal of death, paired with a hot sensation on my forehead.

That was the first time that I, Abraham, would have my heartbeat stop in my forty-five years of life.

+

Shinobu Iijima

I kicked the mansion's window at a good speed, and it went down with a shrill noise. *Entry into the main hall, complete.*

Dead bodies were already strewn about the room thanks to Alice's sniping. Everything seemed to be in order already.

"Wh-What's going on?!" Ms. Mimi shouted hysterically upon seeing the fallen men.

"Alice put an end to them."

She screamed even louder upon hearing that. I was hoping she could help

with the rescue part instead of being surprised. All the enemies in the room had been suppressed, but reinforcements were probably already on their way.

Mr. Hannibal gave directions while still looking shocked at the bodies. "Ms. Mimi! Hurry and check!"

As expected of an A-rank adventurer, he was experienced on the battlefield and could give out precise orders. Ms. Mimi managed to calm down after hearing him, quickly turning to the women off to the side of the room, who were all panicking because of the sudden events. Some had fallen on their butts, while others were trying to crawl away. It was a really pitiful sight. They couldn't run because of the shackles on their ankles, and to be frank, I was thankful to the slave merchants for that. Getting them back would be a hassle if they managed to run and scatter.

"Th-The princess is here! Right there!"

I looked to where Ms. Mimi was pointing. A single harpy was crouched there, in an undignified position, trying to crawl to the door.

Unfortunately for her, that door opened.

"Wh-What is all this?! What's happening?!" Five more guards had leaped in.

"Ms. Mimi! I know these men—they're A-rank adventurers!" Mr. Hannibal couldn't mask the distress in his voice and features. The situation was definitely bad, but our positions made it even worse. The harpy princess was the closest to the door.

The men stood dismayed for a moment at the disaster in the main hall, but they were A-ranks like Mr. Hannibal. After taking a second to confirm the situation, they sprang into action, bolting straight for the princess.

One of them, a red-haired man, pulled out a knife. The princess was lying still on her stomach, and he aimed right for the back of her neck. He grabbed her and hauled her up from the floor.

"Urgh... Get... Get your filthy hands away from the princess!"

Hang on, Ms. Mimi. That's a bad move, one of the worst things you could possibly do in this situation.

As if proving me right, the man had a nasty grin on his face that said "gotcha!"

"I've got a lot of things to ask you," he spat while holding the knife to the princess's throat and glaring at us. "First things first, disarm yourselves. You know what'll happen to this girl if you resist."

Mr. Hannibal looked toward Ms. Mimi. Her face twisted bitterly.

"Do as he says," she ordered.

"But Ms. Mimi..." Mr. Hannibal muttered weakly. "If we do, we'll all be destroyed."

"I already told you—our princess's life takes priority over anything else!"

Mr. Hannibal shook his head at her protest. "Please, calm down. These men have to treat the slaves with the utmost care. They wouldn't actually do anything to her."

"Well... That's true..." A spark of hope flashed through Ms. Mimi's eyes.

The red-haired man's next words changed that hope to despair in an instant. "Ha ha! You all may have to prioritize her safety, but for us, our lives come first before anything else. You all slaughtered our comrades in seconds. We have no reason to hold back."

Mr. Hannibal looked confused. "But if you don't, won't you all get killed?"

"It'd be ideal to not let the products get any scratches on them, sure. But right now, both pulling back and pushing forward lead to hell. If the products have to be damaged in order for us to get away, we'd let that happen and run without looking back."

Ms. Mimi bit her lip and Mr. Hannibal went silent. After a moment of hesitation, she spoke.

"Master Hannibal... Do you really think these men would do that?"

"They're undoubtedly A-rank adventurers. They're currently affiliated with a criminal's guild, so they aren't lying when they say their own lives take priority over everything else."

Silence took Ms. Mimi over too.

These guys are willing to use classic tricks like taking hostages, huh? Doesn't matter, though, since I've finally finished preparing this spell. Let's do it!

"Wh-What are you doing?"

"You're asking me what I'm doing? The answer is that I'm Shinobu Iijima."

"Shinobu Iijima...?"

Though the man took a bit to process what that meant, Mr. Hannibal and Ms. Mimi reacted immediately.

"Wait, Iijima! There's five of them! Not to mention all the hostages!"

"Master lijima! Please, don't put our princess in danger! Anything but that!"

They could beg all they wanted, but that wouldn't stop me. It was plain as day that leaving this situation to these two wouldn't lead to a favorable outcome for us.

"Um, if you two could just get down on the ground for a bit..." I eyed them.

They didn't. All I got in response was two blank expressions.

Okay, then. I'll try saying it a bit more forcefully this time. "Get down!" Still nothing.

Of course they wouldn't. I knew this would happen, I grumbled in my brain as I finished preparing and released my magic, no incantation needed.

It was a Grade 3 gravity control spell. Pressure was applied above the two of them. I needed them to get their heads on the ground no matter what.

"Wh-What's going on?!"

"A-A Grade 3 spell?! But I didn't hear anyone chant! Where did this come from?!"

Me, obviously. I thought while controlling their gravity. At the same time, I put the final touches on the spell I was trying to get to.

The red-haired man cackled. "Grade 3 with no chant? Can't believe Abraham jumped in without even showing himself! What a guy!"

Mr. Hannibal yelped in horror. "A-Abraham?! You all have the Vagrant Grand

Sorcerer on your side?!"

"That we do! What're you gonna do about it?!"

"We're in trouble, Ms. Mimi! Abraham is bad news!"

"I-Is this Abraham really so threatening?"

"He's an S-rank adventurer, said to have ascended beyond humanity. Our common battle techniques won't work against him!"

"But you're so strong yourself! He even makes you fear him?"

Mr. Hannibal nodded seriously. "He's not just dangerous. We might as well be dead already. Our only option is to run!"

The cackles got even louder. "I was so worried when I saw he wasn't here, but I guess I didn't even have to take a hostage in the first place. Ha ha, ha hah ha!"

All right. The two of them seem to be firmly on the ground now. All that's left is to cast my Attack Magic.

The red-haired man's laughter got even wilder. "Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Let's see. I guess I should aim about 130 centimeters up?

There we go. Let's start spring-cleaning.

"Grade 4: Death Scythe."

My whisper summoned a giant reaper's scythe into the air.



The air was sliced with a *whoosh* as the scythe swung around. The impact sent slash-type reverberations around the room. It was clear what was happening; everything about a meter and thirty centimeters high was being sliced through in a straight, horizontal line.

The pillars, the clock on the wall, the chairs, the paintings—*everything* got cut. At the same time—

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"Wha—?!"
"Agh!"
"Bwah!"
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Blood and innards spewed everywhere as the scythe signaled death for the men. Bodies thunked to the floor, one after the other.

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About ten corpses littered the ground of the main hall. No signs of reinforcements on the way.

At last, the only ones remaining were the captured women and us.

"Grade... Grade 4?" Ms. Mimi looked halfway vacant.

Mr. Hannibal's sweat-drenched face was astonished. In this world, Grade 2 was considered amazing, so nothing could be done about their reactions.

He managed to compose himself first. "Um... Ms. Mimi? We've accomplished what we came here for, so how about we search the rest of the mansion for the remaining slaves?"

She hadn't yet recovered from the shock, seemingly off in la-la land.

"Ms. Mimi!" Mr. Hannibal clapped right next to her ears, like a sumo wrestler would to his opponent. The sound was so loud, I was pretty sure it would wake someone up from light Sleep Magic. Probably the best thing he could've done in this case.

"Ah..." She rebooted. "Right. To be frank, our only concern is the princess's safety."

"We can't just leave the rest of them like this. I don't sense any strong guards

in the area either."

"All right. I'm not particularly up to it, but let's release as many of the other slaves as we can. But we must evacuate as soon as there's any danger."

Mr. Hannibal nodded, satisfied. He seemed to hate illegal activities in general, so it figured that he wouldn't back down from this.

"And Master Hannibal? Do you know where the others are being kept? I can't give you much time."

"We'll have to check several rooms, but it shouldn't take more than ten minutes. We have the floor plan, after all."

I had a few questions after listening to their exchange. This facility was meant to house high-quality products, so wouldn't it have special hidden rooms for products that were especially rare? I knew how the place was generally laid out thanks to the magic I'd cast beforehand, but there was no guarantee I'd be able to pinpoint any hidden rooms. If we were going to save the rest of the slaves, I'd have preferred to do so without leaving anyone behind.

"Um..." I volunteered.

"Yes, lijima?"

"Wouldn't it be faster for us to ask the guys in this mansion directly?"

"We could have, but you defeated all of them."

"There's one that might be able to talk if we heal him up."

"Heal him? But...all of their hearts have stopped. I'm a decent adventurer myself, so I know my way around these things."

I myself wasn't able to sense whether someone's heart had stopped or not, so I thought he was pretty incredible for that.

I walked toward one of the fallen men who—as far as I could tell—was the strongest among them. If I recalled correctly, he didn't fall quite as quickly after getting hit by one of Alice's bullets. He'd been twitching up until a bit ago, so he apparently hadn't died immediately either.

"What are you doing, lijima?" Mr. Hannibal asked.

"I'm not too confident about this, but I'll give it a try."

I could've used Revival Magic, but there were a lot of drawbacks to doing so for the user. It would've been stupid of me to do it for an enemy. What I was about to do was based on what Gabriel had once told me: if the opponent did not die instantly, then there was a high chance that they could be revived using Recovery Magic, as it would take care of the physical damage done. It wasn't quite that simple, though, since complications would arise from brain regression due to having no oxygen and their astral body being separated, among other things. Think of it like giving a person a cardiac massage. Revival by such a method was only temporary and had a lot in common with what I was about to do. That was the easiest way to understand it.

At any rate, using Recovery Magic to get information out of this guy was my best option. I reached my hand out toward him.

"Grade 4: Heal of the Powers."

The signature silver light symbolizing holy deities shone, mixing with the emerald light associated with healing. The sight was beautiful and otherworldly. Made it even more ironic to be applied to a bad guy.

"So you really can use Grade 4?!" Ms. Mimi had come back to her senses enough to scream. I nodded, hoping that would be enough of an answer, but she kept going. "Lady Alice also seems to possess incredible strength... Just who are you all?!"

Ugh, I don't wanna explain. Am too lazy.

Up to this point, Mr. Hannibal had done nothing but help me out, and did so here yet again. "Ms. Mimi, Iijima... I mean, Mr. Iijima doesn't seem intent on answering. It would be best for us to not ask."

"But Master Hannibal! Can we really just let this remain a mystery after being shown so much?!"

"For a G—" He cleared his throat. "I mean, a person of his liking to cooperate with us is more than enough. That in itself is already an unbelievable blessing. It would be best not to pry."

He was about to call me a God, meaning he's already figured out who I am.

I'm really grateful he's here. I would've been exhausted getting attacked by Ms. Mimi's questions.

I looked down at the man who'd begun blinking and clearly didn't understand the situation. Seemed the Recovery Magic had worked and brought air back to his lungs.

"Wh-Wh-What? Who are you people...?"

After ensuring that he was properly revived, I said, "Grade 4: Brain Jack."

An immediate brainwashing spell. Asking him questions without doing this might only bring us lies, or he could get away and call for help.

"Okay, let's get started with the questions. What's your name?"

"I-I-I'm... I'm...Abraham."

Fear struck Mr. Hannibal and Ms. Mimi. So this was the guy they were talking about before. If he really was the strongest around, he probably knew more than the rest of them, which made this easier.

"Um... Master lijima?"

"Yes, Ms. Mimi?"

"I won't butt in, but since we're also part of this by being here... What is that spell?"

"It's Brainwashing Magic. He'll do anything I tell him to. It really only works when there's a large gap in power between us, though."

"So there's...a large gap in power between you and the man Mr. Hannibal is so afraid of?" She was trying to smile, but it was super forced.

Mr. Hannibal placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Ms. Mimi, it seems Mr. lijima's mere existence is too much of a shock for you. I believe it best for you to simply stay quiet and not ask anything more."

Thanks yet again, Mr. Hannibal. You're making things so much easier for me.

With that, I had a reliable source of information. The thing was, I hadn't merely volunteered to be here either. The first thing I needed to ask wasn't about the slaves.

I pulled a photo out of my pocket. "Do you know this girl?" It was a photo of the girl who resembled Megumi.

"I do." His answer was immediate.

+

Luna Smith.

A girl raised in a town a small way from Abrasil. Called a genius mage, she'd used what were undoubtedly Japanese characters in a magic circle and had become a hot topic among the reincarnators. That was the information Ms. Kaori had given me.

This Abraham guy had even more details, though, just as I'd suspected. Up until she was about ten years old, this girl was very bright and lively. But one day, a tough blow to the head would cause a sudden flip in personality. She became quiet—silent, even—and spent a lot of time staring at nothing. Every now and again, she would invent strange contraptions and cook odd foods, culminating in the unknown runes of that magic circle.

That was everything he knew.

+

We were in a clearing in a forest, in a makeshift camp we'd built after walking for about half a day from Abrasil.

I sipped my tea alone. "Hmm..."

The sunrise doused everything around me in its colors, and the chirps of the sparrows served as my background music. I let my thoughts overtake my mind.

So this girl took a huge blow to the head and suddenly became like a different person? Then she began inventing a bunch of weird stuff...?

I felt like I'd read a story similar to that back in Japan. There was only one thing I could theorize from that.

Otherworld reincarnation.

The girl had probably been growing up as a normal native to this world, then something triggered her past memories as a Japanese person to surface, as per the usual pattern.

But Megumi hadn't been a particularly quiet girl; I'd say she was definitely on the livelier side. If she had gotten her memories of a past life back, even if she hadn't necessarily become brighter, I doubted she would've become that quiet. I'd never seen her stare off into the distance either.

Besides, if I were to line up my situation with one of those isekai ones, the otherworlders here had been reincarnated en masse, not individually.

"Hmm..." No matter how much I pondered it, I couldn't come up with a conclusion. The only thing I could say for sure was that the girl in question absolutely had something to do with Megumi, no doubt about it.

Where did she go after leaving that mansion? Due to the nature of her abduction, she would have most likely been handled very carefully. As ordered by a female mage of high status, the slaves were marked after making sure that they were indeed virgins with either a proof of virginity or a proof of harlotry that would react to kisses. So if anyone except that bastard dared lay their hands on the girl and the symbol disappeared from her body, it would serve as a warning to all involved that they'd get killed.

Not only did I feel that that was too much, but I also felt a strange level of overattachment from the perpetrators. On the other hand, the girl would be safe until arriving in the bastard's hands at the very least.

"All righty, then. What shall we do about this?"

She'd been taken somewhere, so it might have already been too late. But she'd apparently been left in that mansion for almost two weeks. Had the bastard wanted her for himself, he would've already done something by then.

That didn't change the fact that this was a dangerous situation, however, not to mention the fact that I still hadn't pinpointed his location. I'd been having Cerberus search as quickly as he could. My only choice was to wait for any further updates.

"What's wrong, Master Iijima? You look very grim." Ms. Mimi sat down across

from me. She'd brought more tea, so evidently she was here to speak with me.

"I'm just thinking about some things I've been concerned with. I'm in a very busy period right now. Please don't worry about me."

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"I see... One more thing."

"Yes?"
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"Those we released are allowed to go home, yes? Not just the harpies—everyone."

"That's right. That's why I called a guard for them. Unfortunately, we only have the one. It pains me to say this, but since they'll be going home in a large group like that, some will have to take detours."

"No problem, sir. We are already extremely grateful for your assistance. Who exactly is escorting them?" Ms. Mimi brought the cup to her lips in an elegant motion. She was part of the Royal Guard in her kingdom, so at home she was probably from a high-class family. Not that I hadn't already been able to tell from the way she spoke.

"Did I forget to mention that?"

"Yes sir, you haven't told me yet."

"They'll be escorted by Ms. Isabella, who lives in the north."

Ms. Mimi spat out her tea with an intense pressure and a noise like that of a sound effect in a cartoon. I turned away since it almost hit me.

"Sh-Sh-She's a Great Sage!" she shouted. "A Great Sage, you know!"

"This escort mission is a dangerous one. I needed someone strong to do it."

Even Ms. Isabella would get an instant game over the second she was faced with a player; she could only use about Grade 3 magic. Or could she use Grade 4? I couldn't remember. I'd made sure to inform her of the danger before making the request. She responded by asking me if she could live in Izanach permanently, as she had taken an interest in its library.

"You're using a Great Sage as your lackey... Just who in the world *are* you, Master Iijima? Ah, wait, I was told not to ask things like that..."

"I'm not using her as a lackey. I promised her something in return."

Ms. Mimi's face clouded over. "Is all this really okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"We don't have anything to give you in return. Even if we turned the entire treasure vault in the harpies' castle over, nothing in it would be of any value to you."

"Ha ha. No need to worry about that."

"But I must!"

I smiled at her. "Well then, your princess might have been kidnapped by humans, but she has now also been saved by one. So could you tell your kingdom that humans aren't all bad? I'll be satisfied if you just let everyone know the simple truth that there are all kinds of people out there."

Demihumans didn't get along with regular humans, after all. Nothing would make me happier than to help solve that problem. It was also true that no one affiliated with Ms. Mimi could give me any bright ideas to thank me with anyway. Regardless, I couldn't just let the slaves we'd released try to get back to their homes without a guard. She was probably trying to compensate me for that.

"I will, sir! Absolutely!"

"Then let's have that be our trade-off."

"But that's it...? We could thank you with anything later on, from assets to money. I'm sure even that wouldn't be enough. We would like to thank you with other things as well."

"Other things?"

"You would like to have my people know that humans aren't all bad because of cultural and cooperative reasons, yes?"

"Nothing on that grand of a scale, but I guess."

"Then, how about a racial exchange to thank you?"

"A 'racial exchange'...?" Were they going to have me be a representative for

the humans and hold a big banquet for me? I'd appreciate that, though only after everything was said and done.

"I wouldn't mind," I said with a light smile.

Her face brightened up to the fullest. I nodded and took a sip of my tea.

"Then to start, I would like to accompany you at night!"

It was then my turn to do a comical spit take then cough violently. *Damn it, it's in my windpipe!*

"Where did that come from?!" I wheezed after my coughs settled down.

"This idea is a valuable one to my people as well!" She was beaming at me.

"What? What? How?!"

"The harpy race has been able to survive this far thanks to seed from other races."

"Er, right. I've heard that some races don't have any males..."

"And so, we harpies..."—Ms. Mimi didn't say anything for a bit, then took a big, slow breath—"are always searching for strong men's seed!"

Well, color me shocked. I was specifically shocked at how matter-of-fact she was being, no hint of logical fallacy or anything. I mean, I guess that's what would happen if men aren't born among your people. It was strangely convincing coming from her.

"B-But... But, Ms. Mimi."

"Yes, Master Iijima?"

"Stuff like that, I'd...prefer to nurture with a lot of time and love and...stuff."

"Harpies think with their wombs by nature. Most races that lack males do, in fact. So if one of us gets our heart racing, this is what happens."

"This is what happens," I repeated blankly. "But I really..."

Ms. Mimi looked up at me with seductive eyes and spoke sadly. "Or do you not like me...?"

It's not like that at all! I almost yelled, but unfortunately my sense of reason

was fairly stable. To be honest, my lack of experience was definitely a factor here. It was troubling to be pushed like this in such an unromantic way, like it was something trivial.

"No, that's not the issue here. Ugh, how do I say this...?"

Ms. Mimi had been the one panicking about my strength and friendliness earlier, but now it was my turn.

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After this and that happened, the next day came.

We returned to the city of Abrasil, heading straight for the inn we'd made our base, and rested up in a room. Alice was in the next room, thoroughly examining her gear.

Gabriel called out to me. "Were you all right with that, Master Shinobu?"

"All right with what?"

"Refusing Mimi's offer."

"You mean about her sleeping with me?" I shrugged, exasperated.

Gabriel seemed to be serious about this. "Tsukuyomi is currently in a perilous fight behind the scenes at Izanach. We are also dealing with the case of the girl who resembles your sister. And I believe your confrontation with Imabayashi is on the horizon."

"All of that is true, but what does that have to do with this?"

"Pardon my frankness, but... You are about to engage in a war with your life on the line. Are you sure you're okay with being as you are now?"

I had no idea what she was talking about.

She looked genuinely pained. "It hurts us to know that you are not willing to lose your virginity to any one of us. Using Alice is also an option—"

"Nope! Stop right there. Don't go any further."

She was right in that I could die any moment now—I'd understood she was telling me to *stop being a virgin* before then.

"Am I right in assuming that this is an important matter for a male such as yourself?"

"Put that aside for now. Ms. Kaori, Ms. Mimi... There have been a lot of people coming on to me recently."

"That is an appropriate assumption."

"I'm a healthy high school student. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in stuff like that."

"Then, wouldn't it be better for you to get experience while you still can?"

"Hmm... I mean, it kinda freaks me out to be told something as pelvically blunt as 'we want strong seed,' you see."

Gabriel sighed, clearly a bit fed up with me. "Then what about Ms. Kaori?"

"Wasn't she just joking?"

"I believe she was telling the truth."

"Ha ha. No way! She's so beautiful, and she's way older than me. She'd never go for someone like me..."

Gabriel's piercing gaze made me flustered. "I believe she was telling the truth."

But what was the truth? I wasn't particularly attracted to older women, but I didn't hate them either. Ms. Kaori was undeniably an extreme beauty. It was only natural for a man to be weak to people like her.

Besides, in many ways, I preferred people who had it together. Ms. Kaori, by definition, had it together because of her job. Not many people could pin fault to a police officer. For people like her, personability and personality were the most important things. How did she compare in those regards? She was certainly a perfect fit for law enforcement. She'd seemingly been putting a stop to other players rampaging in this world, after all. And, thinking economically, while being a part of the police was tough, they got paid pretty well. As government officials, they were more secure than anyone.

Money wasn't the only issue, though. If I were to have kids, I'd want the parental responsibilities to be shared. My ideal would be for us both to have

jobs that allowed for good maternity leaves. I was pretty sure government officials definitely had that part down.

Ah, shit. Ms. Kaori fits right into the mold of my ideal woman.

"A-Anyway!" I swallowed my anxiety. "I don't like talking about stuff like this!"

"Is that so?"

Gabriel's ears pricked up. She'd probably sensed something outside of the door at the same time that I did.

"...Cerberus?" My voice wavered.

"Yes, sir. He seems to have returned from gathering information on your sister." She nodded and snapped her fingers.

No longer a puppy, Cerberus entered with his silver hair and black armor—the sheer image of a beautiful, respected knight. The task I'd given him was simple: interrogate the enemies from the mansion, who were all brainwashed, rounded up, and currently being held captive in the cells of Izanach.

"How'd it go, Cerberus?"

He bowed to me. "She will be presented at an auction two weeks from now. This information came from the owner of the mansion himself."

"An auction? Give me the details, please."

"It will be held at a hidden auction venue with the Lions of Patriotism's dignity on the line, where authorities from all around the world will gather. The leaders of the five grand guilds will of course be attending, sans Ms. Kaori."

"Wasn't the girl who looks like Megumi originally kidnapped to be presented to that bastard? Why's she being put up for auction?"

"She had been managed very carefully at the mansion, so perhaps he is attempting to display her to as many people as possible? He could, for example, bid on her for an exorbitant amount to show off."

Is that bastard trying to tell people what his preference in girls is so they can search for more to get his money? The thought was almost funny, but as you

can imagine, I couldn't laugh. The bastard was the type of man who'd not only delete all of my character data from this game, but also boasted about climbing the rankings by being a whale. He was nothing but childish—or crazy, more like. His goal might've been to get as many girls as possible who looked like Megumi—or more specifically, my mother—presented to him. Was he also telling everyone not to sexually assault any cute girl who looked like that? There was nothing more disgusting. The thought of him creating his own harem full of girls with similar facial features to my sister sent chills down my spine.

"Well, this is good news either way. By the time of the auction, she'll naturally still have the virginity mark on her, right?"

"Yes sir. I believe her safety is guaranteed until that time."

Well, that's one less thing to worry about. On the flip side, we were now on a time limit and would have to hurry some things up.

"I feel bad for making Tsukuyomi work so hard on all this."

Cerberus shook his head. "No, sir. We are all participating to the best of our abilities, so I believe there is nothing for you to worry about in that regard."

"Will Imabayashi be at the auction too?"

"According to the mansion owner, the 'king of the Gods' was the person who'd ordered them to give your sister special treatment, and they will be bidding on her themselves. Pairing that with the information that the grand guildmasters will be attending as well, there seems to be no doubt that he'll be there."

All right. We found out where he'll be in two weeks. I now had all the information I needed to take him down.

"Master Shinobu."

"What's up, Gabriel?"

She pointed at the crystal ball on top of another table. "Ms. Kaori is contacting you."

"She is?" We'd already done our periodic contact to make sure everything was going well. Did that mean this was something urgent?

I moved to the table with a bad premonition and put my magic into the ball. Ms. Kaori's face popped up on it, like usual.

"Hi, Ms. Kaori. What's the matter?"

"Bad news, Shinobu."

It was common sense that a sudden call meant bad news. Having predicted it, I wasn't surprised.

"What happened?"

"I got a call from Mr. Imabayashi. He's requesting to speak with you."

Well, that's a surprise.

I began breathing deeply in order to calm my beating heart.

Chapter 2: The Drop Dungeon and the Goblin King

"He's late."

"He is. It's been ten minutes since the time we agreed on." I could feel Ms. Kaori's irritation from the other side of the crystal ball.

There were two in front of me: one connected to Ms. Kaori, and the other to the bastard. The grand guildmasters had direct lines to each other, but I didn't. Ms. Kaori made this possible by connecting the wavelengths for simultaneous communication, but I wasn't quite sure how that really worked.

That aside, I was supposed to speak with the bastard twenty minutes after she told me about it, so she and I both were waiting around for him. But as she'd just mentioned, he still hadn't shown, ten minutes past the designated time. No matter how much we waited, he wouldn't show up on the crystal.

That ball suddenly started glowing; it looked like TV static was pulsing through it. At long last, an image appeared on it, slowly coming into view. When it finally cleared, the damn bastard appeared, sitting on a throne flanked by two knights.

"On top of being late, you're on a throne? You really think you're a king, don't you, Imabayashi?" I laughed while grimacing.

He grinned at me. "That's because I am one."

There wasn't a single hint of shame in his words; he was as arrogant as ever. Him being late on purpose made me hate him even more. In social situations back on Earth, apparently being a little late was a sign that let people know you were in charge. He was trying to send a message—one that said he was above me.

"So, what do you want? I don't think we have anything to say to each other." I let the venom spew through my words. I had no intention of making casual conversation with a psychopath like him. The best course of action was to listen to what he needed, then promptly hang up. I was also purposefully speaking in a rude way to show I wasn't going to play along with his little game. I needed to

make our positions clear to him from the beginning.

"You're calling me 'Imabayashi' now? When did you get so high-and-mighty?"

"I'd already decided before coming to this world that I wouldn't respect you. So what do you want?"

"It's about you setting the slaves in Abrasil free."

How should I go about answering this? I stayed silent for a bit, then mixed a bit of worry into my voice. "You knew about that? I shouldn't have expected any less from the guy that trapped my father."

The light smile that adorned his face morphed into an evil grin as he began laughing and clapping his hands. "Oh, that! That was so genius of me, taking control of his bank accounts!"

His laugh turned into a cackle of satisfaction. "Anyway, Shinobu, I've heard the rumors of your actions."

I paused briefly before responding. "So? Are you going to tell me not to make a mess on your lawn?"

All traces of that smile vanished from his lips. He then changed his tone to that of someone reasoning with a child. "Say, won't you make a deal with me, Shinobu?"

"A...deal?" The waver in my voice stopped being an act at his sudden request.

"A lot of things happened between us. I considered killing you and even plotted to kidnap Shinozuka there, among many other things, as you know."

"And how'd that turn out for you? Ran into a few problems, didn't you?"

"That I did. You've been moving around Abrasil trying to find where I am, right?"

I didn't answer.

"You don't have to pretend you weren't. I told you, I've heard about your movements. You tried to sneak a raid on us. I know that much."

"What are you trying to say?"

"After four hundred years, this world has entered into a state of equilibrium

and safety under the reign of the five grand guilds. And in a little while, a giant revolution will throw off the balance of this same world. You know that."

"Yes. The Agartha event," I nodded.

"Exactly. That large-scale update will be applied to this world, the level cap will be raised, Grade 6 magic will come into play, and new skills and equipment will be implemented. The distribution of strength among us will be rewritten instantly."

"So what exactly are you getting at here?"

"Each of the five grand guilds are preparing for Agartha under a set of fixed rules. It'd be a problem for me if my fighters, the members of the attack team on Agartha, were to die. It pains me to admit it, but warring with you would end up in losses for me too."

"I don't think there'd be any benefits for me to not attack you."

"Oh, don't be like that, Shinobu. I just told you I can see through all your movements. I know why you look so at ease right now too."

"...What?"

"You can go to Agartha, can't you?"

"How do you know that?"

"It's simple—we can too."

I'd known that because Mikagami had told us, but I didn't think the bastard would tell us himself.

"I see. So the terms are the same for us both."

"We also have something you don't: numbers."

I didn't respond. He was right.

"Want to try to fight us? Against strong players who've gained the same strength from Agartha that you have?"

I gazed at him.

"The ones you defeated before were only level 99. I won't let you in on the

details, now that we have access to Agartha, but over ten of us have had our level caps released."

"Over ten people are past the level cap now?"

"Think rationally here. The other grand guilds are on my side too. Does this seem like a war you can win? That's how much of a difference there is between me and you right now."

I clicked my tongue in frustration, then shook my head. "So?"

"I'm looking to control this whole world after the Agartha event comes into play. I only have as many people in Agartha as I do Keys to it, but I plan to get through the event as fast as possible, block all the other guilds from the dungeon, and monopolize the power that comes with it."

I see. I figured as much. If the world really does end up like that, even the players would suffer, not just the natives. It'd be a nightmare for the entirety of humanity except him.

"So you don't want to waste any of your level 99 soldiers that are going to get stronger in Agartha by making them fight me?"

"Precisely. I made sure to prepare good things for you in return."

My ears perked up. If I believed everything he was saying, then there actually wasn't a way for me to win. It wouldn't hurt to hear what he had to offer.

"I'm listening."

"I'm glad you seem to have at least some sense of self-interest." He snapped his fingers to get one of the armored knights next to him to hand him a scroll that seemed to be made of dragon hide. "This is a blood contract. Even players are affected by promises made by these, as you know."

It was true—players' actions could be controlled with that contract. In the game, it was typically used when in debt to a shop, among other things. The concept of "debt" in the game was a type of aid that applied when one's income and expenditures went into the red under special conditions. For example, if one were to die while broke and didn't have enough money to be revived by the Church, their funds would go into the negative. One downside to

this was that they wouldn't be able to keep any of the money they made afterward, if I remembered correctly. Of course, players couldn't undo the debt condition themselves. Had I been in debt when trying to free Alice from being a slave, I wouldn't have been able to.

"Ms. Kaori, he has a blood contract..."

"Many years back, a lot of people tested it and found that it takes effect unconditionally within the game. It can be used in many different ways based on the contract's conditions. And if you try to break promises, regardless of intention, the penalties of the contract are forcefully executed," she confirmed.

I turned back to the bastard. "What do you want to make this contract for?" "I'll officially promise not to attack you all."

He took me by surprise. That was indeed beneficial enough for me, due to our current difference in power.

"I'm surprised. I didn't think you'd actually come up with a decent deal."

"Just know that I have things I need to prioritize over my personal feelings."

"What things?"

"Once I have the whole world in my hands, I want to be the one true king, not just one of the grand guildmasters. Compared to that, everything that happened between me and you up until now is just trifling."

"Then I'll ask: what about Megumi? Unless you promise her safety, I won't agree."

"Don't worry. Of course I'll be using the blood contract to promise you that as well."

I locked eyes with Ms. Kaori. She nodded with a serious expression. "Shinobu, I have to agree with him—you'd have no chance of winning if you were to attack him head-on as you are now."

"You're right," I sighed. I took a moment to think, then continued. "I can't deny that much, Ms. Kaori."

She and I looked at each other for a bit. After the heavy atmosphere passed, I

turned back to the bastard. "I can't answer you right away, but... I'll consider your proposal positively... Or, I mean..." I closed my eyes, then vigorously shook my head.

"Mr. Imabayashi," I gritted through my teeth. "Would you mind if I took some time to ponder this? Just a bit of time... Please."

"The grand guilds will be gathering at an event in two weeks. I would like to show everyone that you and I are on good terms then. I don't have a problem with you taking some time *if* you can show some respect by then." He had a self-satisfied grin plastered on his mug, like that of a hunter who'd just landed his prey in a single hit.

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Ayumu Imabayashi

In the camp we'd made our base on Floor 1 of Agartha, inside of a tent reinforced with war field materials from the royal family of Lamsica long ago, my attendant Murayama spoke to me in an exasperated tone.

"You're just so crazy, Mr. Imabayashi."

"I'd prefer you use the word clever instead."

I waved my hand at the other armored knight in the tent to go outside, then laughed gleefully. This world based off of Europe in the Middle Ages suited me well. Most people from modern-day Japan would consider it outlandish for someone to bring a throne to the middle of a battlefield, but things like this were what made me a *king*.

"You're using a blood contract, but didn't we get a skill that renders them null on Floor 8?" Murayama asked.

Agartha itself was intended for players who'd done their time in the game. Normally, players around that level had a ton of the game's currency saved up. None would be short on funds. That was probably why this skill had been implemented—should one need to pay off a debt, all that would happen was any money they earned would be forcefully subtracted from their wallet.

That, however, was where one's will could come into play. Essentially, they'd be able to choose whether or not they paid off the debt. If they chose not to, the contract's demon god would show up and enact judgment onto them, which would become the pretense for a special battle event to occur. The god itself wasn't that strong, but it was important that I was the only person who knew that. So long as this mechanic hadn't been officially announced yet, I could trick people with the words "blood contract" as much as I wanted.

"Ha ha. Why on earth would I sign a ceasefire with Shinobu? Indefinitely, at that!"

"You really are a fiend."

"And the part about me not getting my hands on Megumi? As if!"

I'd dedicated my entire life to their mother. Fate played its horrid tricks on me and didn't let me get with her. But God offered me the gift called *Megumi*; it would be considered blasphemy for me not to use her effectively.

"You've certainly outdone yourself with this one."

"We may have Agartha at our disposal, but since the grand guilds are a mess at the moment, it wouldn't do us any favors to have Shinobu going around doing as he pleases."

"Indeed. Our expedition team has been going through the deeper floors without rest, and we can't rely solely on the forces we have out here."

"Even if we let them out, we'd just have to use more Keys to get them back in. We already don't have enough of them, aside from the ones we're saving to get out the guys over the level cap. The number given to us over time equals the number of soldiers we get over the cap. We can't waste them."

"It's pretty clever of you to keep those guys in there so we don't lose Keys."

"With this, all potential hindrances have been vanquished. All we have to do now is sharpen our claws through Agartha. Shinobu has access to it too, but he doesn't have our numbers. He doesn't stand a chance."

"And when he finds out that the contract is a sham and panics..."

I nodded, satisfied. "It'll be too late."

"You're so awful."

"It's already over and done with, but if there's any chance Shinobu could get one over on me, it'd be if he got ahold of where the Lions of Patriotism have made their base and launched an attack on it. He'd win against the level 99 players and make a better impression on the other four grand guilds. Something would undoubtedly come from that. That's probably what he's aiming for."

"So he'd be showing them how strong he is, then get them on his side by plotting to cut you off from them?"

"That's it. There were other methods he could've tried, though."

"Like what?"

"Like going to the other guilds and appealing to them directly. He defeated twenty level 99 players by himself. The guildmasters wouldn't have a choice but to see him as a threat. Depending on how he approached them, he could've isolated us."

"I see."

"But he decided to find where we are instead of doing that. He did his best to move undercover, but his Grade 6 summons were spotted multiple days in a row in Abrasil. It had to be him."

"It'd definitely be bad for us if he got the other four grand guilds on his side. We wouldn't be able to beat them even if we pitted him against our leveled-up expedition team."

"He's a Summoner, so he's geared toward fighting entire parties solo. It wouldn't be hard for him to get the guilds on his side by showing them that. Besides..."

"Besides?"

"Every guild is preparing hard to outmaneuver the others in the Agartha event, right?"

"Yes, we're all probably overexerting ourselves to do so."

"If Shinobu proved to everyone that he powered up in Agartha, it'd be easy for him to get everyone suspicious of us."

Murayama cocked his head at me. "What do you mean?"

"We sent twenty level 99 players to Shinozuka's place all at once. How do you think the other guilds would've viewed that?"

"...They'd suspect you of power leveling."

"It'd be better for us if that were the *only* thing. In reality, we've been taking advantage of the bug in the Friend's List that keeps players from showing up as Dead in order to overtake the other guilds. We're obviously using wild leveling methods, yet seemingly no one has died. There's nothing more suspicious than that."

"Yeah, that's super suspicious."

"Then, we have Shinobu's example. He proves that there's a way to use powers from Agartha in the current world."

Murayama gasped. "That would be a terrible sign to the other guilds! It would clue them in to us doing things behind the scenes!"

"I mean, we are. If they find out, they'd form alliances out of fear, and Shinobu would be able to suggest ganging up on us."

"I didn't realize how dangerous this situation was."

"We could always call back the attack team and show the other guilds how strong we've become to threaten them into not betraying us, but the situation itself would still be quite perilous."

"You've been thinking about this a lot, then, Mr. Imabayashi."

"In the end, we're just up against the small brain of a child. Instead of conspiring with the other guilds, he wasted his precious time freeing the slaves in this city, which is under my control."

What we had to focus on at the moment was getting through Agartha. The Keys were a limited resource that could only be obtained over time. So long as that was the case, the number of things we had to do in there was endless. Truth be told, looking at the photo of the girl who looked like Megumi made me want to rush things, but it was obvious that prioritizing Agartha was the right choice at the moment.

"What will you do about the location of the blood contract signing with Shinobu? He'll probably agree to it in a few days' time."

"As I'd said, the most convenient place would be one where all five grand guilds have gathered, so make it the auction venue two weeks from now. And of course, be sure to invite Shinozuka as well."

I rose from my throne. According to Kagura's report, they'd found a safe way to defeat the boss of Floor 7 that would release the level cap.

"I might as well go get the level cap off me," I said and slowly began walking forward.

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Shinobu Iijima

I answered the bastard broadcast on the ball in the most fake polite voice I could muster. "Mr. Imabayashi, it's very helpful for me that you're allowing me to take some time to think things over. Thank you very much."

"You don't have much of a choice in general here, but go ahead, consider it well. Bye then, Shinobu. Ah, one more thing."

"Yes?"

"I prefer the way you're talking to me now *much* more than how you were before."

"...Is that so? Thank you very much."

"Ha ha. I raised you well, didn't I? Bye now."

His image vanished from the crystal ball with a pop. I gazed at the empty surface with a deep sigh. After a moment, I turned to Alice and signaled with my eyes. She nodded and took the ball with her to the next room.

Once the door closed, I looked at the crystal Ms. Kaori was shown on. "Is it safe now, Ms. Kaori?"

"Yes, I've shut off the communication link with him and blocked off all potential lines except for the one we're using. No one will find out what we talk

about now."

No issues, then. "Then let's begin," I said after a cough.

She nodded at me. "How did you feel about that conversation?"

"I'm not going to agree to it. I pretended like I would, but it's clearly a oneway ticket to destruction." I grinned.

The bastard was doing *exactly* what I wanted him to. There was no way his lackeys wouldn't be able to tell that I was doing "undercover" work in Abrasil. Knowing his personality, as soon as he believed his prey was dancing in his hand, he'd get cocky and let his guard down. There was no doubt about it—I'd been living with him since I was a child.

Sure, I'd taken measures to ensure no one would find out, but if I'd really wanted to go undercover, I wouldn't have left so many obvious holes in my actions. I wanted to create a situation where the bastard felt like he'd seen through my sneaky movements because he wasn't that stupid, and it all went exactly as planned.

"You're so patient," Ms. Kaori mused. "Mr. Imabayashi laughed when talking about what he did to your father. I may be a third party, but even I wanted to punch him after that..."

She was right. It was unbelievable that he was joyfully laughing about a person who ended up committing suicide. My blood boiled hearing him.

"I'll make sure to get back at him for the pain he'd caused my father. I'll even lick the bastard's shoes if that's what it takes. And about what I asked of you..."

"Don't worry. I've been talking with the Holy Church's Dragon's Roar behind the scenes."

"Imabayashi said he was confident that he could form an alliance with the other guilds, but..."

"The truth is, they're all over the place. Twenty level 99 players being taken down at once is unheard of. The fact that he had that many to begin with is already suspicious, and since Mr. Imabayashi attacked the Crimson Moon Brigade, the other guilds are now afraid that he'll do the same to them."

"No matter how you look at it, he seems to have a quick leveling method at his disposal."

"Dragon's Roar is also feeling threatened by him, thankfully. Everyone already knows how reckless he is too."

"Then I'll get to the important part. Can we trust Dragon's Roar?"

"We'll be able to reason with them. They've always taken a neutral stance between me and Mr. Imabayashi. I think that's the easiest way to explain it."

The bastard's advantage was that he could get to Agartha, same as me. In addition to that, he had all the other grand guilds aside from Ms. Kaori's on his side. The first order of business for me was to break that part up. Thankfully for me, Ms. Kaori was able to help me get a lot of things done. But on the other hand, the only one of the guilds that seemed likely to join us was Dragon's Roar.

"So my direct confrontation with Imabayashi is planned to be at the auction venue two weeks from now, right?"

"That's right. We have to end things now, before they monopolize the skills from Agartha."

"It would seriously be the end for us if he got them to himself."

"Sorry to say," Ms. Kaori began, "but while Dragon's Roar seemed interested in cooperating with us, they put conditions on it."

"Conditions? What are they?"

"There's a problem within the Holy Church's domain right now."

Problems aren't good, that's for sure.

"A drop dungeon appeared in the Church," she said.

"A 'drop dungeon'?"

"One of the ones that would change every day in the game. They rarely appear in this world, though."

Oh, right, I forgot about that. When the game's service first began, there were a lot of useful methods for obtaining money and items efficiently, such as limited-time dungeons that changed daily. These methods weren't able to keep

up with the eventual currency inflation, however, so the dungeons ended up not providing as good rewards as the usual events. I'm pretty sure people stopped doing them in their dailies in the end. One could see the symbols for them on their screens, but no one paid attention to them anymore. I remember them becoming some sad, unengaged aspect of the game.

"The difficulty levels for drop dungeons vary, but this one seems to have a Recommended Level of 70, I think," Ms. Kaori continued.

"A Recommended Level of 70? I don't remember the devs ever implementing a drop dungeon harder than that."

"Yeah. And in this world, they're unnecessarily long. All that happens in them is high-level monsters are spit out at you with no worthwhile rewards."

"I see what you're getting at. The Crimson Moon Brigade has been tasked with taking care of it, right?"

"Nope, not quite. We've just been asked to help out with it. It seems to be some sort of test to see how prepared we are to fight alongside them. We're apparently going to be completing the dungeon with the least number of people possible in order to minimize risk."

My head was suddenly filled with questions. If the Recommended Level was only 70, then there shouldn't be an issue getting through it. The only possible danger was unlucky things happening one after the other, in which case even level 99 players could face death. If that's what she meant by minimizing risk, then I understood.

"If you're trying to minimize the risk and have as few people die as possible, then wouldn't it be better to have *more* people around?"

"No, accidents rarely occur in drop dungeons. That's why it's so bothersome when they pop up. Going with just a few people is the most logical, by-the-book decision."

"What do you mean by 'accidents'?"

She sighed. "The phenomenon known as 'black drops.' The Brigade once lost ten people to one. That's what makes these dungeons the best place to test one's resolve in."

To sum up what Ms. Kaori was telling me, the players—who had obtained godlike powers and didn't age—feared the word "death" more than anything else. Had they been living for several thousand years, they might have gotten bored of life. But at the current point in time, it had only been four centuries. Living for so long had given them strong attachments to their lives. Those who'd been reincarnated into this world at low levels weren't too concerned with leveling up for this reason either. Most only got up to around level 50, just enough to where the natives couldn't rebel against them. They stayed within that safe margin, only progressing little by little. To make things worse, the Agartha event had been teased to them ever since they'd been reincarnated, with hints that the Clan Coins were their methods to go home. It was only natural that they'd all stay alive with that as their hope.

But the "black drop phenomenon," huh? I'd heard of that too. The forums had once been abuzz with rumors of it, though proof had never been found. In the game, the daily drop dungeons shone white out on the field. It was rumored that one day, a player tapped on the drop dungeon to try to enter it when something terrible happened. At about 4 a.m., random text suddenly engulfed their entire screen, and they ended up in an unknown, bugged-out world. It seemed to be ruins constructed of discarded data, with a ton of ghost-type monsters floating around it. The player got so scared, they forced the game to shut down.

There was a catch to this story, however. This had been right before the typical daily maintenance time for the game, and the next event slated was one where ghost monsters would appear, so everyone just assumed that the player had simply encountered a bug while the game data was being updated, allowing them to see the monsters prematurely. No one thought any more of it after that. And in truth, that was probably what had *actually* happened.

But in this world, that same bug caused something horrible to occur. Ms. Kaori described it as "monster data from the newest event from before we were reincarnated being applied." Unluckily for the guild, that event was being used in evil ways. The attack team they'd sent to investigate the dungeon had their guards down and were mostly wiped out by monsters that possessed both instadeath magic and skills. The few that managed to scramble away alerted the

Brigade of the experience, causing the phrase "drop dungeon" to become a source of fear for the players as a whole.

Needless to say, the chances of a bug occurring were exceedingly low. Most of the time the players would be fine, but the possibility of them putting their lives on the line alone was enough to make the dungeon taboo among them.

"I see... I think I understand the circumstances now."

"No matter how slim the chance might be, no one wants to attempt it—no matter how much they want to gather up the rewards. It's been a source of pain for us, since among the five grand guilds, whenever a drop dungeon pops up, one gets forcefully designated to take care of it."

"Can't blame them. Anyone would decline, even if the danger is only less than one percent."

"By the same coin, participating is a surefire way to prove one's loyalty to an alliance."

"You're going to use me as your trump card against the black drop phenomenon, right? At my level, I wouldn't die so long as I equipped myself with measures to combat the instadeath moves."

"I'll be accompanying you."

"Would it be bad for me to go alone?"

"Dragon's Roar is specifically asking *me* to prove my resolve. It wouldn't do us any good if I didn't go."

Well, she's right about that. I personally didn't want her to be put in danger, but there was nothing I could do.

"And so, Shinobu, I have a request for you regarding the dungeon."

"And what would that be?"

"If the black drop phenomenon doesn't happen, it's just a normal dungeon. I would like you to pretend to be a normal level 99 player."

"I don't quite understand what you're getting at. What do you mean?"

Ms. Kaori looked a bit melancholic for a second, then looked at me with a

strong will in her eyes. "I'll preface it with this: it's just me being selfish. I want to believe in humanity."

What was she trying to say? I decided to stay quiet and match her serious expression.

"The core of this alliance," she stated, "is our shared animosity toward Mr. Imabayashi's evildoing."

"Yes, I understand that part."

"If you show them your abilities up close, Dragon's Roar will be blinded by them, with that being their only reason for joining the alliance. It may be stupid of me to hyperfocus on this, but I want to be able to speak with them on equal terms as *humans*, instead of threatening them with our combat prowess. I believe this is possible with them. It's important to me."

Her honesty glittered brightly in her eyes. While I definitely thought she was being idealistic, I found it comforting.

"Understood. I'll do as you say, then."

Her nod let me know she was satisfied with that response. She dropped her eyes downward and began fidgeting. "And...Shinobu? Sorry to change the subject so suddenly, but I want to know how you feel. Isn't it about time you answer me?"

Her cheeks were flushed. It would've been strange for me to not understand what she was referring to when she was gazing up at me so alluringly.



"You want to talk about that now?"

"Believe it or not, I'm trying my best to let you know how I feel right now."

"Ha ha ha! Please, don't joke with me about that, Ms. Kaori! I'll be going now." I decided to run away with an ambiguous smile.

She called out to stop me when I stood. "Shinobu, the day of your fated battle is two weeks from now, right?"

"Yes, it is."

Her expression turned serious yet again. "In that case, that's when our time limit is. After everything is over, would you please tell me your answer? If you say no, I'll give up without question. I'm a woman too, you know. I don't go back on my word."

"...All right, then."

Ms. Kaori seemed to have no intention of maintaining an unclear relationship with me.

This is hard... I whispered in my head. That was when I left the room.

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The place where the drop dungeon had appeared was inside a mountain range within the domain under the control of Dragon's Roar and the Holy Church. Both we and the other party had dispatched three people, with all of us ranging from levels 70 to 90. On top of that were two level 99 players from each. That should've been more than enough to complete a dungeon of this difficulty, but the main concern was the black drop phenomenon. We'd discussed in a meeting beforehand that we'd retreat immediately should it occur.

I gazed intently at the white light that was floating in the forest we were in. "This is the entrance?"

The entrance to the dungeon looked a lot like the Transport Gate, with two three-meter-tall pillars with a five-meter space in between. The white light emitted from there, indicating that it was the means to getting to the other side.

A man with short hair answered me. "Yep, this is the Gate. I've never seen you before, by the way."

He wore heavy armor and wielded a giant sword. His name was Satoru Murashima, and his class was Heavy Holy Knight. I'd been told that he was one of the two leaders of Dragon's Roar. The other was also participating in this dungeon expedition, with both of them being level 99. Since Ms. Kaori was also participating, both sides were playing all the cards in their hands.

I nodded at Mr. Murashima. "My apologies, I only recently joined the Crimson Moon Brigade. My name is Ryosuke Kishitani." I opted for a pseudonym since my real name would be an instant flag to them. Everyone's real names were listed on the Friends List, so it was common sense among the guilds to use fake ones.

Confusion colored his face at hearing a name he didn't recognize. "Never heard of you. Oh well. I did hear that the Brigade got more members after that incident. Are you really level 99?"

"Huh?" He'd asked in such a rude way that it took me aback. He was basically asking me if I was lying right off the bat.

"I'm asking you—are you really level 99? I know a lot of players recently joined your guild, but most of them were just low-level pieces of shit."

"Obviously, we had to lie about that to the others. We wouldn't be lying to you guys since we're trying to form an alliance with you. That would be terrible of us."

Though the truth was, we really *were* lying. I was actually level 125, so a more fitting description would be a "surprise" rather than a "lie," but in the end, an untruth was an untruth. I couldn't help but feel he could've described the other players as something other than "low-level pieces of shit."

"I guess you're right." He shrugged. "Can't blame you for lying."

Satisfied with that reasoning, he turned on his heel. I'd thought someone of his kind would've tried to pin fault on me, so I was a bit disappointed while also sighing in relief. We were working together on this expedition with an alliance as the precedent, so his side probably didn't want to start any unnecessary

fights either.

He began walking over to his Roar comrades, when suddenly he whipped around, brandishing his giant blade at me. "Try and dodge this if you're really level 99!"

Is this level of violence really warranted if you're just testing my strength?!

The blade made a low noise as it sliced through the air. "No need to fret so much! It's just the back of the blade!"

I couldn't find any words to reply to Mr. Murashima's grin. I was sure he could tell I was a mage from my gear. Had I also been level 99, even getting hit with the back of the blade would wipe out a good chunk of my HP. Fortunately for me, I was level 125 and had *this*.

Use Skill: Release of God's Might.

The stats of my summons out on the field would all feed back into me. Power welled up throughout my body, making everything feel lighter. As my stats shot up, Mr. Murashima's swiftly swinging sword looked like it was moving in slow motion. That's how I knew my melee abilities had then surpassed his.

Gauging the horizontal trajectory of his loud blade, I lightly jumped on top of it with one foot.

"Huh?!" Mr. Murashima's face was instantly doused in shock.

Using the sword as a springboard, I leaped over his head, seeming like I was about to knee him right in the nose bridge. I decided to spare him of that, changing the direction of my leg right before it collided with his face to let him know that I could've if I wanted to. After front-flipping through the air, my feet hit the ground.

Facing the area behind him, I called back to Mr. Murashima. "Good enough?"

"Tch..." He clicked his tongue and shrugged. "Unlikable brat. You look like a mage, but you're actually a physical combat class?"

"Something like that." That wasn't even remotely the case, but there wasn't a point to explaining.

"You could've kicked me right then, you know," he went on. "A mere high-

speed attack wouldn't have been enough to break my defense. Heavy Holy Knights boast both power and toughness, as you've heard. Don't go thinking you won just now." He began guffawing.

God, this guy is so rude. I furrowed my brows.

"Hey, Murashima! The hell are you doing?! Again with this?!" A bespectacled man wrapped in priest garb rushed over, yelling angrily.

This guy was Shuichi Tadokoro, the other top member of Dragon's Roar. Though the two of them were called the heads of the guild, they just looked like regular old middle-aged geezers to me. As indicated by his equipment, this one was a Priest, a higher spec class known as the "Oracle Emperor," which specialized in Recovery Magic.

"Ha ha. Lighten up, Tadokoro!" Mr. Murashima hadn't stopped laughing.

"You're always like this. I'm sorry." Mr. Tadokoro turned to me. "He's not a bad guy, really. He's just rude."

I smiled to let him know I was fine with it as he bowed his head. He coughed, looking apologetic. "Well then, why don't we head into the drop dungeon?"

We all nodded at one another. The transport ritual began, which enveloped us all in white light. If the black drop phenomenon were to happen, this was said to be the time. I'd been told that this white light would turn black, but there were no signs of that happening at the moment.

And then, my vision was filled with nothing but purple.

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Past the light, we found ourselves wrapped in chill air.

Seems to be a limestone cave? A cave-type dungeon, for sure. We weren't inside a hallway, but a wide open, dome-shaped space. Luminous moss gave the place a faint amount of light, but it wasn't enough to abate the dim and dark feel.

Everyone suddenly froze in place.

"...What was that?" A whisper started.

"Wh-What?! What's happening?!"

"The light was purple!"

"I thought the black drop's light was black! Why did that happen?!"

Both the members of Dragon's Roar and the Crimson Moon Brigade were throwing out words wildly. Looking around, every face was stricken with fear. If all ten of us started panicking, it would be hard to get anyone to work together —which was the situation we found ourselves in.

Behind us was the structure that looked like the Transport Gate. The inner part, however, was glowing with a purple light.

"Mr. Tadokoro! We have to retreat!"

The Gate made things so much easier. All we needed to do to get back was use it, as we'd planned. Our group began calming down at my words.

"R-Right," someone huffed. "There aren't any monsters around, so let's go back! Mr. Tadokoro, please!"

The reason the black drop phenomenon had previously taken so many of their lives was because it had been a death trap that took place right after transport. They'd apparently encountered a Monster House right as they landed, which hid all kinds of high-level instadeath monsters inside it and unleashed a full course of instadeath magic and skills upon the expedition members.

"Got it," Mr. Tadokoro breathed. "Let's go back immediately."

He turned to the gate and put his will into it, same as before. One, two, three, four, then five seconds passed.

"No!" he yelled, flustered. "We can't leave!"

That was all it took for the cries of agony to begin. Everyone's faces ran blue, some paled with fear.

"What do you mean we can't leave?!"

"This is bad, this is bad!"

"I told you I didn't want to do this!"

Eyes were wide, spit was flying everywhere, and voices were raised. *This is really bad.* Everyone was in a complete panic and no longer being cautious of their surroundings. If high-level monsters showed up, what were these people planning to do? Did they not realize that by shouting so loudly, they could attract danger? Only Ms. Kaori was desperately pressing her hand to her mouth. The rest were emotionally down for the count.

No, wait. In a way, this might have been inevitable. These guys had been living above the natives with their overwhelming powers, living in safe places far removed from anything dangerous. If you put stress on them in a situation like this, it would be easy to get them to have a breakdown.

That was when the even more inevitable occurred—the sound of rushing footsteps came from afar, likely drawn in by the loud shouts. All eyes turned toward where the sound was coming from, and a small shadow stood at the entrance to the space we were in.

"A goblin...?"

A single goblin holding a bow. The tension we all felt immediately dissipated.

"Damn thing gave us a good shock..."

The goblin readied its bow, aiming it right at us.

"Yeah, thinking rationally, we're not automatically in danger just because the phenomenon happened. This could even be a dungeon full of the little gob—"

The sound of the air being sliced through interrupted the mage. The goblin had fired its arrow, which then appeared through the man's bald head.

The man crumpled to the ground, spewing blood. We all gathered our eyes onto his convulsing figure, shock spreading to each of us.

"...What was that?"

"H-Hey... That's a goblin, right? How...? How did it...?"

One man whispered to nobody in particular. "It... Its stats. Look at its stats!"

Everyone froze, their eyes widening and their bodies stiffening up as fear and surprise overwhelmed them. They probably physically couldn't move.

I understood why. If they were looking at the same thing I was, then they saw

Name: Legendary Goblin (Bow)

Race: Demon

Class: Archer

Recommended Level: 105

We were practically stunlocked for a good moment. After that hesitation came yet another inevitable situation—*chaos*. Total chaos befell the room.

"Ah! Ah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"R-Run! Run!"

"What is that?! Legendary?!?!"

"Ruuuuuun!"

"We can't go anywhere!"

Ms. Kaori was the quickest to move. It might've been their dignity as leaders, but next, the two heads of Dragon's Roar regained their composure as well and followed her.

The goblin moved too. *Fwip, fwip, fwip.* Arrows flew, one after another. Was it programmed to go after the weakest first? It seemed to be specifically aiming for those *under* level 99. The people here were so desperate to run that they were willingly showing their backs to it, completely unprepared to fight back. The goblin was smart to reduce our numbers.

None of those arrows hit anyone, however. I'd jumped in to save the others. I'd either grabbed the goblin's next arrow, or slapped it away with the back of my hand.

Its arrows stopped. I looked toward the three heading for the goblin.

"Grade 5: Maximum Beat!" Mr. Tadokoro—a healer—buffed up Ms. Kaori and Mr. Murashima, who were both melee classes.

Ms. Kaori struck the goblin's right wrist with her katana, landing a blow on a

major artery with her legendary weapon, the Masamune Shin'uchi. Blood gushed from that wrist like a fountain. *She's level 99, but it's only gushing?* A normal goblin would have had its entire top half sliced off, along with its wrist.

Regardless, it was bleeding quite a bit. The goblin paused for a second in distress. Mr. Murashima took that chance to unleash the pressure he'd been gathering up in his blade above his head. It was a perfect blow that was not only from a buffed heavy melee class, but also enhanced by a power-building skill. Even a high-level dragon would be split in half by it. It was, theoretically, one of the strongest damage-dealing attacks in the entire game.

A normal goblin would be blown to bits, from its head to fingernails, leaving no traces of flesh from this unbelievable move. Yet, the damage of the attack was similar to one of a lower level. Rather than a clean slice of a blade, this was more like a blunt one to cave in the head. Only one of the goblin's eyes went out, and it didn't stop breathing.

"Just how fucking tough is this goblin?!" As superior as Mr. Murashima was, he was halfway screaming.

"Think later!" Ms. Kaori shouted. "It's still alive!"

She swung her katana at the goblin's right ankle. You could hear the sound of its Achilles' heel cracking. Even with one leg down, the goblin managed to hold itself up. Mr. Murashima attacked its stiffened head once again.

The goblin finally fell. Mr. Murashima went for its head yet again to put a stop to it for good. Blood spilled from its ears, and its brain matter poured out. He'd probably finished it off. After a few spasms, the goblin stopped moving and the three sighed in relief.

Mr. Murashima glared down at the body. "The guy you killed may have been a mage, but he was level 83! The hell do you mean, 'Legendary Goblin'?!"

"It was unusually tough. As the Eye of Judgment said, it wasn't a regular goblin."

I wondered if they were intentionally avoiding mentioning that the Recommended Level was 105. If they said it out loud, the reality of it all might set in.

At any rate, they'd defeated the Legendary Goblin. The rest of us appeared to be calming down once more. Yet all of us were surely thinking the same thing, myself included: we didn't know what lay ahead, and the place we were currently in was dangerous. Within that field of unknown, I alone had an idea of what was going on. It might have seemed like a normal goblin, but it wasn't. I'd seen a Legendary Goblin before.

In Agartha.

These horrible goblins had appeared on Floor 1 there.

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"Mr. Tadokoro, can you use Revival Magic...?"

"The goblin apparently had an ability that blocks revival. Even the highest-level magic won't work on it. The only thing we can do is leave the body here." Mr. Tadokoro had been examining the man who'd taken the first arrow, then shook his head sadly.

Things were looking bad. If a set amount of time passed after one died, the player would be lost for good. And in this case, dying would be permanent.

Something was bothering me, though. Why were monsters from Agartha here? And what exactly was that purple light?

Though it was more unknowns, I was level 125; I could take on monsters with Recommended Levels of 105 easily. I guess you'd call that a silver lining?

That small bit of hope, however, would be quickly crushed.

From the same passage entrance that the goblin had appeared from came another one with a red nose. It seemed to be checking us out, running and hiding when it was done.

A chill ran down my spine as I looked at its stats through the Eye of Judgment.

Name: Legendary Goblin Leader (Scout)

Race: Demon

Class: Ranger

Recommended Level: 115

A nervous laugh leaked from my lungs. The Recommended Level wasn't the only issue here—it was that a Goblin *Leader* was here at all. The chances of this place being a goblin nest grew higher by the minute. Giant nests that had Goblin Kings were rare, but small nests were dangerous enough. "Goblins" had become another name for small fry that just congregated to get their numbers up, but these were Legendary ones, so no one would call them small fry.

"This is bad, Ms. Kaori."

"What's wrong, Shinobu?"

"It just ran away, but I saw a Goblin Leader."

"Wha...? A Gob—" Ms. Kaori was about to shout but clumsily covered her mouth with her hand. Everyone was calm—for now—but they'd only just finished panicking. It was obvious what would happen if they heard the words "Goblin Leader." She put her hand down and nodded after guessing what I wanted us to do.

I pointed at the entrance on the opposite side of the space from where I saw the leader. "Shall we get going?"

Ms. Kaori approved. There were eight other passage entrances around us. We'd be surrounded if goblins came rushing out of all of them. We wouldn't be able to do anything if tens or hundreds of attacks came at us from all sides. It would be different in a passageway, though. Even if we were closed in on, it would only be from two sides. Something could be done about that.

I called out to Mr. Tadokoro, who seemed to be the more approachable of Dragon's Roar's two leaders. "Mr. Tadokoro, since the enemies have archers, we'll be easy targets for them here. Let's go into that passageway."

"You're right. It'll be easier if we limit the directions they can come at us from."

"All right, everyone. Into the passage."

No one had any particular objections, all of them just nodding at my order.

Mr. Tadokoro ordered one ranger woman from Dragon's Roar to walk to the

nearest passage. I wasn't sure what skill she was using, but she put both hands to her ears and peered inside. She seemed to be scoping out any sounds. After a bit, she shook her head and moved to another entrance. Repeating the same thing for several of them, she nodded at one of them, which Mr. Murashima went in. He motioned for us to come over, so we chose that one to progress through.

"Mr. Murashima, we should probably proceed more carefully here," the ranger woman muttered at him as she briskly walked down the path.

"But we saw a Goblin Leader back there. It'd be better for us to get out as quickly as possible."

I ground my teeth and cursed at him. I'd specifically only told the three level 99 players and this woman for a reason. As expected, the rest of our party's faces hitched. One of them tried to say something, then bit down on their lower lip to stop themselves. The rest of them stayed in painful silence and stared at the ground. I let out a sigh of relief without realizing it. Seemed we were able to get by without mass panic. *All's well that ends well, but I'm worried about what's going to happen from here...*

Probably thinking the same, the ranger woman spoke to Mr. Murashima again. "But Mr. Murashima, we don't know where they could be hiding. We can't even say for sure that this passage isn't a trap."

"Excuse me? What on earth are you a ranger for, then?"

"I'm saying there's a possibility that even I can't handle this."

"Then put your life on the line to see through the damn trap! I'm the one at the front, in their direct line of fire, so what's the deal?!"

"I'm telling you, that's not the issue here..."

"Talking back to me with all this about 'I'm telling you, I'm telling you,' 'I can't, I can't.' What's with you? This is *your* job!"

I exchanged glances with Ms. Kaori, who seemed to share my sentiments. She just shrugged without saying anything.

Regardless, I couldn't just leave the situation as it was, so I whispered in Mr.

Tadokoro's ear. "Could you tell him to stop, Mr. Tadokoro? We're outsiders, so..."

"I feel bad about this too," he responded, "but this isn't the first time he's done this." Mr. Tadokoro looked genuinely pained, so he'd clearly been put through this before.

I understood his position, but I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity. He of all people should be able to do something about it. "But aren't you equal to him, sir?"

"I'm one of those people who climbed the ranks through political influence."

"What does that mean?"

"It's embarrassing to say, but my personality is rather meek. Though he may not look like it, Murashima is a former professional mixed martial arts specialist. He has an immaculate sense for combat and is undefeated within Dragon's Roar when it comes to one-on-ones."

That made sense. For those of us in this world, there were a lot of perks to having battle skills from one's time in Japan. Ms. Kaori, for example, was an expert at kendo, and was currently the leader of the Crimson Moon Brigade. That meant bad news at the moment, though. No one would listen to a brat like me no matter what I said. Maybe I should have Ms. Kaori say something? Then again, he probably wouldn't listen to a woman.

Mr. Murashima suddenly stopped. A dry sound crinkled throughout the passage. I got a very bad feeling.

As did everyone else. We all looked at Mr. Murashima's feet at once. The stones around him were enveloped in a dim light, then transforming into what looked like a metallic earthquake.

"An invisible trap!" The ranger woman shouted our collective thoughts out loud with a pale complexion.

Cracks ran through the ground. The trap had activated, and the passage crumbled around us. As more and more of it fell, the calamity was then upon us.

"Aaaaaagh!"

"Uuuuuugh!"

The ones at the very front, the ranger woman and Mr. Murashima, were swallowed up by a crack first. A pure hole trap. All of the floor we could see was caving in, and we went with it.

I'd say we fell about three floors down, height-wise. At this speed, none of us would take damage, so we all made clean landings, the gross dirt flying up around us.

"Ha, ha, ha ha! Ha ha ha! There's no point in using such a stupid hole trap on us!" I could hear Mr. Murashima laughing through the dust. His voice was a bit higher, so he was probably trying to compensate for messing up in the first place.

Things were still looking bad, however. I hurried to prepare my Summoning Magic to calm the situation down. The truth was, that wasn't just any hole trap. There wouldn't be a point to trying to cause fall damage to people over level 50. If someone had intentionally built this dungeon, then they'd have a good idea of who'd be challenging it. This trap was—

"A Monster House...?" Mr. Murashima cut his own laugh off with a strained expression.

As the dust cleared, the smiles of evil goblins became apparent. About twenty of them surrounded us, as if they'd been waiting the whole time. The space we were in looked just like the one we'd been at previously, so it wouldn't be easy defending ourselves here.

Most of the enemies were Legendary Goblins, with thankfully no leaders in sight. I had to click my tongue upon finding something even worse, though.

All the blood drained from Mr. Murashima's face when he spotted it too. "Oh no. We're...done for."

At the end of his line of sight was a red-nosed goblin dressed in extravagant armor, wielding a huge, decorated shield.

This was its description:

Name: Legendary Goblin Royal Guard (Sword)

Race: Demon

Class: Fighter

Recommended Level: 125

I couldn't believe it, but bad feelings never lied. After having seen a Goblin Leader *and* a Goblin Royal Guard, there was no denying it anymore.

A Goblin King was somewhere in this nest.

The Royal Guard alone had a Recommended Level of 125, with twenty Legendaries with Recommended Levels of 105 around it. If they were solo, they'd all be pretty minor to me, but strength in numbers wasn't anything to scoff at.

I hadn't felt this nervous since facing off with Mikagami. I clenched my fist.

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"Ah... Ah..."
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"125...?"

"Why...is this happening...? Oh God...!"

The Goblin Royal Guard's club moved, heading straight for the emotionally vacated Mr. Murashima, who'd been drenched in fear by that point. It shot out at a speed unseen to the human eye toward his chest.

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"Agh!"
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He hadn't been able to keep up with the speed and couldn't see the attack, taking it head-on without any recovery or defensive movements. Flying backward at his own incredible speed, he was caught by Ms. Kaori.

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"Guh!"
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She put as much power into her feet as she could, skidding back, managing to stop herself after leaving a line a few meters long in the ground.

What happened to Mr. Murashima?! When I checked, his eyes had rolled back into his head and he was gurgling. He wasn't dead, but was definitely down for

the count.

With just one hit...

Even among the level 99 players, Mr. Murashima had his martial arts experience and was classified as one of the strongest humans out there. Someone like him being rendered unable to fight in just one hit made the rest of our party shiver uncontrollably.

But...it's not like this was anything out of the ordinary. He was 25 levels under that enemy. Covering that difference in stats wasn't an easy task. That was how this world worked—the absolute principle set by God.

"It's over..." somebody whispered.

After that followed a long silence. Not a single person let their voice out. If they did, they'd be the first target. Understanding that, all they did was clutch their weapons or shake in their boots with pale faces.

"Ki ki ki!" The hunters and the hunted. The Goblin Royal Guard laughed evilly at this situation in which the law of the jungle had been firmly established.

It slowly raised its right hand. Another goblin followed its order and leaped toward Ms. Kaori.

"Grr! I'm not going down without a fight!" As expected of Ms. Kaori. None of the other shivering members could've reacted like that.

She readied herself to retaliate, appearing to be waiting for the right timing to pull out her katana.

She wouldn't end up using it, though, because I moved first.

"Not a censured human, but a censured god. Slaughter such a god and manifest the crimson lotus to this land."

Magic flowed through my blood, from my heart to the staff in my hand, gradually growing hotter, to the point where it was burning when it reached my palm.

"Grade 5: Kagutsuchi of Fire!"

A searing beam of fire shot out from the staff. The top half of the goblin blew

off with a crunch. Three goblins behind it were thrown into the mix, and the flames hit the wall behind them. I'd predicted that a big explosion would occur, but there was definitely *something* special about this dungeon. My magic was absorbed into the wall... Or rather, it was erased without a trace.

Four goblin corpses lined the floor. The Goblin Royal Guard, seeing that, made a confused noise in their direction. "...Ki?"

To me, it was perfectly obvious what had happened. I'd just done exactly what the Royal Guard had done moments before. When you're twenty levels above the enemy, that's what would happen.

"All right then, why don't we treat ourselves to a good ol' one-on-one?"

As I aimed my staff, it finally dawned on the Royal Guard what was going on. Its eyes filled with caution and anger as it positioned its shield in front of itself.

"Not a censured human, but a censured god. Slaughter such a god and manifest the crimson lotus to this land. Grade 5: Kagutsuchi of Fire!"

I heard Mr. Tadokoro's voice of dismay. "H-He's firing another Grade 5...?!"

Even level 99 players couldn't do consecutive Grade 5 spells. But I was over level 100, so it was possible for me.

"Now, turn to ash!" The flames that even gods would fear rushed toward the Goblin Royal Guard. Unfortunately, it wasn't labeled Legendary for nothing.

"Ki ki kiiiiiiiiiii!" A scream full of intent. It had stopped my Grade 5 attack with just its shield. Not surprising, since that giant shield was built to protect the king. It was on me for underestimating it.

My flames and the shield pushed against each other in a struggle. *This is bad!* The Royal Guard's shield was winning out ever so slightly, the goblin slowly but surely walking forward. Its class was Fighter, and it was the same level as me, so my advantage was having long-range attacks. If it got close enough for a melee attack, I wouldn't stand a chance, and it knew that. I could hear it cackling gleefully behind its shield.

"Ah, wait. Did I say one-on-one earlier? Sorry, I lied."

As if a summoner would fight one-on-one. My words coincided with a girl

appearing behind the goblin, brandishing a reaper's scythe.

"Skill: Coat of the Moon Shadow." This was the highest stealth skill in Tsukuyomi's repertoire. It worked with her ability to hide in shadows, making for the perfect stealth attack. Once this set of skills were activated, she was guaranteed a critical hit.

Her scythe swung down, the reaping glint hitting the words "critical" into the Goblin Royal Guard. Criticals, to explain, were so strong that even Alice's level 50 shots could affect level 99s. I shouldn't have to say this, but level 125 Tsukuyomi controlled by my level 125 self was certainly going to take things out in one hit.

The Goblin Royal Guard split in two, its now-dead top and bottom halves slamming into the floor. Its innards spilled everywhere. The other goblins gaped in shock, barely able to make a sound. Fear took over their beings.

I took a step forward. They took one back. One more forward, one more back. It was as if the word *despair* had been plastered to their faces, and they couldn't take it off.

It seemed I hadn't yet pushed them over that final edge, though.

Tsukuyomi jumped out of one of their shadows. "Boo!"

She swung her scythe in a playful manner, like a child playing a prank. The goblins fell with a thunk, signaling the beginning of mass panic.

"It's your turn now, goblins." We humans had done nothing but panic since arriving in this dungeon. Once we were drowning in fear, horror, and insanity, our party would crumble as we knew it. Should we stop functioning as a group, our combat prowess would also drop considerably. As if to embody that theory, the goblins—who'd gone half insane at that point—gave up on attacking together and began running as their individual instincts told them to. As a result, they ended up revealing their unguarded backsides to us.

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"Gyah!"

"Kiii!"

"Gaaaaah!"
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At this point, the goblins were nothing but target practice. Tsukuyomi proceeded to freely cut all of them down by going in and out of their shadows, swinging her scythe.

This was the time to gang up on them. I snapped my fingers, summoning a seraph and a three-headed guard dog in the darkness behind me. Cerberus was weaker in his human form, so I had him going all out from the get-go. We would get killed if we underestimated these things; that's what I'd learned during my travels. I wasn't going to let my guard down.

I raised my right hand and spoke to my two subordinates. "Gabriel, Cerberus. Trample them."

The decisive statement. Gabriel and Cerberus did exactly as they were told, running out and trampling the goblins.

Looks like we made it through this one... I sighed lightly, then felt a tap on my shoulder. Mr. Tadokoro entered the side of my vision, looking thoroughly terrified.

"What in the world are you...? This power isn't normal!"

I went silent and contemplated how to explain, but Ms. Kaori answered for me. "He's Shinobu Iijima, the boy who defeated twenty level 99 players from the Lions of Patriotism."

Mr. Tadokoro's face spelled disbelief, and she nodded. "It's him. A level 125 Summoner."

As that conversation continued, my summons finished off the goblins. A big part of our win was getting them to panic first. Four goblins actually managed to resist until the end, causing some damage to Cerberus's front paws. Though our levels were far apart, they weren't absolute, and our opponents weren't standard goblins. The Royal Guard had been the same level as me, so the Goblin King was probably even higher. Letting our guards down wasn't an option.

A dome of light appeared at the edge of the clearing, about ten meters in diameter. Just as I wondered *what* it was, Mr. Tadokoro yelled in excitement.

"We're saved! This is a safe zone! A checkpoint!"

A checkpoint? Like the ones in video games? I looked to Ms. Kaori. She looked back at me, confused as to why I seemed doubtful. When she figured it out, she chuckled.

"Is this your first time seeing one, Shinobu?"

"It is. A relay point? The usual one?"

"That's right. I can't believe you're so strong yet you don't even know about things like this."

"These things... I'm pretty sure they appear in long dungeons so players can safely log out in them, right?"

"Yes. They appear in this world too. Monsters aren't allowed in."

"I see. So it really is a safe zone." I sighed. I'd been nervous up until that point, but it seemed we'd be able to take a breather.

We all entered the dome of light in relief.

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"That's everything I know about Agartha."

We'd made a simple camp within the safe zone. Everyone was sitting down, the scent of coffee wafting around us. I finished my long tale.

"All that actually happened to you? So, you really are level 125?" Mr. Tadokoro asked. I confirmed it for him.

"I guess things do make more sense if you are," he mumbled, lost in thought.

"The level cap was indeed supposed to be raised with the Agartha event."

"That's why this is dangerous." I was able to say that for sure. I told everyone about the wariness I was feeling. "Imabayashi has Keys to Agartha, just like me."

The air in the room froze over. "Mr. Imabayashi...has them?"

"Yes, no doubt about it. Some of them have had the level cap released. He's going to end up monopolizing Agartha's benefits at this rate."

"That's rather hard to believe..." Mr. Tadokoro locked eyes with Ms. Kaori.

"I'm sorry for keeping quiet about it," she answered. "I thought you wouldn't believe me without proof."

"I wouldn't have, that's for sure. But how do you know he has Keys? You're enemies with him. You might just be trying to get us on your side. I can't help but see it that way."

"I have no way to prove it. But as you are aware, he's dispatched a lot of level 99 players. Isn't that suspicious?"

"I have to admit, that's fairly solid proof."

"He seems to be conducting some kind of extreme power leveling, yet no one from the Lions of Patriotism has died. This must be because of Agartha as well. Even *if* he didn't have access to Agartha specifically, he has some way of power leveling. That in itself is for sure dangerous. Am I wrong?"

Mr. Tadokoro went silent. There was no doubt that he could see Ms. Kaori had a point, that this was evidence enough. He most likely saw the bastard as an unlikable deviant too.

"Whatever the case, our only option is to close in on Mr. Imabayashi and render him powerless. I can't think of anything else."

"That's true. We wouldn't have a way to fight back if Mr. Imabayashi placed many level 125 players at the entrance of Agartha. And even without Agartha, his ability to power level is indeed dangerous. Once the update is finally applied, we won't be able to suppress him in the fight for hegemony of Agartha."

"You understand, then. He's the closest to monopolizing it at this point, that much I'm certain."

"Knowing his personality, he wouldn't let any of the other guilds release the level cap and begin to treat them like he does the natives."

"For sure. My guild would come first as his main enemies. Next in line would be Dragon's Roar, since you've been in the most neutral position up until now."

"Shinozuka, are you threatening me?"

"You can go ahead and think of it as such. To me, I'm just telling you about

something that'll come as naturally as flowing water."

Mr. Tadokoro took a long pause to think, then spoke again. "Previously, even before knowing about this, I considered joining forces with you because I'd decided that Mr. Imabayashi was dangerous. I suppose that really is the best option."

From beside us, Mr. Murashima came wobbling over to Ms. Kaori. "But Shinozuka, why did you hide that this kid was that very same lijima we'd heard about?"

He'd struck where it hurt. This time it was Ms. Kaori's turn to stay quiet. She'd had proper reasons to, wanting to form a proper alliance by speaking with them on equal terms rather than showing off my strength. My powers from Agartha having come from irregularities was beside the point. She'd really been intent on the basis for her argument being that Imabayashi's leveling methods were dangerous. But as Mr. Murashima said, the fact that I was here was enough for them to wonder what was up.

"To demonstrate," Ms. Kaori broke her silence.

"Demonstrate what?"

"The Lions may be able to access Agartha, but we have Shinobu on our side with the same abilities as our trump card. Doesn't that have the same effect?"

"I suppose it does. Iijima really does have the power to take on many level 99 players at once. I admit that."

"If we form an alliance, I have to show you what we have to offer, right? I kept quiet about him to show you his powers in the most simple way possible. I didn't think we'd run into an accident in the dungeon like this." Her defense wasn't perfect, kind of a complete one-eighty from her original intent, but it wasn't that bad either.

"Gotcha. I get that part. We're shocked at lijima's powers too. You sure showed us." It was clear that there was a *but* to Mr. Murashima's words. "Doesn't that make it his fault that monsters from Agartha are showing up here, though?"

Ms. Kaori's eyes widened. "What?"

"We've seen the black drop before, but never that purple light." Mr. Murashima glared at me. "I'm saying he triggered that purple light for this drop dungeon. The devs might've prepared a patch full of monsters over level 100 for this data to be applied after Agartha."

"Ah..." Ms. Kaori couldn't stop herself from reacting.

Mr. Murashima looked satisfied with himself. "The conditions for the dungeon appearing were either someone arriving at Agartha, or players getting over level 100. Doesn't that seem plausible?"

It really did. For a game on this scale, preparing data in advance was common sense. Screenshots of unreleased game events accessed through hacking often made the rounds.

At present, normal players couldn't get to level 100. Let's say the devs set that as the condition for this purple drop dungeon to show up. In that case, they wouldn't have a reason to hide the dungeon data prior to the reveal date. In theory, it shouldn't have been a problem for them to just leave it in the game as is—the level cap prevented the level 100 condition from being fulfilled in the first place. Mr. Murashima was claiming that this previously prepared data showed up because of something the devs hadn't anticipated.

"But you can't say that for sure."

"And you can't say the opposite for sure either."

The two of them glared at each other before Mr. Tadokoro stepped in to mediate. "Stop that. We don't have time to fight."

Mr. Murashima didn't listen and doubled down. "You guys go and defeat the boss yourselves so we can all go home. That'll wrap things up nice and neat."

"Just us? Why?" Ms. Kaori sounded confused.

"Why do we have to cross such a dangerous bridge with you? I'm gonna camp out here in the safe zone. This is your fault, after all."

The other members of Dragon's Roar nodded in unison. As fearful as they looked when observing my reaction, they didn't seem like they'd relent.

Mr. Tadokoro seemed troubled. "I'm sorry to you all, but I'm going to have to

agree with Murashima here."

"Wha—?! You too, Mr. Tadokoro?!" Ms. Kaori yelled, obviously offended.

Mr. Tadokoro bowed his head. "You all were the ones who wanted to form an alliance because *you* are the ones who are in danger. There's no impending danger for us."

"That's...true, but..."

"This is the best chance for you to indicate your sincerity. Don't you think, Shinozuka?"

"Before we know it, all of the guilds will be usurped by Imabayashi! Didn't you agree with me because of that?"

"I did. I'm not going to put up a front anymore—I'm scared."

"Scared?"

Mr. Tadokoro held his right hand holding a coffee cup out to her. It was subtly shaking.

He let out a dry laugh. "Ha ha... Remember the man who was shot with an arrow earlier? I can still see his face. I can't stop thinking about it. I'm just scared. So scared that I can't leave this safety zone."

"Then, what will you do if we die and don't come back?"

All he responded with was ragged breaths.

"Will you stay in this area until you die?" Ms. Kaori pressed further. "As long as Shinobu is our best warrior, now is the time for us to work together."

Her words seemed to stir something in him. He looked off into the distance for a bit, then sighed quietly. "I have my opinions about this alliance as well."

"Which are?"

"Opportunist, wait-and-see-er, fence-sitter. You know those are how they describe me, yes?"

Ms. Kaori's face turned sour and she bit her lip.

Mr. Tadokoro laughed seeing that. "No need to pretend. As a fellow

guildmaster...I was jealous of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes. While the other guilds walked all over the natives as they pleased, you alone tried to stop them with all your might."

"What are you talking about? You agreed with me many times."

"So long as it wasn't a detriment to me, yes. But if it ever seemed like the others would turn against me, I stayed quiet. You know this better than anyone."

She couldn't respond.

"The truth is, I feel the same way you do. I wanted to talk back to them, and couldn't forgive their horrible deeds that made them even worse than brutes."

"That's why you agreed to do this and work with me, right? Then, this is it. *This* is the time for us to join forces and overcome the battle together."

Despite her desperate statement, Mr. Tadokoro shook his head. He lifted his still-shaking hand again.

"My body just won't keep up with my heart."

Ms. Kaori gazed at his hand in disbelief.

"Allow me to answer your previous question. If you all lose to the goblins, the rest of us are done for. I believe our only option left would be to starve to death."

She met his eyes and begged. "That's why now's the time to stand and fight."

"But I realized something—opportunists like me can't change so easily. That's what led to this decision."

"What decision?"

"Even if you manage to defeat the Goblin King, and we all escape safely...I won't be forming an alliance with you."

"What?!"

"I'm scared of Mr. Imabayashi. The moment he becomes my enemy, I won't

be able to move, just like now. I realized that. This is my choice, even if it will eventually lead to my downfall."

He bowed his head. Ms. Kaori's eyes were filled with sadness.

"Shinozuka." He lowered his voice. "It seems I am not a person who's able to stand up to my own fears. I'm really, really sorry."

"Then that's the end of our negotiation, I take it." She let out a very deep sigh.

The chances of our alliance had been shredded to pieces. To top it off, we now had to face off against an army of goblins with just a few of us. So this was what it felt like to have salt rubbed in your wounds.

Ms. Kaori turned to the rest of the Crimson Moon Brigade members. "Well then, there's no point in us being here any longer. Everyone, start preparing for departure."

They heard her but did not move.

"Hm? What's wrong?" She blinked at them.

What she saw was a sea of faces drenched in fear. Or rather, a sea of faces for which the rope of nerves had been cut by arriving at the safety zone.

"So the cowardice spread to the rest of you too. Pathetic."

I placed my hand on Ms. Kaori's lowered shoulders. "There's nothing we can do."

If I were to be honest, this was only natural. I might not have been able to move myself if I weren't level 125. I also wouldn't have been mentally ready for something like this if I hadn't gone through what I did back at the beginning of the game. Tons of players obtained godlike powers and played around in this world for years. Those very same people were suddenly being told to toe the line of death; it was too much to ask of them.

"Let's go win this, Ms. Kaori."

"It'll just be us, then. This is what I get for not being virtuous enough. I'm sorry, Shinobu."

It's not your fault, Ms. Kaori. I turned to Gabriel. "Gabriel, I leave healing

Cerberus to you."

He'd only been lightly hurt, but it was best for us to heal him whenever we had time. Letting his wounds worsen would only lead to fatal ones.

"Understood." She bowed.

Mr. Tadokoro rushed over to me. "lijima, wait!"

"Hm? Yes?"

"Would you allow me to heal your summons?"

I raised my eyebrows. Why was he suggesting this now?

He responded with a pained expression and a strained voice. "Please. Let me do just this much. I don't want you to waste your precious MP."

Ah. He's giving us false kindness while he stays in this safe space... was what I thought at first, but quickly changed my mind. His shoulders and hands were shaking violently, and his face was almost blue. Seeing him made me feel something indescribable.

This must have been all he was capable of. He wasn't a bad man—in fact, he was probably a good one. This was the most he could do for us. Ms. Kaori had an eye for people; I understood why she chose him as a potential alliance partner. Alas, he ended up not having enough will or courage.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Tadokoro."

"You don't need to thank me. You should be berating me."

"But still. Thank you." I bowed my head to him.

After making sure that Cerberus was completely healed, Ms. Kaori and I set off deeper into the cave.

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Battle after battle.

Endless goblins closing in on us. I'd stopped counting after thirty.

As we defeated Leader after Leader, Royal Guard after Royal Guard, the outlook of the situation started to seem favorable for us. We were running out

of steam after so many battles, with my and Gabriel's MP being cut down to half since we were the only ones with recovery methods.

Taking step after step inside this seemingly endless cave, we progressed farther and farther downward. Somewhere in the middle, it crossed my mind that we might have set off an endless loop hallway trap. Of course, I'd made sure to put marks on large boulders along the way to prevent that, but the path was so long that I couldn't help but consider the possibility.

When we arrived at the staircase, we all grew more confident. Going down it, what appeared in the passage was a fancy crimson door adorned with gold. We opened it up to a wide corridor decorated with a red carpet and works of art. This was certainly the deepest part of the labyrinth. The change in scenery was enough to solidify that.

The long hallway came to an end. At that very moment, what we encountered was an overwhelming presence.

A throne made out of skulls stood at the back of the clearing. Flanking it were two Goblin Royal Guards. Sitting on the disgusting throne was, of course, the Goblin King. The menu screen at the edge of my vision displayed its information.

Name: Legendary Goblin King

Race: Demon

Class: Fighter

Recommended Level: 140

It was way more powerful than me. Not that I hadn't seen that coming.

It would murder us the second we gave it an opening. An opponent like this was a bit much for Ms. Kaori. She'd fought on the front lines against the goblins thus far, but I signaled for her to stand back, putting Gabriel and Cerberus at the helm. I immediately readied myself for battle.

The Goblin King sharply snapped its fingers. "Bow before me."

An extreme weight suddenly dropped on us. It felt similar to Gravity Magic,

but it was different. My senses were telling me that it was a skill that directly connected to one's spirit. I identified the skill as soon as I thought about what the Goblin King would have. This was most likely "Pressure of the King," a move that accessed one's instincts and made them unable to use abilities for a set period of time, which even strong players fear.

Gabriel had sweat running down her face, and Cerberus was howling. They weren't quite bowing, and while the skill didn't seem to be completely affecting them, it was still preventing them from fighting at full capacity.

The same went for me. It was taking everything in me to remain conscious and keep standing. Ms. Kaori had no way to fight against it and was already on the ground.

"Oh? Resist, will you? Insignificant being." The King's voice rumbled throughout the space.

"Unfortunately for you, I can't afford to die here," I gritted through my teeth.

"How foolish. Why must you struggle against the salvation I am granting you?"

"Salvation?" There was no point in hiding my confusion.

The King cackled grandly. "It is the unwritten rules of this 'game.' The laws dictated by that which you all call the 'developers.' It has been nothing but comical to watch you struggle like ants, blissfully unaware."

My head was swarming with questions. *Game? Developers? Unwritten rules?* I had so many things to ask, but the King gave me no opening, continuing to speak gleefully.

"Yield to me. I shall not do you harm."

"Yield what to you, exactly?"

"My existence in itself is your salvation. The death I will grant you...will be your 'happy ending.'"

Hearing that reminded me of when Mikagami, who I suspected to be related to the devs, told me that I'd be happier dead. I'd brushed him off at the time because I thought it was a joke. But we players had been reincarnated into this

world after already dying once, so perhaps the concept of "death" itself was in some way directly related to this world? It didn't seem like I should ignore the Goblin King's words.

"Are you implying that I can go back to my original world if I die?" I volunteered a guess.

The King raised its voice, laughing harder. "Kwa ha ha! That is not a bad guess! Would you like to see for yourself? I shall not hesitate to kill you painlessly!"

"Don't joke around. I don't need to be killed."

"Whatever you do, this world is sjdoihxcsekljewknjkbfb."

The King's voice suddenly broke off and I couldn't understand it. The closest thing I could liken it to was TV static.

"Ms. Kaori? Did you hear that just now?"

"Did you suddenly lose track of it too?"

She'd experienced the same thing then. I'd almost thought that I'd been attacked by Mind Control Magic, but my stat screen didn't show any status effects on it.

I focused on the King. "If it's possible, then I'd like to avoid fighting you. Will you hear me out?"

There was no doubt about it—I could speak to this boss. We'd lost quite a bit of our resources at that point, so I conversed with the King with a sliver of hope.

"Foolish question. So long as He wills for me to not speak of any more, then I have nothing to say. The will of our existence is the erasure of the 'players.'"

Then the TV static was the devs regulating this thing, huh? It had to have been something important. My first order of business was to overcome this hurdle.

The King grinned. "No matter how you struggle, you all cannot move at the moment. The end of this war has already been decided upon. Go forth, my servants!"

As it claimed, we were already doing our utmost to fight against the Pressure skill. The Royal Guards on each side of the King began marching toward Gabriel

and Cerberus.

"Gabriel, Cerberus! It's do-or-die! You can handle those two!"

The Goblin King snapped its fingers. Light spread everywhere.

It happened in an instant.

When the blinding light died down, over a hundred Goblin Royal Guards were surrounding us.

The King smiled. "Checkmate."

The absolute *worst* situation. We already couldn't move because of Pressure of the King, and the difference in strength between us was now abundantly clear. Even if we *could* move, we didn't stand a chance.

"You're right," I sighed. "We might be done for."

"You will admit it? Should you not resist, I shall kill you kindly, without falsities. Choose well: dispose of your weapons, or resist until the end!"

"We might be done for...like this, that is."

Its skill was still taking effect. Clinging to my will for dear life, fighting against my heavy body, I used up every bit of strength I had to move my hand and get my middle finger up to face the Goblin King who'd already decided he'd won.

"This hand is all I need to flip the board upside down!"

My middle finger coincided with my use of Skill: Release of God's Might, which would multiply my summons' stats by 7. I know, I know. I should've used this earlier, right? But monsters could instinctively figure out players' stats and would underestimate them as soon as they thought they were weaker.

Doing so allowed Gabriel and Cerberus to break free from the curse. With nimble movements, they both shot toward the Royal Guards and engaged in direct combat. Gabriel's straight rights resounded around the room, while Cerberus's teeth cleanly hit on the first bite. It was obvious that their stats were even higher than they'd been up until now.

They would only win in a one-on-one, though. If they were to be surrounded by multiple enemies, they could put up a good fight, but would in the end be ganged up on.

"Oh?" The King sounded mildly interested. "It seems your power increased explosively. But what of it? My army numbers over that of a hundred—"

I didn't have any intention of answering it. Over a hundred Royal Guards? So what? I had a way to take out tons of enemies at once.

Let's bring her out. Come on! After scrimping and saving every last coin from my part-time job in desperation, I finally bought my true, real—

Trump card!

Copying the Goblin King's movements, it was my turn to snap my fingers.

"Grade 6 Summon: Reign down! Amaterasu!"

The area was flooded with light.

You'll often hear that it's best to save your trump card for last, but in my case, this girl was my literal sole trump card. She only had two moves, after all. One was a completely useless bare-handed attack. The other was a one-of-a-kind Attack Magic. That single shot was a last resort that would put an end to everything. Once fired, it would take time before she could use it again; the only magic in the game that had that restriction. That was why Amaterasu was the only summon in Grade 6 that had Attack Magic.

When the light settled down, a little girl appeared, about six years old and a hundred and twenty centimeters tall. Wearing shrine maiden's clothing, she had long black hair that ran down her back, just like her sister. A halo of light backed her as she beamed a carefree smile at me.



"End them in one hit! Fuck 'em up, Amaterasu!"

This skill of Amaterasu's was often called cheating, to the point of the devs receiving a lot of backlash after implementing it. If it came into play, no one would have time to revive, heal, defend, or buff themselves. A single hit destroyed everything, so every player who heard its blunt name and learned about its effect for the first time had the same reaction: "WTF?" *That* was how infamous the move had become. Many players ended up rage quitting the game because of how broken it was.

The light behind Amaterasu glowed a deep red. The principle of this magic was very simple, praised by physicists as beautiful.

Beyond that of nuclear fission. Beyond that of nuclear fusion. The move was a direct conversion of mass by magic. It could be considered a weapon that followed the logic of science fiction, more fitting for an interstellar war rather than anything fantasy; it activated just as the theory proposed by the genius Judea laid out. The worst, strongest magic that would materialize a demonic sun to the earth.

It was called—

"Grade 6: Mass Conversion Bomb: E=mc2."

Her call made the light of destruction blanket the entire area in white.

E = energy, m = mass, c = the speed of light. The speed of light converted to seconds was c = 299,792,458 meters per second. The digits of this explosion's energy broke into astronomical territory. A nuclear fission had occurred when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and the mass that disappeared, using the word "weight" to describe it without making a misleading statement, was estimated to be about 0.7 grams. By simply changing that tiny mass into heat, hell was brought upon the Earth.

Amaterasu was converting the mass of the surrounding air. The weight ratio was one-to-one meters to kilograms, and she could convert all of that into energy. The scariest part was that there was an almost infinite amount of air in the atmosphere. In other words, this was a nuclear bomb produced by the progression of civilization. The mass of nitrogen and oxygen in the atmosphere,

measured by Einstein's formula, would be converted to heat and set alight.

The wild, dry flames filling the wide space were over one hundred million degrees Celsius. A heat over seven times the temperature of the Sun's core burned everything away. The light was so violent that no one could open their eyes. Within that scene, I could hear the death cries of the Goblin Royal Guards everywhere.

When the light passed, all of the goblins had disintegrated aside from the Goblin King, whose body had been half turned to ash.

"Wh-Wh... Wha...?"

Barely breathing and covered in wounds, the Goblin King could only stare straight ahead with its eyes wide open. It was only natural, since all of its underlings had disappeared in the blink of an eye. The King itself was half dead. It was probably feeling the same emotions as the players who'd raised the backlash against the devs.

On my part, I actually wanted to praise the Goblin King for surviving it. If, for some reason, the game glitched and friendly fire became possible, all of my comrades would've also been decimated for sure.

The airy voice of a young girl came from behind the shocked King. "Skill: Coat of the Moon Shadow."

From its shadow came the swinging scythe of the goddess of the moon. Her high-level stealth skill and shadow travel came into play here.

Tsukuyomi looked appalled as she watched the Goblin King fall to the ground. "I can't believe this... It survived my sister's attack..."

Amaterasu was so broken that even her own sister reacted to her like this. She'd really made me bend over backward to summon her, but it was definitely worth it. If it weren't for her, we would've had no chance of winning.

The inside of the dungeon brightened up. In the game, that was the miasma of the dungeon lifting after the player beat the boss, signaling its completion.

Amaterasu came toddling over to me as I proudly looked around. "Nobu!"

"Hm? What's up, Amaterasu?"

"Head pats!"

If only this weren't her character setting... Not that I have room to complain. I grumbled internally as I patted her head.

She smiled whimsically. "Nobu! Nobu!"

"Yeah? Want something else?"

"Amachan is sweepy now!"

If only she didn't have use restrictions on her... Not that I have room to complain.

She collapsed where she stood, transformed into beads of light, and vanished.

And with that, the boss has been defeated. We should have a way out now. The only thing left was to return to where we'd come from and it'd be mission complete.

Ms. Kaori hobbled to her feet. "This was my first time seeing that at level 125. It really is terrifying..."

That was when I noticed a glowing, crimson red treasure chest next to the Goblin King's throne; it hadn't been there a few minutes ago.

What's this? I wondered as I approached it. "A reward for completing the dungeon?"

Using the Eye of Judgment, the description of the item inside the chest was as follows:

Judgment Results:

Crown of the Legendary Demon Lord

Rarity: Impossible

Buffs underling monsters by a multiple of 4. Multiple equips possible.

Can be equipped by: Mages, Summoners

Are you serious? The usual buffing items would only multiply stats by 1.05 or

1.1 at best. Although, thinking about it, the Agartha event was intended to unleash crazy power-ups one after the other. In which case, this dungeon really was supposed to be unveiled after Agartha.

"Ms. Kaori, do you want this crown?" She'd helped me complete this dungeon, so I figured I'd ask.

She shook her head. "There wouldn't be a point to me having it. You take it, Shinobu."

"Then I'll happily oblige."

"You're going to get even stronger with that."

"I will indeed."

"You're a monster at this point."

"Is that really a compliment?" I laughed.

She smiled back at me. "Of course it is."

I was grateful for any number of power-ups.

A voice then came from the Goblin King's corpse.

"Goblins who have lost their king. Dispose of this criminal who hath stolen our treasure!"

A black light crawled out of the King's body, gathering into many spheres the sizes of pachinko balls, resulting in countless physical spheres of black. They moved in unison, flying every which way, with some of them lining the floor. The rest followed the corridor and flew deeper into the cave. The ones on the ground spread into black splotches, from which skeletons grew out of, like Tsukuyomi rising from the shadows.

Name: Legendary Goblin Skeleton (Sword)

Race: Undead

Class: Fighter

Recommended Level: 110

The number of skeletons in the room wasn't anything to scoff at. There were probably over a hundred of them, just like the number of Royal Guards before. Amaterasu is down for the count, so how should I go about dealing with this?

"What should we do, Shinobu?"

"Taking them on one by one isn't going to get us anywhere, so let's just blast past them back to where we came from."

We then began running toward the entrance.

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Shuichi Tadokoro

In a dark tunnel.

The smell of blood and flesh filled the area.

"Maybe we should have gone with Iijima after all."

"Yeah..."

I let out a sigh full of regret at Murashima's exhausted, single-word sentence. Of the three of us that escaped to this tunnel, one was already dead. Murashima himself had been hit with a cursed weapon that couldn't be cleansed, so he couldn't be healed and was on his last breaths. I tried for the umpteenth time to heal him, to no avail.

I checked again that the voice-and presence-blocking magic was still in effect, sighing again when I saw that it was. We couldn't hear outside of the barrier either, but we had to do this lest we be detected and killed immediately.

The only thing I could do was stare blankly at the rock-faced walls of the tunnel.

Why did it end up like this?

Just one hour ago, we were all filled with joy at the dungeon brightening up.

But our fate had already been sealed. The safety zone disappeared at the same time the Goblin Skeletons showed up.

We ran off in all directions in a blind panic. I ran as fast as I could, struggling

to breathe as my comrades' screams filled the background. There were just so many Goblin Skeletons. In a situation where we could only run without fighting back, I could only assume my comrades all lost their lives, unable to do anything.

"So many of them appeared out of nowhere... It's possible that Iijima and all of them were killed too."

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"Yeah..."

"I wonder what we should've done?" I whispered.

"Yeah..." Murashima really didn't have any strength left in his voice.

"Murashima?"

"Yeah..."

Silence.

"...Murashima?"
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My hand shook as I checked his unmoving pulse. I gazed at his face in disbelief. His pupils were wide, with his eyes all the way open. He'd passed away.

"...I'm the last one left."

No answer.

After using my hand to close his eyes, I crossed myself. Murashima was Shingon Buddhist, but I was Christian.

Buddha and God. Though I prayed to a different deity, I was sure that his would not do something as horrible as sending him to the underworld.

For the short remainder of my time, I thought.

Where did I go wrong? Just half a day ago, when I let Iijima go? Suddenly, my body stiffened up.

Pitter, patter... Pitter.

Footsteps from something outside the hole.

Cold sweat ran down my back.

Pitter, patter... Pitter.

The god of death...is approaching. Footsteps inviting fear...are approaching.

My gut told me to look to the entrance of the hole. A single Goblin Skeleton stood there, holding a rusted blade.

"I've lived for over four hundred years, but... I see. You're my last."

Thinking back on it, the definitive moment I went wrong was when I didn't take Ms. Shinozuka's side. That day, four hundred years ago, when I decided to be opportunistic despite agreeing with her, while merely watching her attempt to stop the other guildmasters' rampages.

Self-interested, opportunist, fence-sitter.

I played to the favor of everyone around me while they called me those things. The people of this world gradually lost their humanity, ending up as groups that would parade as gods and treat the natives like ants.

I knew it was bad. Yet I just watched, adding myself to the list of people pushing the boundaries of atrocities with Mr. Imabayashi at the helm. That violence wouldn't only be enacted upon the natives, but would one day come back around to us. I knew this, yet I didn't volunteer my opinions, didn't aid anyone—I just let the mood of the room take over as I did nothing.

No, that's not right. Perhaps, at some point, I myself had become just as insane as everyone else.

"Ha ha... Ha ha ha..."

It was laughable. I supposed me getting murdered by the undead from hell was fitting. In the end, I really should have gone with Iijima. Had we cooperated with them, Murashima could have served as their shield, or I could have worked as an extra source of MP for their recovery spells. We could have been useful.

No matter how I looked back on it, it was now too late. This would be the

conclusion of my life. A reap of my own sowing. Thinking of it that way, it really was laughable.

"Please. End me..."

I spoke softly to the Goblin Skeleton. I had no way of knowing if it understood or not, but it proceeded to approach me, sword in hand.

When it swung it above its head, that same head flew off.

"Grade 5: Kagutsuchi of Fire!"

The trail of flame shot all the way to the back wall. It was the same scene I'd seen earlier that day. The magic scattered along the wall.

I strained my eyes to try and figure out what was happening. From the entrance, I could see a ragged boy.

"...lijima?"

I ran outside. Iijima, his summons, and Ms. Shinozuka were there, all beat up. The passage I assumed they'd come from had the remains of innumerable Goblin Skeletons all the way down it. From what I could see, Iijima's party had not been able to heal themselves. They probably didn't have enough MP.

"We made it!" lijima cried.

I hurried over to his side and cast a high-level healing spell throughout the area, making sure afterward that everyone received the effects.

"You came back to save me? Putting yourself in this much danger?" I couldn't hide my shock.

"This is completely normal," he asserted.

"But...we refused to form an alliance with you! I'm sure there was a place for you to return on the way here. Why would you risk everything just to save me?!"

lijima looked at me with a straight face. "Do I have to have a reason to save someone?"

His confused tone made me feel like my head took a physical impact. *Ah, I see... This is the emotion I'd long forgotten*. As everyone slowly went insane,

everyone slowly forgot about this, and it disappeared from their hearts.

This was it. This was being *human*. Standing up to hardships even in the face of impossibility, running to save people even in the face of danger. This was how humans should be.

What in the world had I been doing up until then? I was a fully grown adult, but I ran away as soon as things got dangerous, and ended up having my life saved by a kid at the very end.

My body shook as my vision clouded over. Tears flowed pathetically down my cheeks.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry, Iijima..."

"Come on, let's go to the return point. You're the last one, Mr. Tadokoro. Four people died, but...everyone else is alive."

And so, we—Dragon's Roar—and Iijima's Crimson Moon Brigade formed an official alliance, choosing to face off against the Lions of Patriotism together.

Making Mr. Imabayashi my enemy was a terrifying thought. But I wasn't going to run.

I pledged in my heart that I would never show Iijima such a pathetic adult anymore.

Chapter 3: Settling Things with My Foster Father

Shinobu Iijima

The day of the auction, where the five grand guilds would gather, had finally come. The girl who looked like Megumi would be bid on by the bastard. That day served as an unmovable deadline for me.

We'd prepared lots of things in advance for it and were finalizing our preparations. I was currently in the bedroom of the person called the Undying Emperor of the La Vita Empire, face-to-face with the guildmaster of Tiger's Eye.

"Wh-Who the hell *are* you people? How'd you get in here?" A beard adorning his chin, the emperor was feared by his people because of his absolute power.

As it would turn out, even a person like that would look cute wearing pajamas while looking flustered in his own bedroom.

Tsukuyomi answered his question. "Your defenses were indeed quite tight, but we have stealth skills unbeknownst to even you." She was talking about her shadow travel and Coat of the Moon Shadow. This set of skills even worked against a level 140 Goblin King. She'd hid in people's shadows as they went in and out of the imperial castle, then transferred into the ones of those who looked important enough. That was our trick to getting here.

"I am Iijima, a member of the Crimson Moon Brigade. I apologize for the sudden intrusion."

"I-lijima?!" Seemed he knew my name. The other guildmasters had too when I visited them, so that wasn't surprising.

"Guildmaster... Or should I call you Your Majesty? You look rather pale right now. Here, have some water."

I took the cup that sat on the bedside table. He blankly took it when I offered, so I poured some water for him.

"You didn't poison it, did you?" He seemed to be quite panicked.

I had to laugh at where his priorities were. "You don't have to drink it if you don't want to."

That was when the glass of the window broke, taking the guildmaster's cup with it. Alice had shot it from over ten kilometers away.

"Wha-?!"

After that, the vases and whatnot in the room all broke open, one by one. The guildmaster simply watched it happen. According to Ms. Kaori, the other guilds —aside from Dragon's Roar—were full of people who treated the natives horribly. If we came at these people, who'd used violence on the daily, things wouldn't go so smoothly.

It was vital for us to get the first hit on them, then move on to negotiations from there. That was why I'd had Tsukuyomi move in the shadows. The bastard thought I was sneaking around Abrasil anyway, and I really was there at the moment. I'd been showing up to the businesses in the city to form good relationships with them and had been doing charity work every day through the Adventurer's Guild. My alibis were as good as gold.

How was I in Abrasil when I was currently in the La Vita Empire? Simple—I'd been using Tsukuyomi's doppelgänger. The summon and its summoner had to be within a fifty-kilometer radius of each other, but I didn't necessarily have to be conscious during it. Cerberus guarded my physical body while I was unconscious in our home base, since summons could move freely there. My consciousness alone was in Abrasil most of the time, but my body was elsewhere. The bastard knew that summoners had restrictions on them, so he wouldn't expect this at all. I wouldn't have been able to pull this off without the Transport Gate either.

Tsukuyomi had gone around to the various grand guildmasters and enlightened them to my strength. She had to do it quietly and carefully each time, but in today's case, we didn't have a choice but to do it this way since the auction was tomorrow.

"I'm also sorry that I have to flaunt my rude combat prowess."

"What did you do?! How did you do that?!"

"They're long-range shots from a weapon you can buy with Clan Coins. Precise shots to the eyeball turned out to be effective against the level 99 players who'd attacked the Crimson Moon Brigade too."

"Wh-What are you trying to say?"

"We're able to sneak into the emperor's bedroom in the middle of the night and shoot cups from far away. I'm trying to let you know that *this* is what we're capable of."

His gulp was audible. He got the message: we could kill him at any time.

Glad that he understood, I continued. "I'd like you to form an alliance with us. Will you agree?"

"A-An alliance?!"

"Imabayashi's Lions of Patriotism plan to harm all the other grand guilds. That's why I've come here today, albeit in an intrusive way."

"B-But you... You can't just show up and say things like that..."

I decided to play my next card and pulled out a blood contract from my pocket.

"What's that ...?"

"Every other grand guild has already agreed to form a large union with us against the Lions."

"...Really?"

"You can see for yourself if you don't believe me."

"This really is a blood contract, but..." He gazed down at the writing on it.

He'd probably fall right in as soon as I told him about Imabayashi's Keys to Agartha. I'd also defeated twenty level 99 players in the first place, was level 125 with level 125 summons, and had Tsukuyomi's invisibility skills. Not to mention, everyone knew about the bastard's horrible statements and actions since coming to this world. I could also show this guildmaster my powers in real time, since I could go to and from Agartha as I pleased. It would be absurd if I wasn't able to convince him with all this.

It would've been terrible if the bastard wasn't frugal with his Keys and called back the guys he'd sent to complete Agartha. If the other four grand guilds sided with him, none of this would have gone as easily for me.

Thankfully, I knew his personality well. Everything went as planned. With this, all the preparations were complete. Glancing at the emperor, who was looking over the contract, I turned my eyes to the moon floating in the sky through the window.

The final battle was tomorrow.

Just one shot. This one shot was all I had to get the bastard to stop breathing. I wouldn't get a second chance.

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The auction was held in the royal castle of the Kingdom of Natalia, which governed Abrasil's surroundings. Those who participated were distinguished people: players, royal families, and nobles from various kingdoms—even leaders such as from the upper echelon of the Holy Church.

To me, it was definitely a bold and daring move to hold such an event at a royal castle. Right in the throne room, no less. This was specially made to be the banquet hall for tonight, but it was the *throne room*! I couldn't describe my emotions knowing this. These guys were seriously doing whatever they wanted.

In this place, only the governing figures of the player guilds were allowed in. I was standing there in my tuxedo when the bastard called out to me.

"There you are! It's been a while, Shinobu. Don't be shy, have a drink." He was in his own tuxedo.

I shook my head. "I'm all right, Mr. Imabayashi."

"What? You don't want to drink my wine?" The mood changed in an instant as he glared at me.

I paused and took it back. "I'll have one, then."

A servant handed me a glass, which I put to my lips and sipped just enough to not be rude. I couldn't afford to get drunk when the big showdown was right around the corner.

"Ha ha ha! See? I'll be nice to you, as long as you listen to me."

"Yes, I'm aware. I'd like to keep good relations with you too, sir."

That improved his mood. He chugged his own wine glass and let out a gross breath. "Oh, right, Shinobu. Want to come watch the slaves sword-fight in the arena later?"

"Where would that happen? We're in the royal castle."

"Ha ha. I had one built a hundred years ago in the basement. I've got about forty sword slaves right now."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. That went beyond just "doing whatever he wanted." If this was what the royal castle had sunk to, then I couldn't even imagine what kind of atrocities he'd done to the kingdom as a whole.

A light headache almost made me faint right then and there. "...Is that so?"

"If there's someone you want dead, I could very well throw them in the mix if you'd like!"

"I think I'll pass, thank you."

"Aw, don't say that, Shinobu! It's pretty funny watching guys try to fight bare-handed against heavily armored knights. None of their attacks work, and their own armors break with a single punch. Heh heh, their toughness is half-assed so they can't even die in one hit."

"That, uh...does seem pretty fun..."

I was suddenly exhausted, but he didn't seem to mind. "Alcohol gets that much more delicious after watching them shrivel in fear at these guys! Lots of people love it!"

I couldn't stand listening to him anymore. I could understand someone partaking in something like that if this really were just a video game, but... Well. He was probably doing this because he actually did think of it as a game. It was natural to his personality. For the other players who'd ended up like him, it'd probably taken them some time to drown in their own overwhelming powers. The thought alone disgusted me, but it was also sad.

"Mr. Imabayashi, let's get to our main discussion already. The blood

contract."

"Oh, right. That. We're all here, right? All right!"

All of the five grand guildmasters, including Ms. Kaori, were present. The bastard made sure they were all there, then clapped his hands together. To his side, a servant wearing black pulled out a scroll made of dragonhide.

"This is the document. See for yourself."

As I opened it up, the bastard addressed the rest of the guilds. The reason he was holding the contract signing in a place like this was to show the other guilds that he'd gotten me on his side.

"Now then, Shinobu, all of the guildmasters are here. When you're done reading the contract, sign it and prove that we're on good terms. Let's leave everything that happened between us in the past, like water under the bridge."

He was saying it like an order, probably to keep the other guilds in check. In the end, *he* was the one forming the alliance with *me*; he could sic me on them at any moment. "Don't betray me," he was telling them. Everyone here was aware that was his intention.

"When you're done looking at it," he rambled on. "Uh... Yeah, here, sign it on this table. I've already signed it. Hm? What's wrong?"

I'd changed the way I was holding the contract.

"Why are you holding it like that, like you're going to rip it up? That's not funny, Shinobu."

The sound of the contract being ripped to shreds lightly echoed through the hall. I'd ripped it up, just as was requested of me.

"Y-You!" the bastard sputtered. "What are you doing?! Paper made from dragonhide is extremely expensive!" Not only was he fucked up, but he was also frugal as all hell.

That's not what you should be upset about. Besides, the price of this thing is probably pennies to you. "I've changed my mind. The thought of getting friendly with you sends chills down my spine."

"Shinobu... Have you gone insane?" He clicked his tongue and looked around.

"If this is how you're going to act, you're gonna make all the other guilds your enemy too."

I stayed silent, which the bastard took to mean that he'd won, with an expression to match. "Even you won't be able to win after getting ganged up on by a ton of level 99 players. The only reason you won against those twenty was because we hadn't come up with a plan to fight you yet. You're nothing now that we have one."

The validity of his claims had become very dubious because of the accessory I'd received from the Goblin King, but I'd let him have this one. I'd defeated over a hundred goblins at the time, which all had the power to overtake level 99 players with ease. Goblins were different from people, however. At the end of the day, they were just that—goblins.

But if humans had the ability to change their equipment, then they also had the power to change which player combinations went where. Let's say all of the level 99 members of these guilds had a solid plan of action against summoners —or rather, me. What would I do then? Despite the level difference, it was a certainty that even I'd have trouble with them.

I confirmed that for the bastard. "Yeah, if everyone here came after me at once, I'd get stomped on like a bug."

"Not if—when! That's right about to happen!"

"I have a question for you about that." I coughed lightly. It was my turn to look like I'd won. "I wonder who everyone's going to side with?"

Ms. Kaori was the first person to stand by my side.

Next came Mr. Tadokoro of Dragon's Roar on my other side, while the remaining two guildmasters stood behind me.

"...Huh?" The bastard sounded hysterical.

"This is how it is, Imabayashi."

"Wh-Wh-Wh...? What are you saying?!"

"I'm saying this is how it is."

That was when the first clear sign of distress appeared on his face.

Ayumu Imabayashi

Agh, damn it! Shinobu's smug face is abhorrent! What on earth is going on here?!

"Everyone!" My voice sounded more pleading than I would have liked. "Please, stop the foolish jokes! You're...joking, right?"

"Mr. Imabayashi, this isn't a situation we can joke around in. And you know how much I love jokes."

The first to speak was the scrawny Tadokoro of Dragon's Roar. The damn four-eyes had always been on Shinozuka's side. There was nothing more aggravating. I'd let him sit in his spot the whole time because he'd shut up with just one rebuke.

The way to deal with him was simple. "Are you going to make me your enemy, Tadokoro?"

He looked me straight in the eyes. "Both Iijima and I have said as much."

What in the world is that face...? Like he's prepared himself and been enlightened! It pissed me off even more that it reminded me of Shinobu when he was being rebellious. At any rate, he'd made it clear that he was intent on fighting me.

As for the rest, aside from Kaori Shinozuka, what was their deal? They were nothing but badgers in a hole like me. It was hard to believe they'd betray me at this point.

Next, the guildmaster of Tiger's Eye opened his mouth, as if to answer me. "lijima's power... He got it from Agartha, yes? He told us you have Keys of your own—how long have you been hiding them? Just come clean already. Why were you trying to get the jump on us?!"

His words told me everything. No matter how smoothly I could handle the situation from here, I was at a complete disadvantage. They'd all already been sweet-talked by Shinobu. It was too late for me to get them back anymore.

That was when I noticed that the edges of my shirt were drenched in sweat. *I'm displeased. This whole situation is displeasing me. It's all his fault!* I glared at Shinobu.

"Shinobu..." I let the venom spill from my voice. "We've confirmed that you were near Abrasil the whole time. The only way you could've shown these idiots your powers from Agartha is by meeting with them *in person*. How did you do it?"

"I have a way to teleport around the world in seconds. Let's just say I got that from Agartha too."

I'd never received reports of such a method. Or perhaps it came from a Floor we hadn't conquered yet? Or was it an item from ancient times? There were many possibilities. The only thing I knew was that he for sure had this method. He couldn't have pulled this off otherwise.

I furrowed my brow. "But it was you yourself in Abrasil. We even saw your summons. How did you do that?"

"Don't you know about Tsukuyomi's skill that allows her to create doppelgängers? Couple that with me and teleportation, and what do you get?"

I couldn't answer him. He only pretended to be in Abrasil to make me let my guard down? And when we spoke over the Communication Crystals, he was just acting? I'd just been dancing in his hand the whole time?

"And so, this is checkmate, fucking bastard."

Checkmate...? What the hell is he talking about? Did he just say checkmate to me, his foster father, the man who raised him for over ten years?

"By the way, Imabayashi. What level are you? You're past the level cap, right?"

I was currently level 100. He didn't need to know that, though. I started to regret not leveling after releasing the cap.

Although, even if I knew this situation was coming, I definitely wouldn't have been able to level up. After level 100, the minimum level monster you had to defeat in order to get EXP was 80. What would've happened if I got hit with a

critical rush? What if monsters with instadeath skills awaited me in high-level dungeons? Or if I got hit with a curse that blocked Revival and Recovery Magic? Though the chances of these things were very low, every possible route had those one in a million chances. I'd never cross a bridge so dangerous. If I were to partake in leveling, it would be after obtaining equipment, spells, and skills from Agartha. And even then, it would be slow and gradual, within a safe margin. It was nothing but appropriate for me to not have leveled up.

"Accept your fate, Imabayashi!"

Oh no.

No, no, no!

Sweat spewed from my armpits and drenched my back. How many level 99 players were in the security office again? Never mind, it doesn't matter—they'd never be able to stop all the members of the other guilds, not to mention Shinobu!

Then what should I do...? It pains me to say this, but I only have one option left.

"Bye, Shinobu!"

The sound of a rupture echoed throughout the hall. Ha ha, see that?! This is the exquisite skill of a level 99 Ninja Master!

The blinding black smoke accompanied me as I dashed toward the security office on the lower floor to contact the Agartha expedition team. I descended the castle stairs at a significant speed. The only class that won out against Ninja Masters in speed was Thieves, but nobody liked that class. I was sure that no one in that hall had been one. The only one I was unsure about was Shinobu. He'd gotten to level 125, a higher dimension territory to me. I had no idea what he could do.

I glanced behind me, half praying, but no one seemed to be chasing me.

I've won!

I hurriedly pulled out a Communication Crystal from my pocket as I confirmed my victory. Of course, I was contacting Kagura of the expedition team. If that man came to save me, it was perfectly possible to turn the tables on the rest of them. I had about ten Keys to Agartha, so though it pained me to spend them here, I didn't have the leeway to grumble.

Pick up! Pick up, damn it! Waiting with bated breath, I jumped when the Crystal finally reacted. Amazing job, Kagura! You picked up at the speed of lightning! You're my trump card for a reason!

```
"Oh, Imabayashi."

"Kagura! Urgent news!"

"You look tense. What's up?"

"Shinobu Iijima! The one I told you about before! He's coming to kill me!"

"Okay, and?"
```

Something felt off about his light, unbothered speech, but I was too focused on getting orders out to him. I was sure they'd all agree immediately if I told them to come back. I'd transport them to my side within five minutes, then they'd spread out and fight.

"Bring your entire troop back immediately! I'll pay you as much as you want!" "Sorry, but I refuse."

"...What? I thought you were working for me for the money?" What was wrong with him? All of the reward money he'd worked for up until now would perish if he kept this up.

"That's right. I believe in nothing but the American dollar."

I nodded. I knew that part. "Of course, your reward is in dollars! I'll pay you as much as you want!"

"As long as I get dollars, I'm satisfied."

"Yes, exactly! You always said money was the only thing that would never betray you. There's never been truer words, which is why you need to believe me right now—"

"But you know what, Imabayashi? There's one exception to my dollar rule."

"...Exception?"

Kagura took a breath, sighed softly, then continued. "You know I was thrown away along with my entire unit a long time ago, right? And you know that I beat the shit out of my commander the next day and was kicked out. Ever since then, I haven't been able to trust the dollars of men who leave their own comrades to die."

Wh...? What the hell is he saying?

"I'd intended for this to be your last chance. Even after you had the cap released, you still didn't go and level. But the rest of us? You kept throwing me and my comrades out into wastelands of death, every single day. And some of them died."

"Wait, Kagura... What...are you trying to tell me?"

"If you want to know what's going on, then go ahead and ask the devil near you."

"The devil? Wait—Kagura, wait! I'll pay you however much you want! I'll give you half of everything I own! It's not just two or three billion yen, you know!"

"You know I only believe in American dollars."

"Oh, fuck you! I can give you a hundred million of those! Please, I'm begging you, just come save me!"

"As I said, I don't believe in your dollars."

"Wait, wait wait! Let's just talk... You'll understand if we talk, Kagura!"

"Bye, Imabayashi. I'll take what we've gained from Agartha, including my unit."

The Communication Crystal then shut off.

My soul had half left my body at that point, and my brain wasn't working. I finally arrived at my destination, the security office with all the level 99s in it. I opened the door and wobbled in. I knew I'd made it, but I couldn't think

straight.

There were about thirty of them. Would they be enough to deal with Shinobu? Not only had he defeated twenty on his own, but he also now had all the other guildmasters on his side.

"Mr. Imabayashi! Why are you here?" asked my subordinate Murakami.

"I'll explain later... Prepare for a counterattack!"

Whatever was happening, I had to buy time. Was it possible for me to use these guys as shields and escape?

That was when I noticed the gazes of those around me feeling off. They were all looking at me, every single one of them. Wait a second, they're not looking at me. They're looking...behind me? And why do they look so surprised?

I turned around with a bad feeling in my stomach.

"Skill: Coat of the Moon Shadow."

A girl in gothic lolita clothes was standing behind me, with skin so porcelain that it could have been blue. Her eyes were so chilling that the temperature of the room felt like it was going down.

"...Who are you?"

"The goddess of the moon."

So this was Shinobu's summon, Tsukuyomi. How long had she been in my shadow? *It can't be...* This was why Shinobu hadn't chased after me? Because he didn't have to?

"And Amachan is the big sister of the moon goddess!"

Out of nowhere, a small child dressed in shrine clothing stood next to Tsukuyomi. Who the hell is this? That was when I realized that the situation had taken a turn for the worse.

People gathered together.

All of the castle's manpower was gathered here.

And a summon of a small girl.

There was only one thing that this situation was pointing to. By the time reality struck, a scream had already come out of my lungs.

"Urgh— Amaterasu?!"

Another name for a nightmare.

Beyond that of nuclear fission.

Beyond that of nuclear fusion.

A direct conversion of mass by magic.

"Grade 6: Mass Conversion Bomb: E=mc2."

As soon as Amaterasu announced this, the pure white light of destruction blocked out my entire line of sight. They'd also put a barrier around this space so it wouldn't hit the surrounding areas. How oh so *polite* of them.

+

"Why...am I alive?" That was the first thing that came out of my mouth when I opened my eyes.

Where am I? It must be the imperial castle based on the interior. I surveyed my surroundings and looked out the window. This seems to be a passage on the first floor?

"Hey."

The voice came from behind me. I turned around on reflex, then screamed.

"Get away! Get awaaaaaaaaay!"

About ten meters away stood Tsukuyomi and a giant black dog. It had three heads, so it must have been Cerberus, another of Shinobu's summons.

I have no way of winning against them. I decided that instantly, then darted off in the opposite direction.

"What a pathetic man you are. If you really are level 99, you could at least put a scratch on me if you bet your life on it."

I had no intention of doing so—I'd never actually fought in my entire life. I'd

used wooden swords in practice battles, with super thick armor so I wouldn't get hurt. The only times I'd fought against *anyone* with actual weapons was when I was torturing the natives under level 30. And yet this girl was asking me to fight her with my life on the line? *Don't be so stupid!*

...No. This was why. It was because I lived like this that I...could only run at the moment. But that was my right! I became a guildmaster through political influence and money! That was how I was able to make my lackeys do all the dangerous stuff! I did my best too! Did my best to obtain that right! And I was perfectly valid for using it!

A feeling in my gut told me to turn around.

"Boo!" Tsukuyomi shouted playfully as she rose from my shadow, her scythe glinting as a dry sound rang out.



Was that the sound of my Achilles' heel breaking? Extreme pain washed through both of my legs as they stopped working. I fell to the ground with a thunk and screeched as I endured the agony.

"Gaaaaaah!"

"Go on. Crawl away."

You don't have to tell me that! I'll struggle until the end! Just you watch, Tsukuyomi... When the tables turn, I'll tear your limbs off and throw you to a horde of orcs in heat! I won't forgive you, no matter how much you scream and cry! I'll make you regret doing this to me!

"Hee hee," she giggled. "That door over there is the only place you can run. Go on, go to hell of your own accord."

I felt something chilling come from those words. "Wh-Where...are you taking me...?"

"I told you to go."

Her soccer ball kick didn't have even an ounce of mercy, striking right into the side of my stomach.

"Aaagh!"

I kept trying to crawl toward the door as I yelped. This is humiliating. To be closed in on by such a little girl and made to crawl like a worm... And I'm headed toward hell? The fear I felt only expanded.

"Stop right there," Tsukuyomi said lazily. "This is the last window."

The last thing I saw was her lightly raising her hand before the window shattered. I felt an excruciating pain and half of my vision went dark.

"Wha-?!"

Tsukuyomi raised her hand yet again. The other half of my vision blackened, and I couldn't see anything but darkness anymore.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The only thing I could do was scream through the agony. Was that magic? A status effect? Blindness? Could it be healed? I had so many questions as I was

consumed by the darkness. My heart was dyed with anxiety and despair.

"Alice really has become a useful girl. I like it when they have no mercy." Tsukuyomi sounded like she was laughing.

"S-Stop... Stop... Stop... Please..." That was probably the first time in my life that I begged, but I would only get denied with the iciest voice possible.

"No."

"Please... You have to..."

"This is the end."

Pain struck my wrists. The tendons must have been cut, because I couldn't move them immediately after. Despair consumed me as I realized what was happening.

Forget running. I couldn't see. Couldn't move.

"Looks like you can't move anymore. I'll leave the rest to you, Cerberus."

I could feel moist, warm breaths on my skin. The next moment, I was covered in saliva. Something tough, like a giant fang, hit me as I felt a rough tongue on me.

The feeling of being hoisted into the air.

The feeling of my body shuddering like an earthquake as stomping sounds hit the ground.

The sound of a door opening. Right after, I could feel myself going down what felt like a staircase. After a while, there was the sound of a door opening.

Where...? Where are they taking me...?

At our destination, mass cheering hit my ears.

+

The same day, at the same time.

Gabriel

The royal family's treasure vault had been remodeled into a new room, serving as a place for slave auctions.

"Hello," I greeted the black-clad official that stood in front of the reception desk, then handed them the written invitation I'd received from Ms. Kaori.

"Oh," he mused as he looked it over. "Invited by one of the Gods, were you?"

The unscrupulous man leered at me grossly with carnal desires. While I admit that my appearance is beautiful, this made me most uncomfortable.

"Are you headed to the auction venue?" he asked with a sly smile.

I didn't answer.

"You're a perverted one yourself." He chuckled with a lowbrow grin that instantly revealed his intentions.

I'll say it again, but I was veritably uncomfortable.

"Do you enjoy torturing them? Or are you just a plain homosexual? You probably already know how it works, but I'll go ahead and explain the proceedings anyway."

I didn't respond, letting him continue.

"You are not allowed to taste test them directly, and touching their chests, pelvises, and buttocks is strictly prohibited. The items for this auction are of the highest quality, so please comply and treat them as you would works of art."

Another pause.

"Note that we have also prepared a playroom for the guests, so please partake in such activities only after purchasing the items."

Silence.

"And, of course, every possible action toward your purchased slaves is allowed, including murder."

Eye contact.

"At present, we have all of the products on display beyond this entrance. That is all. Please follow the rules and enjoy the auction!"

He bowed his head low to me. When he lifted it, his expression immediately changed to one of wild bewilderment.

Of course it did. The intensity was that of a cannonball being fired.

I'd whipped my body around and swung my fist at him with every fiber of my being. However, I made sure to indicate the bare minimum of politeness to him, bidding him farewell as my fist collided with him.

"Goodbye, sir."

A right hook with my heart and soul poured into it, like that of an arrow being pulled back as far as it could go before being fired.



"Bwaaagh!"

I believe it was about twenty meters; the man shot across that distance before he slammed into the wall. A person-shaped hole was left in his wake, and judging by the sound, he appeared to still be flying and smashing into things along his way. At any rate, it did not seem I would need to worry about what he would do afterward.

"Now then. It is time for me to head to where Master Shinobu's sister is," I whispered as I punched another man to my side and headed into the auction display venue.

+

Ayumu Imabayashi

"This is as far as I will accompany you, Imabayashi."

I heard Tsukuyomi's words within my pitch-black vision as I felt myself drop a good distance to the ground, a groan escaping from me.

"Well then," she said with finality. "Good luck."

Good luck? For what? What's all this cheering about too?

A bright, loud voice answered my question. "Ladies and gentlemen! It's time for the main event of the day! I'm your announcer, Hannibal! Nice to meet you!"

Main event? What...? What's going on here?

"All righty, then, allow me to introduce the man who has just entered the underground slave fighting ring!"

A giant applause responded to his announcement. *Underground...slave* fighting ring? What? Why...am I here...?

"I'm sure you've all heard of the William Dukedom Skewering Incident! The one where the kind duke, who'd boasted low taxes for his people, was skewered to death along with all of his citizens, then becoming an object to decorate the dominion with. I bet that's a fresh memory for a lot of you, huh?"

I think that happened about ten years ago. I'd punished a man for going against my will.

"Or what about when all those girls went missing in the town of Genus? Every girl between the ages of twelve and nineteen was taken away by sentinels and never came back!"

I remembered that too. That happened twenty years ago, because I'd found a girl I saw in the streets there that I'd liked. I ended up not finding her, no matter how much I searched, so we rounded up all of the girls under twenty to avoid the hassle. Aside from the girl herself, didn't we turn the rest into zombies for my guild's necromancers to control?

"Or how about this? The fighters right here in this ring! All of them are well-known adventurers and martial artists, but ah, how cruel! They were taken here by those with overwhelming, violent strength that think of themselves as *gods*! Now, these people are forced to fight for their lives on the daily!"

I couldn't see, but I could feel the stares on me, probably from the eyes of the slave fighters burning with rage. I could tell—they couldn't wait anymore; they were on the verge of exploding.

"And sorry to throw in a personal story, but I, Hannibal, am also one of those who sadly lost his family to this man. All of the tragedies were caused by him! Come! All of you demihumans who have had your families kidnapped and killed, give me the greatest cheers and applause you can!"

I see. They gathered all of the people who hate me in this one place. How...cruel of them... I don't think this is something a human being should do to another human being at all.

"He's currently in a wormlike state. He can't move, nor can he see! This pathetic man once controlled all of Abrasil from the shadows for four hundred years, reaping all of the profits and pushing the limits of violence and inhumanity."

Hannibal inhaled a deep breath, his voice suddenly changing to that of anger as he shouted out.

"Ayumu Imabayashi! This man right here!"

His words were then drowned out by the raucous cheers, which had intensified almost to the point of insanity. Their voices full of grudges and hatred filled the whole ring. It almost felt like it was about someone who wasn't me.

"His opponents are the men who were kidnapped and forced to kill one another! The forty-two slave swordsmen will now enter!"

I felt like I was floating, like I was astral projecting, seeing myself from above. My emotions seemed to have ascended to a realm beyond that of fear and despair. I'd heard that this happened to kids who'd undergone abuse for long periods of time. By treating themselves like another person, they were able to escape from the pain, even just a little bit. Or at least, I *thought* that was how it went. It was a form of psychological escapism to protect oneself. This train of thought in itself was me thinking of the situation from a third-person perspective.

Ha ha... That's strange. I'm in such a situation, yet I'm perfectly calm.

"Just look at their eyes full of passion! They're all ready to go! The flames of revenge on Ayumu Imabayashi can be felt from the stands! It's time for our main event!"

The greatest cheer yet roared up. It was obvious what was about to happen.

"Ayumu Imabayashi versus forty-two slave swordsmen! And though I don't think I'm qualified, I will also be participating as an observer since I'm an A-rank adventurer! Pay attention, everyone, and feast your eyes upon this spectacle!"

A gong rang out to signal the beginning of the final curtain on my life.

+

Shinobu Iijima

"I...never told you to go that far."

I left the slave fighting ring behind as soon as the swordsmen lunged toward the worm bastard.

Tsukuyomi really did go all out when she wanted to. For a second there, I

considered stopping her, but I changed my mind and let her do as she pleased. Everything Mr. Hannibal had said during his introduction was the plain truth. I couldn't describe this as anything other than the bastard getting his just deserts. He'd ruthlessly beat up the natives, so it was only natural for him to face the natives' retribution. It was an issue between him and them—there was no place for me to butt in.

That was the end of that.

I'd been worried about his Agartha expedition team, but Tsukuyomi said those people were more on the sane side, compared to him. We'd bet a lot contacting them, and I'd thought there was a ninety percent chance of us failing. But they'd known that we had Keys to Agartha as well, so it was a smooth process convincing them. I'd dispatched Tsukuyomi there just thinking that it wouldn't hurt to ask, but they actually did end up agreeing with us.

And so the bastard... Actually, wait. I didn't need to call him that anymore. It might have just been to end things for good in my mind, but I decided to stop calling him that. The reason I'd done so in the first place was because the name "Imabayashi," which I associated with the man who'd run my father off the edge and made me and my sister unhappy, was enough to make my hairs stand with how much hatred it fostered in me.

Anyway, in the end, the reason all this happened was because of his nature. All of the guildmasters feared or hated him because of his psychopathy and were collectively wary of him. The same went for the Agartha expedition team. With that in mind, Imabayashi brought this whole situation upon himself.

That aside, all the expedition team did was affirm for us that we could talk to them. They didn't actually agree to take our side, instead just sitting and watching as we went after Imabayashi. I had no idea how they were going to move after that, so I'd treat it as an unknown factor and wouldn't let my guard down.

I walked through the castle, lost in thought, and finally arrived at the room I was aiming for.

"How are things going, Gabriel?"

Gabriel was standing up straight at the entrance. "I've secured the girl who

resembles your sister here." She bowed her head.

"Thank you. Can I go in?"

"She is not in the middle of changing or anything, so I believe that would be acceptable."

Even so, I didn't want to barge into a girl's room without asking. I knocked on the door.

"...Come in."

When I entered, it looked like your typical cute girl's room, like one a princess would live in... I think. Wait, this is a castle, so this may actually be a royal family member's room.

When I met eyes with the girl, my voice came out before I realized it.

"Megumi?"

There was no mistaking it. This was my younger sister. This was...Megumi. *My sister.* It couldn't be anyone else.

"Shinobu?"

"...Huh?"

Though in my mind she was already my sister, I wasn't expecting that out of her. I'd even checked Megumi's log-in time yesterday—it wasn't for another half year.

The girl in front of me was absolutely Megumi, though. How was she here without logging in...? Or maybe she'd reincarnated here while still alive, unlike the rest of us?

My head was swarming with questions, but I put them all aside.

"Megumi? Megumi... Megumi!"

My legs ran to her and my arms were thrown around her before I knew it.

"But...how? Shinobu? It can't be... How? Why? How?!"

She seemed to be just as confused as me, but I didn't mind. I finally reunited with my sister, whom I'd been so, so worried about since arriving in this world.

Megumi put her hands on my back and pulled me closer.



After holding each other for a while, Megumi pushed me away.

"I'm sorry... Megumi..." Tears were filling my eyes.

"Shinobu, I don't think there's much time left."

"Time? What do you mean?"

She smiled at me. "I want the best for you. I think it'll be better if you die soon."

"Huh...?"

"No, I really think that's the best option. You may not believe me, but before the azoixjoviewkjenjwkjnf builds up..."

Just like before, I heard TV static and couldn't make out the words.

"Megumi, what are you talking about?"

My voice caught in my throat. All I could do was stand there, gaping.

Gabriel placed her hand on my shoulder. "Compose yourself, Master Shinobu."

Her voice and expression were pitying me greatly, but were also very kind. Her usual expressionless face wasn't there; she was biting her lip and looking deeply distressed. What kind of face was I making to make her look at me like that?

My knees buckled against my will and tears blurred my vision.

"She's gone... Megumi disappeared, Gabriel."

"...I can guess how you feel."

My sister Megumi had disappeared in front of my eyes. Without a sound, without a warning... Simply disappeared like smoke dispersing into the air.

Epilogue: The Curtains Rise on the Agartha Event

"A chance meeting between siblings. I was wondering how it would turn out."

The view in front of him was completely white. In this space, even the edge of the horizon was blurred. The only thing that wasn't white here was a single man sitting in a chair.

Wearing a hoodie, jeans, and an eye patch, the man spoke to the girl that was sitting across the table from him.

"You still ended up incarnating here after that world, huh?" he said loftily.

"This body ended up meeting with my brother after all, Mr. Mikagami."

"How do you view this world, Megumi?"

"You're already talking down to me?"

"I don't like beating around the bush."

After a moment of silence, the girl said this without answering Mikagami's question: "I want to end this game as quickly as possible."

"And why's that?"

"To save as many people as I can, as soon as possible... Before the players can make any more mistakes."

"I see... Those feelings were the miracle that became the fuel for the hands of the clock to speed up half a year faster, most likely. Honestly, you're too kind."

The girl sucked in a breath as determination filled her eyes. She released that breath. "All right, then. Let's begin."

"As you wish, Goddess."

That day, the following system alert was sent to all of the players in the world of *La Vita Online*.

Player Megumi Iijima confirmed Lost. All player logins are now confirmed. The game has e final phase. The Agartha Event will now begin.	ntered its

Afterword

And that's the end of volume 3. How was it?

For this volume, I was particularly debating whether or not to have the main character get his revenge on his foster father.

At one point, on the internet, stories featuring things like exiling and "it's too late for you now" types were popular. Like ones where the main character would get kicked out of their party for being useless, then make a comeback and reveal that they're actually super talented.

That's fine as an example of this trope, but I felt off about it and didn't end up following it, since most of those stories' morals are "the people who kicked the protagonist out end up self-destructing." Those who kicked them out gradually fall to despair as the main character gains feats better than theirs, and when that group begs for them to come back, they say, "It's too late now!"

I can say for sure that these types of stories fall under the "villainess" category more often than not. Seeing one's enemy self-destruct with no blood on one's own hands is a story element that seems to be popular with women.

To put it simply, a woman who gets dumped by a high-value man suddenly gets popular with ultra, superhigh-value boys in a new place, and when she hears that the original man got fired from his job and became a bum, she goes, "Oh, really? Well, I'm glad I'm the lucky one." That's the most basic template for a female-based one.

You don't really see those for series with predominantly male audiences, where the main character doesn't face off directly with their opponent, so I guessed at the reason this genre was popular and did my research.

As a result, when I wrote the original web novel, I made it a free-to-read one that wouldn't take up much time for people taking a break from housework. So from the time that this genre was trending, I carefully considered whether or not to incorporate it into my male-focused works. That's why I mentioned the

debating part at the beginning.

The answer I ended up with was "Summons sure are handy! They're kinda the main character but not really (laughs)."

Lastly, my thanks.

My illustrator, Yuunagi, thank you again for drawing so many beautiful and cute characters.

To everyone at *Micro Magazine*: Thanks to you all, I was able to publish yet another volume. Thank you very much.

And to you, the readers, who purchased this volume. Thank you for everything.



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The Invincible Summoner Who Crawled Up from Level 1: Wrecking Reincarnators with My Hidden Dungeon Volume 3

by Shiraishi Arata

Translated by Jasmin Thairintr Edited by Ruuri

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