

The background of the cover features a vibrant illustration of a young anime-style girl with long, flowing blonde hair and large, expressive blue eyes. She has a joyful expression, with a wide smile and her hands raised near her face. She is wearing a dark brown, short-sleeved top with a thick, dark fur collar and matching fur cuffs. Her hair is adorned with a headband that has two large, brown cat ears. She is also wearing a long, flowing purple skirt with a dark fur trim at the hem. The setting is a lush, sunlit forest with tall green trees and a path leading into the distance. In the background, a faint, stylized image of a city with a prominent tower can be seen through the foliage. The overall color palette is warm and bright, with a focus on greens, blues, and the girl's blonde hair.

NOVEL

10

written by
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illustrated by
Saku Enomaru

LONER LIFE ◆ IN ANOTHER WORLD ◆

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AFTERWORD

Newsletter



CLASS REP

DRESSED AS A WHITE RABBIT

"So then,
is our top
priority
avoiding
a war?"

ARIANNA

DRESSED AS A SHEEP

"Most of the
Theocracy's
common folk
do not want
this war. I will
return to the
Theocracy to
earn us peace."

MERIELLE

DRESSED AS A BAT

"The only person who can oppose
the pope now is the princess of the
Theocracy. That's you, Arianna.
You're a fool if you think they
don't have designs on you!"

SHALLICERES

DRESSED AS A FLYING SQUIRREL

"The Kingdom will go to war with
you. It would be unthinkable
for us to foist this responsibility
upon Lord Haruka."



Special

VICE REP C

DRESSED AS A TANUKI

Vice Rep C
is our local
Tiny Tanuki,
so how could
she not have
tanuki PJs?
They don't
show up in the
main story, so
now's your
chance
to check them
out!

**BIG
REVEAL!**

LONER LIFE

◆ IN ANOTHER WORLD ◆

Loner Life in Another World (Light Novel) Vol. 10
© 2022 Shoji Goji
Illustrations by Saku Enomaru
First published in Japan in 2022 by OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.

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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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TRANSLATION: Andrew Schubauer
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LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Jehanne Bell
PROOFREADER: Catherine Pedigo
EDITOR: Lorin Christie
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-88843-750-6
Printed in Canada
First Printing: November 2024
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

LONER LIFE

◆ IN ANOTHER WORLD ◆

NOVEL

10

THE PURE SISTER'S
KILLER STRIKE

WRITTEN BY



Shoji Goji

ILLUSTRATED BY



Saku Enomaru



*Seven Seas
Entertainment*



VICE REP A

One of Haruka's classmates. A cool beauty prone to glaring at the guys when they do something stupid.



VICE REP B

One of Haruka's classmates. An absentminded girl who was voted the most popular student in the class. An Archsage.



VICE REP C

One of Haruka's classmates. A lively ankle biter who longs to become an adult. She's like a class mascot.



QUEEN BEE

One of Haruka's classmates. Leader of a group of five fashion-obsessed girls. A former model.



BOOK CLUB PRESIDENT

One of Haruka's classmates. A level-headed strategist who was involved with literary activities back in high school. Has known Haruka since elementary.



GYMNASTICS GIRL

One of Haruka's classmates. A former candidate for Japan's Olympic gymnastics team. An alchemist who transforms gymnastics equipment into weapons.



ERAILIA

An elf. Vizmuregzero's sister. She recovered from a terrible illness with one of the frontier's mushrooms.



SHALLICERES

The princess of the Kingdom of Diorelle. Traumatized by experiencing the half-naked heave-ho of the pseudo-dungeon. Also known as the Royal Girl and Shillyshally.



CERES

Princess Shalliceress's maid. Has served as the princess's guard and body double from a young age.



STALKER GIRL

The daughter of the chief of the Shino clan, a family specializing in reconnaissance. A top-class spy with Perfect Invisibility.



MEROPAPA

The Duke of Omui. An invincible warrior hero known as the Frontier King and War God, among other titles.



MERIELLE

The daughter of the Duke of Omui. Unable to remember her name, Haruka calls her Merimeri, and now so does everyone else.

CHARACTERS



ANGELICA

The former emperor of the Ultimate Dungeon. Haruka used "Servitude" on her. Also known as Miss Armor Rep.



HARUKA

A high school student summoned to another world. The only member of his class not to receive a cheat skill from God.



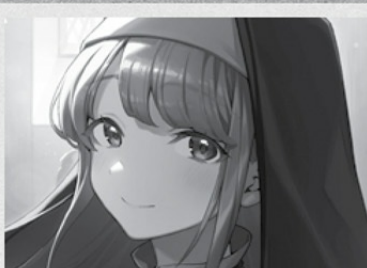
NEFERTIRI

A former dungeon emperor. Haruka freed her from the Theocracy, which used her as a weapon of mass destruction. Also known as Dancer Girl.



CLASS REP

The student council president of Haruka's class. Talented leader. Has known Haruka since elementary school.



ARIANNA

A cleric of the Theocracy. Belongs to a political faction that opposes the mistreatment and enslavement of beastfolk.



SLIME EMPEROR

A former dungeon boss. Absorbs enemy skills with Predation. Haruka used "Servitude" on it.

STORY

Haruka met Arianna, a member of a delegation from the Theocracy to Haruka. Her goal? To warn them of the corrupt church that has nested in the Theocracy's black heart. She became one of Haruka's allies, and Haruka immediately set her to work power-leveling in dungeons. She soon became strong enough to protect herself against assassins and other threats.

Meanwhile, the pope's forces stage a coup in the Theocracy, placing the royal family under siege and executing any who resist.

Arianna vowed to return to the Theocracy despite the danger. To head off her inevitable demise, Haruka suggested a plan to destroy the church: under the pretext of visiting the Beast Nation as a dignitary of Diorelle, Haruka will slip across the border into the Theocracy. There, he plans to strike at the heart of the church...by storming the cathedral!

PROLOGUE



THE ARTISAN KEPT early mornings, rising and beginning his inspection of the enormous pots long before dawn ever broke the horizon. He cultivated a living thing, and that made his work a difficult task. He kept one eye on the contents of the pots as he fiddled with their temperature and composition. No two pots were exactly alike, and no two pots were the same from day to day. Hence why the artisan could never afford to take his eyes off his work. He silently conversed with his creations—conversations of seeing, of hearing, of *feeling* the substance. Giving less than his absolute best would only take the artisan so far; it limited what he might produce and what he might learn, and... Well, that was unthinkable.

It was precisely because this village artisan had no other way to compensate his savior, precisely because he had no other way to express his gratitude, that he would no longer despair or accept excuses.

One fateful day, his village had been destroyed. He had no choice but to flee from a swarm of monsters, and as he ran, it was all he could do to protect the helpless among his neighbors. That he was unable to do more did not trouble him. To him, it was enough that he had been able to protect some of them.

Yet when the monsters had been dispatched and he returned to the ruins of his hometown, a realization hit him the moment he stepped into his brewery: his efforts had been too little, too late. Yes, he had saved the lives of the townsfolk, but the brewery that sustained the village was destroyed. As if the wrecking of the village was not bad enough, it had also lost its economic lifeblood.

The situation had turned sour, and he could smell it. Every single barrel of *akazake* liquor had gone to vinegar. All were ruined.

As the man responsible for the brewery, he had no room to make excuses.

Food was precious in a hamlet as impoverished as this one—there was no room for failure. Without the materials to make more, even a single failure meant they were ruined past the point of recovery.

If the smell was this strong, then the vinegar must have permeated into the barrels themselves. The artisan had as good as slain the village himself. Even death would not be enough to pay for his failure. If he couldn't at the very least take one of these monsters down to hell with him, then he would not be fit to show his face before the villagers who had placed their trust in him.

As those thoughts ran through his mind, he addressed the *akazake* he had ruined. "I am sorry, so sorry, that I wasn't here when you needed me. It's all my fault, I know. I wanted you to mature into a fine *akazake* that would bring smiles to all our people's faces. But now... I apologize."

He had a soft spot in his heart for every one of the barrels. Why wouldn't he? He had spent day after day talking to them, laboring over them with love. He performed experiment after experiment and trial after trial in the hopes of brewing a masterwork of *akazake*. Now that it had all gone to ruin, he could never make amends for his negligence.

He laid a hand on one of the barrels. "You deserve an apology, too." These were the treasures of this destitute town, the benefactors that brought happiness with the fine *akazake* they produced. These barrels had been treasured and passed down from generation to generation through the village's history—with the artisan receiving them from his father, and his father from his father's father, and so on—and always producing fantastic *akazake*. And now they were all, to a barrel, soaked with vinegar. Ruined.

Never again would these barrels create *akazake*. After so long at their task, after bringing joy to countless lives on the frontier, these invaluable items had been destroyed at the hands of the artisan.

He did not know how long he stood there, nor for how long he apologized. He was barely conscious of the tears dripping down his cheeks.

When he turned, he saw dark, dark black eyes boring into him.

And then he sold all the vinegary *akazake*.

The man insisted that such rancid stuff should never be sold, but when the owner of those black eyes marinated fish in it and gave the artisan a taste, the dish made his astonished taste buds sing. Before he could recover from his amazement, the boy with the black eyes requested the entire stock, paid in full, and whisked it away.

The payment could buy a new brewery. The artisan had been on the verge of abandoning any hope of ever rebuilding the treasure of his village. He looked around in a daze. Even his stores swelled with stacks of grain, and when he finally regained his calm, he realized that the half-ruined building had been rebuilt and remodeled to be grander and more beautiful than ever before.

When the artisan dashed outside, he discovered that this ruined *akazake* had also been paid for with a new village. Only moments before, there had stood crumbling huts. Now grand edifices lined the village streets, ringed by a stout wall. In the blink of an eye, this village had been transformed into a walled stronghold of a city.

The villagers wept and embraced one another. Even those who had suffered hideous wounds and had nothing left to wait for save death walked with a spring in their step, their injuries healed. The last vestiges of this nightmare had vanished, leaving behind a happiness unlike any the villagers had ever seen before.

It was then that one among them said, “You know what that was? That was the calamity of happiness.”

Only later did they find out why, miraculously, they suffered no casualties in the monster attack: namely, the calamity happened to be passing by when he stumbled upon a deluge of monsters, decided they were in his way, and set upon them. Afterward, in exchange for the ragged hamlet’s ruined *akazake*, the boy gave the villagers a new chance at a future.

It was all—every bit—a calamity of happiness.

Later, the artisan subjected the local youths to grueling and exhaustive training in the art of brewing *akazake*. The young ones soaked up the knowledge without a word of complaint, matching the artisan's enthusiasm stride for stride. All worked assiduously so they would not shame that dear calamity, all the while reflecting upon the fortune delivered to them. Before they knew it, the village had grown rich and bursting with prosperity. In the mere twinkling of an eye, the village had grown into a full-fledged town.

Thus the artisan decided to leave brewing to the village youths; henceforth, he would turn his attentions to fermenting vinegar—for he was no longer worthy to brew *akazake*. Not when he was unfit to pass down the craft. Not when he could not safeguard the barrels.

Now he wanted to create vinegar, the same vinegar the calamity of happiness claimed was worth such an elephantine fortune. The artisan would never forget the look on the calamity's face as he marinated that fish; no, not for as long as the artisan lived would he forget how his failure had brought the calamity such joy. All the same, that did not mean his failure was truly worth the riches showered upon them. The artisan wanted to bring joy with vinegar he had poured his heart and soul into. There was nothing else he and his co-villagers could do to repay the calamity's kindness. The only thing left for him, the only thing he could do, was become a vinegar artisan.

"Once I loathed vinegar and treated it as a form of failure," he mused. "I never knew it could have such rich, complex flavors."

He discovered that changing his recipes produced a multitude of different flavors. He learned that a lack of care would ruin the final product. Like *akazake*, vinegar was a fickle thing to produce, and even if it was only *vinegar*, all the time and thought he put into it would be reflected in its flavor.

In the aftermath of the incident, the artisan learned countless recipes from the merchants who came to the village to buy vinegar, and he experimented

with different varieties of his stock in his cooking, thus committing many of the dishes to heart. Already, the town had gained a name for itself via its *akazake* and vinegar, and many flocked to it to try the local cooking. And yet he doubted he would ever forget the taste of that fish marinade. It would not have mattered to him if he received no acknowledgment for his life's work save that smile in the calamity's black eyes; that alone was enough. Therefore he produced the finest vinegar he could. As he gave it to the townsfolk, he dreamed that it might reach the calamity's table and bring another smile to the boy's face.

On that fateful day, he had told the boy, "On my pride as an artisan, I can't sell you *akazake* that has turned foul."

The calamity responded, "Yeah, but the sourness is worth something, ya know?"

And the artisan believed it. And he tried to perfect sourness, concentrating and fermenting one solution after the next.

Finally, at the end of all his labors, he produced a vinegar with a mouth-puckering sourness. Word had it that the calamity promised to buy it all, but as it matured, it began to dissolve the alchemically-created pots it was fermented in.

Why, oh why, the artisan wondered, would anyone ever want to buy this? Yeowch! That's beyond sour!

It was a hair-razing development.

DAY 101

MORNING



WHITE LOSER INN

IT WAS A TIME OF DAY too dark to call the crack of dawn. So why was I awake? That's right: revenge. Teenage boy tactical strike!

Last night went on forever. I rather invested all my true teenage-boy self into the occasion, with the repeated cycle of lovemaking providing a high-speed rotation of climax and recovery; an endless night where we employed Limit Break. And then, starting in the wee hours of the morning, the girls got their revenge. Of course, in any other circumstance, Presence Sensing or Area Analyze would have alerted me to their attack, but Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl used Invisibility and Presence Concealment to oh-so-sneakily transform into a couple of leopardesses and wreak their teenage-boy abuse operating under the name of revenge.

"It's, our duty. To perform, the morning ritual," said Dancer Girl.

Uh-huh. But I couldn't begin to tell you how many times I'd woken up bound in Dancer Girl's chains. I didn't have a clue how often she'd exacted her revenge on me. And then she switched out for Miss Armor Rep.

"Haruka, 0. Revenge, 1," said Miss Armor Rep. "Can't neglect, the ritual."

It truly was a shame that these girls were so focused on revenge when it's such a fruitless act. But yeah, this was all-out revenge for last night. It was an early morning M-rated motion-fest of captivating curves.

"Whoa there! Pillow talk's a foreign language, but this girl's got a gift for tongues. Whew, I wish I was half as much of a cunning linguist! She's giving me a real tongue-lashing—yeesh, she'd better not kiss her mother with that mouth... Okay, whatever, the point is that she's pucker-upping on my morning

pecker-upping!”

Smooch!

Considering how I’d worn them both out last night, I thought I’d be spared a lecture this morning, but Miss Lecture Rep had quite a wicked tongue. It was intense!

“Heyo, morning. Well, not exactly, since I’ve been awake for a while now, but I guess I’m finally out of bed, ya know? Yup, that was the ‘Morning, sleepyhead. It’s time for your wake-up call service!’ routine. A pinpoint attack of ‘Sleepy morning head—your wake-up call service!’ aimed at a certain high school boy who shall go nameless, but when said high school boy doesn’t so much get up in the morning as *get it up* in the morning, that sleepy head wake-up call’s more likely to wear on that high school boy until he’s completely worn out! Eventually he takes so much damage he may not be able to get up, let alone *it*! We’re talking a battle where the result would either be an eternal slumber or coming so much you hardly know where you’re going, you feel me? I barely got out of there alive, you know?”

Yeah, they were smiling at me with a mixture of innocence and self-satisfaction, but they knew they had...uh, something...dribbling from the corners of their mouths, right? Uh, yeah, I could totally see the censor bars. Gah, the way they licked their lips turned me on like anything, but lover boy over here was rapidly running out of steam. Even so, there was no time for a revenge match with Lovemaking. Oh, and could they let me out of these chains already? They were hard and painful and cold, and not only was this not my fetish, I had no plans whatsoever to get into it. The girls sure seemed to enjoy it, though! *Don’t tell me they’re going to make me bear this humiliation all day. This is going to be one long, long wait until nightfall. I’d better make sure I have a full tank of MP before jumping into that fray.*

When I went to the dining hall, I found the chubby thigh crew in their compression shorts giving their morning calisthenics their bouncy best. Maybe all of Dancer Girl’s yoga lessons were paying off, because those girls had

progressed from stretching routines to morning yoga, and it amazed me how lusciously limber they were as they navigated their flexibility exercises.

Meanwhile, other girls were meditating or practicing tai chi after they'd picked it up in perky preparation for the upcoming battles on today's agenda. I had my hands full cooking, but Jupiter Eye and Wisdom seemed to be pretty busy too, recording some vital information.

"Good morning!" the curvy crew chorused chestily, everything wobbling about in a particularly well-endowed fashion. It would have driven me nuts if not for a little post-nut clarity.

"Uh, yeah, good morning?" I said. "I mean, I feel like I've been awake for ages, but you have to say good morning since it's morning. I see the bosom bunch is looking all perky, bright-eyed, and bushy-tailed, and that's what's important, right? Anyway, how about we get some breakfast going? I made a plain pizza with some cheese that came in yesterday. Speaking of that, what we call Margherita pizza comes from the Latin word margarita, but it's easier for us to remember that like the flower marguerite. And if we came from the land of our good friend Marie Antoinette, then the name Margaret would be Margarita, like the cocktail, which comes from St. Margaret of Antioch and originally meant 'pearl,' but now it refers to a type of daisy. It's a complicated etymology for such a simple type of pizza. Kinda funny the way these things shake out sometimes, ya know?"

"Pizza!" the girls cheered. "And don't call maidens the 'bosom bunch,' thank you very much!"

A storm of thundering thighs broke out—a real scene of boisterous mayhem as the girls fought over long, sticky strands of cheese and struggled in a delicious mashing of flesh. They forsook all honor in pursuit of the pizza, and soon they started to forsake clothing as they yanked at each other over the course of the brawl. Uh, they knew they could wait for the next one to come out of the oven, right? *Cool it with the strip show, ladies? You're gonna make the pizza burn.* I mean, *my* teenage-boy passions were certainly inflamed.

Sausage omelets flitted over to the girls, and the beacons lit up for the pandemonium of the booby brawl to recommence.

“I guess I was right,” I said. “I’d better make cheese and butter production my top priority, or we’ll never have peace. Guys, come on. If you keep pulling on those compression shorts, someone’s booty will start making a guest appearance, and the censor bars are still gearing up for battle. They’re not ready yet?”

Sister Girl and her pals weren’t quite at the level of my classmates, but Royal Girl and Merimeri-san were all up in the thicc of battle. And Maid Girl was in utter anguish worrying over Royal Girl? Meanwhile, Elf Girl kept her distance from the fray while nabbing herself a slice of pizza and loading it down with a healthy garnish of toppings. By way of comparison, Poster Girl and Stalker Girl had given up on getting toppings of their own and had retreated to shelter to chow down on their pizza. Amateurs.

“Yup, the priest dudes would never be able to handle a view like this. They must’ve left and are never coming back. This level of thiccness is anathema for priests, ya know?”

“Stop commenting on our bodies!” the girls yelled.

The priests were off training with the frontier army today, but I had to wonder: did it fit with the teachings of the church to have a bunch of priests running around blowing things up? But the vanguard would have been weak without a defensive line of priests, and the nerdbbrains weren’t back yet either, so whatever.

According to Stalker Girl, the nerdbbrains had already set off for the capital, met up with the First Division, and were now on their way back to the frontier. Apparently, the meatheads were putting the moves on the First Division’s pretty macho chicks, too. No one knew where the nerds had gone, but reports showed that the harbor in the Merchant Kingdom had gone up in flames, which only went to show how effective incendiary torpedoes were against wooden

boats.

“Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl,” I said, “can you guys take the titty committee out for training today? Once I’m done with my staggering volume of odd jobs, I’ll probably swing by to sneak a peek at—I mean, I’ll catch up with you guys. Because what if there’s a bunch of girls in a dungeon? And they all suddenly took off their clothes? Then how’s anyone supposed to tell which one of them is Nudist Girl? Heck, I bet even the monsters would be confused at that point. And then you’d treat me like some Peeping Tom? So let me put it out there in advance: it’s hot, I get it, but you need to keep your armor on or else the monsters will file a complaint?”

“We’re not going to take our clothes off!” the girls shouted. “And don’t you dare call us the titty committee!”

“Nah, it’s okay,” I said. “I’ll give Nudist Girl a pass since it’s her thing and all that. Huh, wait a sec. Why’re you wearing clothes?! I thought we had an understanding!”

“Stop being so mean to poor Fukunuki-chan!”

Wearing clothes made it seem like there was a new version of Nudist Girl. So did she still count as Nudist Girl anymore? Newdist Girl, maybe? That was awfully confusing, but maybe it was like the thing where some aquatic critters changed their names as they got older, you know what I mean? Yeah, we’d start calling tadpoles frogs when they got big enough and stuff? Pretty soon we’d have to start calling her Newtist Girl. Okay, now here’s the real question: would that new name ever stick in my brain?

“So these are my newest rapiers,” I told the girls. “I had some doubts about how well estocs would work with your ceremonial staves. Come and get your share. I’ve got enough for everyone. I recommend these guys for the arts club girls, since they’re made for fighting human opponents and dealing status ailments.”

“Thanks!”

I figured that was enough equipment for the day. In fact, I even analyzed the make-up in one of those kits from the call lady and whipped up a batch of my own to sell. It'd be even better for the skin and come in prettier colors. But I was out of MP from my morning teenage-boy full-body beat down, and even if I had MP batteries in my item bag, I was still woefully unequipped to go toe-to-toe with an army of girls jiggling right out of their compression shorts. Even though I had increased my stock of barrettes, I was liable to get knocked out cold if I got into a shoving match. We'd have to save the bargain sale for later.

Since hot weather had arrived, I'd stocked up on lighter clothes, and knowing what happens when you cross girls and revealing clothing, I figured that meant they'd want some razors. So I made some and put them up for sale, too. But when Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl saw my huge supply, they asked what I needed all those razors for. I told them it was for dealing with a problem of a particularly feminine nature, and it was at that very moment that reality hit me with a thunderclap shock.

It turned out this fantasy world's got a medication that made girls' skin silky smooth with no upkeep required whatsoever, and my classmates were popping 'em down the hatch constantly, meaning they were already permanently hair-free. Razors wouldn't sell.

That wasn't the surprising part. When I asked a couple questions to make sure those medications were healthy and safe to take and all, Class Armor Rep and Dancer Girl told me that it's for women only. No guys allowed. When I asked why, they said it made guys go bald and grow more hair in unwanted places. Since the medication was so powerful, you couldn't take it out of the store and had to take it right then and there. No two ways about it, this medication was hormonal.

Female sex hormones would make the medication lengthen your head hair and eyelashes while stopping hair growth in other places. When guys took the medication, it activated male sex hormones instead, which promoted balding, eyebrow loss, and big ole scraggles of facial hair and forests of hair in

undesirable places.

I'd noticed that Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl didn't have a lot of hair down there, but I'd never paid it all that much attention—I'd heard that plenty of non-Japanese people had little to no body hair. Medication had been the culprit all along.

Now that I looked, I realized every single one of the girls in my class had silky smooth skin.

"I guess that finally explains why razors didn't fly off the shelves during the bikini sale. And it proves that my razor production line won't turn a profit and that you're all hairless! Okay, but how come we're only running into fantasy world medicine when we're ten volumes in, and it's to zap your pubes of all things? You're really giving my suspension of disbelief a workout, people!"

I guessed my only way to offload the rest of my stock was to dump 'em on the old guys so they could give their facial hair a trim. RIP. *Fantasy worlds, man.* There're surprises around every corner!

Anyway, the girls finished getting ready and peaced out. The plan for the day was for them to split into two groups, take on the mid-floors of their respective dungeons, and then regroup to tackle the lower floors together. Two dungeons in one day was sure to net them the big bucks, and that meant I had to put together a bargain sale after all!

Time for me to roll out. I had a full day ahead of me, what with going to both the general store and the armory. And just because I wasn't going into any dungeons didn't mean I couldn't pop in at the Adventurers' Guild. I mean, I had my daily dose of glares waiting for me. Skipping it would throw me off my groove, you know? And I needed to stock up on glares before our trip to the Theocracy!

"Which is why, like clockwork, I'm here every morning to check out and peruse and inspect the board," I explained. "But once again, none of the requests have changed on this obstinate bulletin board, which makes me so

angry, I'm past flipping tables, I'm ready to flip the darn board. In Buddhism they say all things must pass, but I think whoever said that never saw this freaking board because this board stands no chance in hell of changing, like I'm talking an eternal, everlasting, infinitely unchanging board here, so please, oh please, could someone on staff hurry up and post some new requests on this unchangeable, immovable, permanent bulletin board?"

Here I paused to wheeze for breath and let Slimey chime in with an inquisitive wiggle.

"You have a lot of nerve to keep sneaking in here!" the receptionist said. "You'd think that someone who isn't an adventurer and therefore isn't supposed to be in here would come in quietly, but you march in like you own the place and start ragging on us loud enough for everyone to hear, which raises the question of how you could possibly define that as sneaking in when you have every eye in the room on you, only to unload a dictionary-length diatribe of disapproval. So please, oh please could you enlighten me—or actually, could you please spare me and be quiet for once?"

Here, she paused to wheeze for breath and let Slimey comment with an exclamatory jiggle.

Ah yes, the familiar routine of the receptionist's deadly glares. Her rich vocabulary and the command of language in her comebacks were exceptional. Her lung capacity had also gotten plenty of practice in recent days. Those shrill notes were next level. Not to mention, the slime stealthily wriggling his way onto her head was a nice touch?

Just then, I heard some of my female classmates yell, "Ugh, he's back! He said he was going to the duke's palace today, but here he is, going out of his way to the Adventurers' Guild."

"Wait, weren't you going to the dungeons?" I asked. "Tsk, ts. If you keep making side trips, before long you'll end up so lost you'll wind up accidentally blowing through a dungeon in your search for dungeons. Then you'll find that

you actually cleared a dungeon even when you were off on a side quest. Funny how it always works out like that, huh?”

“Funny how *you* have the nerve to lecture us for making side trips when you waltzed your way into the guild on an obvious side trip!”

Anyhow, it turned out they’d come to the guild to pick up some info on a new dungeon. They wanted Sister Girl and her peeps to try clearing one of these shallow dungeons on their own for the experience.

“But didn’t they do that on their first day?” I asked. “Yeah, they totally did, ya know? They basically curb stomped a dungeon king.”

“Getting put in an iron ball and flung at monsters or hurled around with swords strapped to their arms is not the same thing as clearing a dungeon!”

Huh. I guess that didn’t count. But you had to give them credit for their effort, you know? And then in their latest escapade, they’d been plenty murderous and flattened monsters all gung-ho, as was proper. You’d think that would’ve counted, what with me being their instructor and all, but I guessed not...? It made no sense. You feel me?

DAY 101

MORNING

I have endless doubts about the gatekeeper's criteria for letting people through, since they never stop anyone. Take three guesses on if I got let through. The first two don't count.

OMUI CITY

THE TOWN'S BUSINESS DISTRICT grew more colorful by the day, with new signs of prosperity popping up all over the place. The hawkers called out their many wares in loud, cheerful voices to the throngs of passersby, each with a smile on their face. They had once been a people who had struggled to survive, and now they were truly living for the first time. Their shopping lists had expanded from basic food and weapons to include other household goods and personal luxuries, which made their daily lives—their food, their homes, everything—more opulent. Gorgeous garments, tasty dishes, smiling families—yup, it looked to me like this place had finally become a proper town.

And through all this prosperity fell a meteor shower of orphans, streaking through the air, dropping cookies like a rain of chaff, and flying over the business district like they were the rulers of these skies. Yeah, they were aimed right at me and hurtling in for hugs.

Once you kickstarted an economy, money would continue to circulate through it without settling down, which in turn would produce more money and goods. And this town was already at the point where it could claim the title of a full-fledged city. It'd keep developing on its own. Maybe I could finally take a break from my side hustles?

Anyway, I made my way past all the bustle of the business district to where the shops finally ended at the keystone of the city wall: the duke's palace. It was, effectively, a fortress where the lord of this domain lived. It occupied the

most dangerous position on the frontier, as it overlooked the monster forest. It was also, allegedly, the most vital line of defense for protecting both city and frontier. I said allegedly because they never tried to stop anyone coming in. And like always, today they let me through without even going, “Halt!” Which, I mean. Okay?

“How come they always let everyone waltz right on in with zero sense of concern and zero sense of being on guard duty? The town gatekeeper dude’s like, ‘Yup, that’s chill’ and this gatekeeper dude’s like ‘Yup, that’s chill,’ and they don’t even stop freaking dungeon emperors from coming and going whenever they please. Seriously, how shady would you have to be for one of these guys to stop you?”

Jiggle jiggle.

Yup, I had endless doubts about the gatekeeper’s criteria for letting people through, and once again—shocker—he let me go right on by even as the slime on my head jiggled hello as we passed.

The duke lived in a swanky palace, with thick, plush carpeting and gorgeous furnishings. Even so, I didn’t see signs of wear and tear that’d come from people living in the place. I guess the duke’s family was still living out of that little cupboard in the corner.

“Thank you for coming, Haruka,” said the duke. “As the lord of the frontier, I am thrilled to hear that a company that trades across the continent wants to open a branch here in Omui, but I’ve left the general store to handle all our imports and exports for years now. I’ve also gone around to many different businesses and asked them to open shop on the frontier, but I never stood a chance at actually making it happen. Having the Delibaur Corporation, one of the most prominent businesses on the continent, partner with our little general store is beyond my wildest dreams, so I am immensely gratified by their offer. But all the same...if I might ask your honest opinion, would this not produce more work for you? From the frontier’s perspective, this opportunity is like a dream come true. But if you are opposed, then we will all understand and turn

down their offer. I know you aren't at all the type to hide your feelings, so I hope you don't mind me asking for your honest input. What do you make of their offer?"

Whatever Mr. Meridad was going on about at great length didn't seem like all that big of a deal to me. Still, we had a very important matter to discuss that I refused to sweep under the rug. And that was the fact that Mr. Meridad was calling delivery health call girls! *Now look here, I'll tell Mrs. Murimuri.* I'd gotten lectured to death for my part in this, so it was only fair he got chewed out and walloped too!

The old dude from the call girl company said, "I apologize that we were unable to give a favorable answer when you requested our business many times in the past. We are most ashamed of our role in the previous state of affairs here in the frontier, but my people are merchants, not fighters. I could not ask them to take up arms and go to the frontier. That, and internal pressures within the Merchant Kingdom prevented us from extending our aid. Thus, we have become subcontractors of the Zackary Corporation, and our pride as merchants will not allow us to ask for anything more. We shall leave all matters of the supply chain here in the frontier to the Zackary Corporation, and we plan to carry goods that are not sold in Zackary stores. That is a sign of our respect, you see, from one merchant to another. We cannot cross that line, not after the Zackary Corporation has single-handedly distributed merchandise across the frontier for so long. Nevertheless, I hope you could oblige us by granting your permission to open a branch of our business in your territory."

That cunning old dude's abacus clacked as his calculating eye roved the room, but he'd long since discovered the most valuable item in the place. Yup, he'd already popped a coin into the massage chair and was presently giving it a test run. Old dudes were suckers for that thing.

As the vibrating chair relaxed him, I could see the glint of calculation behind his spectacles as he imagined what a huge profit these chairs could net him and tried to work out the sweet spot between production expenses and sale price.

“On my authority as the Duke of Omui, it is indeed my dearest wish to cultivate more business in my domain,” said the duke. “But the Zackary Corporation is our savior. I would be a poor ruler if I could not pay back the debt we owe them, and I cannot return their favor with betrayal. Hence why I would appreciate Haruka’s honest opinion.”

“Oh, no, no. For such a paltry product, surely this price is more than enough. We are already taking a loss as it is to learn the mechanisms of this chair. Here is my counteroffer.”

“But aren’t you gonna jack the price up and rip off all your customers? So I’d be fair in selling them to you at this price, ya know?”

“Yes, yes, for now, since this is our first transaction and such, we’ll pay a special stocking fee. Say, yea big?”

“Nah, it’d be one thing if we’re talking selling individual chairs, but all these guys come with coin slots. So you really need to consider the additional revenue stream those’ll provide. So how ’bout this much?”

“Oh, no, no. We merchants pride ourselves on our honest prices. That’s our motto, in fact. So might I suggest this price per chair?”

“Nah, nah, nah. Merchants are always proud to sell at bargain prices if there’s money in it for them. And besides, honest prices mean prices that benefit the consumer. They’re cheaper prices, you get my drift? So here’s a counteroffer?”

“Oh, no, no, no, no. This is only the beginning of a long-standing continuous partnership, is it not? So for one time only, we’ll buy at a loss to stock up on these chairs. And if I pay in cash, will you give me a special price? Say, this much?”

“Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah. People’ll be buying up those puppies like hotcakes, so how about this instead?”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no.”

“Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.”

Jiggle jiggle, Jiggle jiggle, Jiggle jiggle, Jiggle jiggle, jiggle.

“Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.”

“Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah.”

*Wiggle wiggle, Wiggle wiggle, Wiggle wiggle, Wiggle wiggle, Wiggle wiggle,
Wiggle wiggle, wiggle.*

“Ah, methinks the boy doth protest too much. Come now, if that won’t work, wouldn’t you lower the price just a smidgen? Just a tad? Just a mere modicum, here, just for example...”

Jiggle jiggle jiggle ji—

“You two are going on for far too long!” cried the duke. “Haruka, were you even listening to a word I said? And what are you two doing over there, fooling around with those abaci? Why are you trying out the massage chairs and trying to intimidate each other with your smiles? Do I really need to give you permission to start business here when you did so without my leave anyway?”

Mr. Meridad and that call girl he was so chummy with were making an awful racket about something. I’d have to spill the beans about this to Mrs. Murimuri too.

“Hels!” she yelled. “How dare you be so rude in the duke’s presence? Your Grace, I am so terribly sorry. My companion is a remarkable man, but I’m afraid whenever anything to do with business comes up, he completely forgets where he is. I beg your par—Huh, you’re only buying twenty chairs? Get a hundred, on the double! Why, get a thousand! They’ll sell out in no time flat.”

Mm-hmm. When I tipped off Mrs. Murimuri, I’d throw in a morning star for cheap, too.

“Anyway,” I said, “we’re not the people to ask permission from, ya know? It doesn’t matter if Mr. Meridad and I are on board with it. So long as the general

store lady says it's chill, it's chill. And if she says no dice, then sorry. But I know she won't turn you guys down if you give her a mushroom bento first. By the way, I happen to have an especially first-rate mushroom bento selling at a marvelous price, and if you buy now, I'll even throw in a beautiful cloth wrapper for it, the right thing to make it feel like a present. For, say, yea much? Do we have a deal?"

"We'll take it! We'll most certainly take it!"

The general store lady used to go into the woods to pick mushrooms here in this backwater frontier before she had an accident that almost killed her and left her disabled. Even though she knew she could no longer fight, she kept right on operating her dangerous business, stocking up on medication and food. That tiny little store of hers never turned a profit, but it single-handedly supported the whole frontier. There was never enough to go around, but she never let that stop her from scraping up whatever she could and handing it around—not if she could save even a single person.

That's how the mere act of me passing her money and mushrooms breathed new life into the entire frontier. From her experiences running around trying to secure items to stock her shelves, she was familiar with all the local specialties of every town and hamlet across the frontier. She knew shipping routes and shipping times like the back of her hand.

Plus, the entire frontier trusted her. And in the end, it's trust that made the business world go 'round. The reason people trusted me—a stranger—enough to sell me their stuff, no problem, was because the lady at the general store signed off on me. That's what turned the frontier rich, and in turn, everyone went to the general store whenever they had the pocket money.

Well, it was that and the backbreaking amount of overwork. But hey, those tears streaming down her cheeks were tears of gratitude for the people of the frontier. Everyone popped in the store to look around and buy a little something: townsfolk, obviously, but also visitors from out of town, too. Now that I thought about it, I figured she probably would have dropped dead from

overwork by now if not for all those restorative mushroom bentos.

“Oh, no, no, no, for five? That’s much too much. Couldn’t we lower it to this?”

“Nah, nah, nah. This price’ll make sure her employees get a good first impression of you. And you’d better bring ten, because the general store lady will take more than three alone, ya know? Reputation is worth more than gold for merchants, and sometimes, you gotta eat a loss and get ripped off. You feel me?”

Whenever new enterprises tried to move into the frontier, competing with the general store always made them fold. It would have been one thing if they wanted to coexist and sell stuff that she didn’t carry, but all the old dude merchants up to this point had gone to Mr. Meridad and asked for the rights to monopolize the market. He always turned them away at the door for such an inept move.

But that’s not what this company did. Yup, they sent a call girl and everything! She was a real go-getter, and I, as a teenage boy, could not deny the impressive assets she possessed.

So even though they’d once been the general store lady’s lenders, and she probably still owed them something, they pledged to become her retailers.

“Now hold the phone. Isn’t this price higher than the one we were talking before?”

“Oh no, no, I insist. We won’t be able to stay in business if you keep ripping us off! Here, let’s take this price for twelve bentos, and then would you be so kind as to put in a good word for us with the Zackary Corporation?”

“The general store lady’s the one who set the price, not me, ya know? You’re better off looking at the big picture. Focus on your stacks of mushroom bentos, not your stacks of cash. Besides, if you miss your chance now, then I’ll have to pull another all-nighter to make more. And mushrooms don’t grow on trees, ya know?”

Now, if they went to the general store and made their introductions, the matter would be a done deal. I figured they must have come to see the duke and me first to lay the groundwork.

“Th-then we’ll take twenty-four!”

“Pleasure doing business with you. And stuff.”

So yeah, why not rip them off on the bento boxes? Those were the only massage chairs I had in stock, and everything after the bento boxes was going to the general store lady, so this was my only chance for some seriously scummy sales!

I decided I’d only show them things I had a major surplus of. I’d keep selling my other stuff wholesale to the general store lady, which meant I could divvy up the rest afterward and let the merchants babble and squabble and quibble over who got what.

“But are you sure, Haruka?”

“I mean, yeah. The general store lady already has a bunch of factories and workshops up and running and contracted with her, and pretty much everything goes through her store for assembly before it gets put out on the market. Come to think of it, I guess our economy’s subcontracted out to her?”

The frontier government handled all the stuff where you needed to ignore business risks and profits and whatever, like public works projects, mining, and heavy industry. But the general store lady was contracted to join in with sales and distribution, which helped keep most of the wealth here in the frontier.

“I must say,” said the duke, “you were able to make quite a good price.”

“Nah, that wasn’t the point,” I said. “I mean, we needed a protective trade system, or else merchants out there are gonna snap up all the profits. Even if we make actual good stuff, it’ll get bought up for cheap in no time out there on the continent, and pretty soon we’ll be heading into a depression.”

The free market looked good on paper, but that kind of system was set up so

that the only people who profited were those with tons of capital and a monopoly on the distribution of goods. Those who lived in areas that produced the goods got the short end of the stick when wealth flowed outwards. As far as using merchants as a distribution system went, there weren't really any benefits outside of competition keeping rising prices in check.

Still, you needed some kind of distribution system. Only merchants could handle the distribution of physical goods known as the market. You had to make a system that prevented monopolies and collusion and a network of diversified trade channels that couldn't be swayed by market manipulation, since there'd never been a historical example of successful collective distribution of wealth and goods. Therefore, someone like the general store lady, who cared about people more than profits, was crucial.

But looking at the big picture, it wasn't healthy for the economy if the general store lady had a total monopoly. Managing a domain like this meant you had to take the good with the bad, forcing the merchants on the market to compete with their strong suits and reduce their own weak points. I'd driven that point home to Mr. Meridad. Well, not him, per se, but his aide. So I figured the frontier would be okay.

At any rate, this decision would bring us more specialty products from other nations, which would feed the people and enrich their lifestyles in one fell swoop. And even though nothing was official yet regarding this new business, Mr. Meridad was crying tears of happiness.

Well, he'd be crying another set of tears when Mrs. Murimuri and Mrs. Morningstar read him the riot act and beat the bejesus out of him for ordering a call girl. Yup, I was totally gonna tattle on him.

DAY 101

MIDDAY

*You sell the whole kit and caboodle, from majors to lieutenants.
It's not my fault you only call it a general store.*

OMUI CITY

GENERAL STORE

EVEN THOUGH I already passed the business district on my way to the palace, I ended up doubling back to the general store in the business district with the call girl in tow. Yup, I was dropping off another one of my deliveries at the enormous general store. Speaking of enormous, it looked like it'd had another growth spurt.

The word “stuffy” came from the Middle English *stuffen*, meaning to equip or furnish, and this place was certainly equipped and furnished to the gills. We also complained about stuffed-up noses and told people to “stuff it” when we'd had enough, which suggested that the last thing anyone wanted was an excess of stuff. Basically, what I was trying to say was that her place was way, way, way too crowded! And stuffy!

I decided to put my hands on the wall, use Alchemy to make a couple of vents up near the ceiling to let some of the heat out, and, while I was there, use Heat magic and Holding to cool the air a little. But with a store this packed, even a good layout and magic weren't enough to fix the issue.

“Hello, this is Ellyus, and I'm here on behalf of the Delibaur Corporation,” said the call girl. “I do apologize that it has been so long since I last called on you, but I stopped by today to send my regar—ack!”

The general store lady pulled the call girl into a bear hug and shook her back and forth. Well, you know how it is. Everyone's got their own sexual preferences, and even if you didn't really get it, you still gotta respect them.

That's the mature thing to do, or so I'm told. But with that being said, bring on the yuri! *You don't mind if Mr. Richy Rich over here watches, do you?* And was this the 18+ version or the one available for all ages? Because if the former version was available, sign me up!

"Elly!" the general store lady cried. "What are you doing in this rough neck of the woods? Are you all right? Are you hurt anywhere? You didn't get attacked by a monster, did you? That boy better not have pulled any funny business on you! Yes, I'm sure he must have. There's no way he wouldn't have. Everything he does counts as funny business! I would've done my usual rounds near your place if I hadn't been so darn busy ever since that boy reorganized the frontier from top to bottom! Now my poor general store is this enormous building smack in the middle of downtown, and everyone's so rich I have my work cut out for me keeping up with all these shoppers. All right, yes, we do have so many mushrooms, no one's sick anymore, but now I'm so busy I don't know what to do. And it's all that boy's fault! And you tell me he didn't do anything to you?"

A rough neck of the woods? Uh, you mean the town where you live and work? It sounded like there was an awful lot of groundless slander mixed in there, especially considering the call girl was so bad at her job. She didn't even do any sexy stuff!

"Oh, no, I'm quite all right, thank you. You're very kind. Anyway, I finally got the opportunity to come see you. I had heard so many stories about what a wonderful building you had, but my goodness. Your storefront is so innovative and efficient that I'm simply blown away. It's no wonder they call it the best shop in the entire continent."

Wow. The call girl could tell that this store was designed in such a way that would purposefully direct the flow of traffic and line of eyesight so that customers would spend more time looking around than they intended, which in turn made them more interested in buying and eventually tempted them into opening their wallets. *Ah, we're not so different, you and I, my dear call girl.*

“Oh, stop!” the general store lady snapped. “This used to be a general store. Just a regular old shop! I used to have to scrimp and save to get enough merchandise to keep the place open, and I can’t begin to tell you how much your dear father helped me before he passed on. Now every time I take my eyes off it, this building gets bigger! And we all know who’s behind that, but whenever I ask him, ‘How come this building’s bigger, huh?’ he says, ‘What, is it getting fat?’ And when I tell him, ‘Uh, no, it’s definitely getting taller too,’ he says, ‘Yeah, this must be the growing season for buildings. Or maybe it’s in a good spot to catch the sun?’ So then I tell him, ‘No, it most certainly is not growing like a plant!’ and he goes, ‘Okay, then maybe it’s leveling up.’ The work never ends! I keep on hiring and hiring, but I can never catch up to this store’s rate of expansion and increasing stock. What kind of general store gets bigger and expands its stock on its own? It’s all this boy’s fault! What sort of idea of a general store does he have rattling around up there in that noggin of his?!”

If all you’re trying to do is get a product made, it’s all well and good to have one custom-ordered. But it’s the window shopping, the looking around and picking stuff up even when you didn’t set out to buy anything, that comprised the crown jewel of wasting money, the quintessential component of ripping people off. And if all you’ve got is a poky little store, there goes half the fun of window shopping. Sure, the place was now the size of a superstore currently on its nineteenth renovation, but when it all came down to it, a general store was a place that sold all kinds of daily necessities, and heck, you could call pretty much anything a daily necessity. You know what I mean?

“Actually, wait. Yes, it’s perfectly natural for general stores to branch out and sell a bunch of things, but your ‘bunch of things’ includes orders for houses and villages, thanks to a certain lack of adherence to your guiding principles, which I happen to know all too well, you feel me? I mean, if you want to sell houses and villages, then you’re gonna need a way bigger store. So look, it’s not my fault that your general store’s still growing and is branching out to cover colonels and lieutenants, too.”

Yup. People were placing orders for bunches of stuff—houses, villages, roadways, rivers, you name it—at the general store, and she passed along all the order forms to me to fulfill as part of my side job. Those puzzling bits of economic activity that transcended the definition of a general store inevitably got lost in the shuffle of all the other things she had me doing.

“...Wait, houses?” said the call girl. “You sell villages?! I mean, I’d been told that you’d turned into the biggest merchant on the continent, but you’ve grown so huge no normal merchant could ever possibly compete. I’m in awe.”

I guessed the call girl and the general store lady were old buds. Apparently, the general store lady used to do business with the call girl’s dad, but after he passed away, the call girl took over the family business just as the general store lady got super busy, so they hadn’t seen each other for ages. And now that they’d reunited, the general store lady had grown so epic that the call girl had to tear her hair out in agony. What was that all about? Did she screw up making change, or something?

Anyway, I knew the general store lady was giving me a look of total exhaustion, but you had to remember that she already managed the entire frontier’s economy all by herself and headed a huge business that had regular clients up and down the kingdom. But the fact of the matter still hadn’t sunk in for her, which is why she kept working as a salesperson in her own store. Thus making her this worn out, you feel me? Yeah, I didn’t think she could view her new position with any sort of objectivity. Her zero self-awareness was her worst trait. *Uh-huh. So could you quit glaring at me?*

“Oh, whatever,” she said. “Sit down, sit down already.”

I thought the call girl wanted to broker a contract between her company and the general store, but she wanted to be all professional about it and not let her personal connections sway things one way or the other. But the stranger act wouldn’t fly with the general store lady, so the call girl had to sit there in stony silence as the general store lady hugged her, pushed her around, forced her to sit down, and plied her with goodies.

“So, boy,” said the general store lady to me, “what’s the plan?”

“What’s the plan for what? Getting a call girl? I mean, I have no qualms with calling one up, but I dunno what use *you’d* have for one. And besides, one already showed up before we called. I mean, that’s arriving so fast it doesn’t qualify as delivery. I think you’d have a leg to stand on if you filed a complaint for false advertising, in fact. Don’t even get me started on how difficult it’d be to classify that kind of service as ‘health.’ I mean, but I wouldn’t say no to ordering one up?”

I mean, yeah? I’d be down to call one, but how was I supposed to go about that?

“Ugh! Listen, all the factories and workshops and tailors and craftsmen and blacksmiths in town are producing incredible work. Every one of the surrounding villages has some kind of specialty now, and they’re even developing their own local cuisines. Everywhere you look, boom! Prosperity. Even without your side jobs, the economy is thriving in town and all over the frontier. The new development is going perfectly according to plan.”

“Yeah, and?”

“Don’t ‘yeah, and’ me! What’s the plan now, boy? This is all your fault!”

Not another false accusation. Seriously, how many false accusations could one world even have? But the inn seemed to have a continuous supply of several bazillion false accusations for me. Day after day, false accusation followed false accusation. First, I’d be hit with some false charge, then deemed guilty for another ridiculous claim, only to be hit by a frightening deluge of further calumny. And the minute I got home after a hard day’s work, I found yet another impressive supply of false accusations waiting for me, which, to the inn’s credit, had never once run out of stock.

“I lent you capital because I thought it’d turn a profit, and if you pay me back with a little extra tacked on, then that’s how investment works, ya know? So it’s not my fault. Since it’s my money, I’ll pitch in and come up with plans to make

us money, but you've already paid it off with interest. I don't care what you do with the rest of the money and factories and all that stuff. I'll give you some business proposals to safely tide you over for the next couple of years, but anything beyond that's not my problem. Sure, I am reinvesting because it looks like it could make me more money, and that's why I'm helping. If you keep making and selling what people want, that's on you. Don't go saying it's all my fault. You know? You picking up what I'm putting down?"

The die had already been cast—cast so far, in fact, that it had gone missing, and there was currently a search party scouring the banks of the Rubicon, including a busy team of police swarming over the area in a large-scale dragnet, and a Mr. Caesar may or may not have made a statement to police. But wait, since Caesar was the die-casting perp, didn't that mean none of this was my fault to begin with?

"Do you really want to give up on your share of this general store and all your assets in town after a single payment? When business is booming and we keep expanding? People are coming to me begging for help because this is all too much for them. Time was, we had nothing but this poor little town, but now it's turned into a grand city without any of us having to lift a finger! We all looked up one day and realized we'd been blessed with this fortune. But you refuse to accept anything for your efforts. You could even say 'I'm taking everything. It's all mine now,' and I doubt anyone would mind."

Oh heck, no! I was already crazy busy as it was, what with my side hustles and spending so much time "sleeping" I had no time to sleep. When I'd finally built factories and workshops like how I remembered them from back in my old world, opened more shops, and outsourced my side gigs, she was trying to put it all back on my shoulders? That would mean another freelancing gig, dammit! No way, nuh-uh! High school boys had more important things to do (like teenage girls) than work at side hustles. They're at that tender, tender age where they ignore the drudgeries of daily life to pursue their (wet) dreams.

"Look, I finally foisted the responsibility of the local economy and my

overwork onto you. No way are you giving that back,” I told her.

“I had a feeling you’d say that,” she said with a heavy sigh. “And I told everyone that would be your answer, but still.”

Yeah, she was totally missing the big picture. She had no idea what she was worth to everyone or why all the people in town turned to her for help. She was the person who had risked her life gathering mushrooms in the forest back when life on the frontier was harsh, and she was the one who didn’t let anything stop her—not the loss of loved ones or the wounds she sustained as she made her dangerous way from village to village all over the frontier, delivering food and medicine. Thanks to all that, everyone trusted her with their merchandise and money. Me? Nah. It had nothing to do with me. I was some random guy who happened to have a bunch of spellstones and mushrooms. The general store lady was the only one who knew the frontier as well as she did, the only one who’d won the trust of people up and down the domain, the only one who could have taken those mushrooms and cash and spread it to all corners of the land. I didn’t do anything. She didn’t recognize what a big deal it was, what she’d done, and it was because of her efforts and how much everyone trusted her that the general store was now this giant economic hub. How come she couldn’t realize that this success was everyone’s gratitude to her?

That same gratitude led to her store aggregating all the wealth of the frontier, and then she went and spent it all again on the people. She lived in her little upstairs attic room, poor as a church mouse, working her butt off every single day to the point that everyone in town worried for her. It was that complete lack of self-awareness, I’m telling you. See what a nuisance it was?

Anyway, my future looked dire. I had only just managed to dump the never-ending loop of freelance work onto some other poor bastard’s plate, and now here was more work showing up on the welcome mat! With suffering in front of me, difficult times as far as the eye could see, there was only one appropriate response: *run!*

DAY 101

AFTERNOON

We're three years too late for middle school syndrome, but walk into a dungeon and the next thing you know, we're forever thirteen.

DUNGEON

69TH FLOOR

WE PLANNED ON starting off the morning by splitting up to take on our respective dungeons and then reconvening to go through the lower floors together. When the time came to meet up, I discovered that Shimazaki-san's group and the sports girls' group were both late, but it wasn't like they were having any trouble.

"Let's get in there and show that dungeon who's boss!" I said.

"Sounds like a plan!" the other girls cheered.

The hold-up was caused by this being our first time in a while since we'd encountered any maze-style dungeons. Normal adventurers liked these mazes since it made it easier to defeat enemies one at a time, so that meant we mostly took care of the floor-style dungeons or the maze/floor combo dungeons. Our particular forte was the floor dungeons, since we were pros when it came to group battles. But we weren't the best at fighting when broken up into our smaller parties. These things took a while when you didn't have that many people.

"Shalliceres-san and Merielle-san," I said, "could you two please be the vanguard for the arts club girls' group? Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san, I'd like you to help and coach Arianna-san's group."

"Absolutely." *Nod nod.*

Mazes meant tight corridors and poor visibility, which made them pretty spooky. But we all had maxed-out Presence Detection, so we could use that and Enemy Detection to comb the maze for monsters. Once we switched out our weapons to something better for fighting in tight confines, we were all ready to go.

“Three enemies at the next corner. Roll out, team!”

“I shall take on the rightmost foe.”

“Cool, then I call dibs on the middle.”

“Umm, does that mean I get left?”

“And I’ll use my Shield Bash to stop these foes in their tracks!”

Just as Haruka-kun had predicted ages ago, it wasn’t only our stats that skyrocketed once we got past level 100. Our skills received a dramatic boost, too. Even enemies with Stealth and Presence Concealment were easy as pie to find and destroy.

“Four enemies up ahead on the left-hand fork, and three straight ahead. Well, we have the sports girls with us, so let’s go left.”

“Roger that!”

These dungeons had hidden rooms with treasure chests containing items, and dungeon kings also offered loot drops. Haruka-kun sniffed out so-called legendary grade weapons with his uncanny knack for finding goodies, used alchemy to imbue them with the material known as mithril from stories and myths, and then slapped on special abilities with the secret rituals only master blacksmiths practiced. That’s how all the equipment he put up in his bargain sales ended up being so powerful. But even swords that could make mincemeat of monsters on the lower floors of dungeons couldn’t do a thing against his perfect made-to-order armor sets.

“All right, not too shabby.”

“Omg, that looks amazing. He gave you his Lil Steely-chan?”

“Yes, because he told me he didn’t have enough swords for a six-sword fighting style.”

“But didn’t he say he was getting in more?”

“Well, yeah. I hear he can get more Magic Hands, but I think controlling them all’s another story.”

“If he gets more hands, can’t he make more swords for them anyway?”

“Must be nice to forge your own stuff.”

We had by now all reconvened at the meet-up spot, and even Arianna-san’s group had shown up right on time. I liked their spirit, but I didn’t think it would have killed them to slow down a little...

“Thanks for waiting for us, gang,” I said. “Can you guys chill out? If you get hurt, Mr. Overprotective Worrywart’s going to ban us from tackling the lower floors of dungeons again. Safety first, everyone.”

“Got it!” the others chorused back.

We were about to head down to floor 70, so we switched our gear into something better suited for group fights and spread out into battle formation... only to end up in a confused free-for-all against a bear monster. Trying to defend against a bear attack would have been plain stupid, so we retreated. We tried to lure it closer to us, then surrounded it and walloped away before drawing back once more and repeating the process. We scattered before it and regrouped to attack its flanks. It was less of a fight than an animal hunt as we whittled down its HP without getting hit. The bear might have been powerful enough to win against one of us with brute force, but our overwhelming advantage as a group annihilated it.

Haruka-kun once said, “Just because you’re strong doesn’t mean you guys need to, ya know, act like barbarians, you feel me? Down that road lies terminal meatheadness. And once that sets in, you’re a goner.”

He then went on to say, “My theory of suffering, based on my experience as a

professional sufferer of countless false accusations, is that you should suffer as little damage as possible from your enemies while maximizing how much they suffer.” Was that him confessing to his repeated offenses, he who always swore up and down that he had been attacked by the monsters first and was only a poor, lowly victim of monster massacres?

GRAAAAAAH!

“Hi-yah!”

GREEEEEH!

“Take that!”

“Eat this!”

GURRRGH!

“Bombs away!”

“Whoa, watch where you’re swinging that thing!”

“Grrr!”

“Try this on for size.”

“Er, and this?”

“And this too?”

“And this three!”

“And this...uh, four?!”

“Fire!”

“Bam!”

“You’re going down!”

GRAAAAHHHHHGGGGHHHHggh...oohoo~

“Hi-YAH!”

Guys, please don’t charge into the fight like you’re about to take over the

world. Also, quit trying to ride the bear! I mean, I know technically it's on a roadway so you could treat it like a vehicle, but can we please cut to the chase and defeat it?

Maybe it was the self-proclaimed terrible teenage boy rubbing off on me, but that bear seemed to be enjoying itself big time. Then it finally got tired of dancing with us and collapsed before turning into a spellstone... Was it just me, or did it seem pretty darn happy to get the stuffing beaten out of it?

Now we decided to split up again to take out floor 71. We could always end up separated in a real fight, and chances were high that Arianna-san's group would be cut off from the rest of us should we go to war. So even as obnoxious as these maze dungeons were, they were also opportunities to get some hands-on experience battling in small squadrons.

"Go, girls," I commanded.

"On it!"

Shimazaki-san's group were like Asuras, more bloodthirsty than demons; merciless, beautiful war maidens of myth. They were a daunting force, filled with a ghastly ferocity that drove them to slay monsters with more tenacity than anyone else in the group. They'd reached level 110 and left it behind in the dust once they heard that their experience share with Haruka-kun worked both ways. They slaughtered countless monsters for him in their insatiable greed for experience, spurred on by the belief that the experience would go to him, too. They became fiendish monster slayers in their efforts to repay Haruka-kun for all he'd done for them. Yet for all the blood smeared across their faces, they looked majestically, strikingly beautiful.

But guys. Seriously.

"You need to slow down," I told them. "Arianna-san's group needs to get some training and leveling in, too, so don't hog all the monsters."

"Whoopsy-doops. Were we hogging them?"

“So sorry!”

Then the sports girls, the ones who trained to see how far they could push themselves, and the arts club girls, who hatched detailed schemes to annihilate their foes, came together. These two groups occupied the far opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of fighting. Still, they made a great team.

Then, for a brief instant, all sound vanished. Swords danced in an elegant flow of motion; blades pinwheeled resplendently. They treated it like a swordplay demonstration, as nothing more than an idle way to pass the time, but it was far too exquisite for any of us to emulate. The two girls, side by side, were clad in their silver armor; Angelica-san’s boasting a platinum sheen and Nefertiri-san’s so perfect it glinted a faint gold. A hush fell all around them like it was the end of the world. Speaking of ends, if Haruka-kun were here, I bet it’d be the end of *common sense* instead.

We all admired Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san. They were like goddesses, as if beauty had taken mortal form and achieved the pinnacle of martial prowess. They flirted outrageously with Haruka-kun whenever he was here, coquetting with him constantly and dogging his steps with the most lovestruck smiles on their faces. But when he wasn’t around, those same smiles took on a menacing aspect. They were so monstrously gorgeous, so devastatingly beautiful that we couldn’t look away. Their appearances transcended common sense so far that it was not enough merely to admire them. No, we found ourselves begging to worship them.

“You rocked it!” we all cheered. “I have, like, zero idea what you just did except for the fact that it was totally wicked!”

We took a short break before heading down to the 80th floor and the battle against the dungeon king, wherein we all took off our breast plates to get some air flow. Haruka-kun would have had a field day if he’d been here, what with the way we had our tops rolled up and were fanning ourselves. I figured I’d have to put a word in to him about this eventually before we forgot and did that in front of him. These latest armor sets were completely fantastic. No

complaints here, but they weren't all that breathable. That made it exhausting to do a bunch of battles back-to-back. If your level was high enough, you could power on through, but I felt like it was important to keep yourself in top shape both physically and mentally.

"Jeez," someone said, "I didn't realize until now that I'm sweating like a pig."

"Yeah, I totally didn't notice either since, if anything, it makes my underclothes even comfier."

"Right? Like it's sticking to my skin, but I don't feel gross or anything. Does he have some kind of temperature control built into these things?"

"Yeah, but...when things get sweaty, is it just me or do they get a little see-through?"

"Yuuuuuuuuup. Haruka-kun turned red as a tomato when he saw."

Being able to plop down anywhere for a fun round of gossip and a snack break is the prerogative of all teenage girls.

"For a Sex God, he's honestly such a virgin."

"Right? He gets so shy all the time."

"I hear that Jupiter Eye means he can see *everyone's* bits and, like, store a million images of them."

"That's kinda wild."

"Yeah, and I think he can zoom in and get a good look at things even when he's *super* close up."

"Yikes!" we all agreed.

"He was. Concerned. About hair removal medication's. Ingredients?"

"Oh yeah, he's an alchemist too, isn't he?"

"Testing for, side effects. He was, earnest, about it. Because he, didn't, have the, actual medication."

“Oof,” we all said. “Side effects.”

“...You think he knows now?”

“Girl, he totally knows now.”

I gathered that Haruka-kun had an inkling that this medication worked on sex hormones, but no one in this world knew about them yet. He wanted to make sure there weren't any side effects or other abnormalities, so he did some thorough research into it using Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san's...ahem... wetness. We'd tried to sneak the issue past him without him looking into it too deeply, but so much for that. To be fair, we hadn't known it would do *that* either before we started using the medication, but...uh...well, let's just say things were a lot drier now for all of us.

“It's a regular thing women use here,” one of the girls said, “so I don't think it's harmful.”

“Yeah, harmful's not the word for it. But like...we're all sort of lacking in the moisture department, right?”

It was a necessity, a must, a vital need for us girls because it stopped hair growth and made our skin silky smooth without all the fuss of maintenance. Throw in some of Haruka-kun's super bubbly body soap and lotion, and you had yourself a ticket to skin that was as smooth as a baby's bottom! I mean, jeez. In the bath, everyone looked so smooth and shiny we could have all been dolls. It was almost kind of freaky. So sure, since it was an absolute necessity, it wasn't exactly an issue, so...I guess we had to say goodbye to our...you-know-what... didn't we?

“We just won't take it for, eh, three months? Then we'll be back to normal in no time.”

“Yeah, but I mean, once you get used to this kind of skin, there's no going back. You feel me?”

“Back when we were getting our bikinis, Haruka-kun was so concerned for us I

hear he managed to put together razors.”

“Oh, but come on! We can’t ask him for *razors*!” we all screamed.

“What’s the issue? It’s not like we can grow hair down there anyway,” said Vice Rep B.

“We’re not telling him that!” all of us yelled at her.

“I mean...he already knows, right?”

“Yeah, exactly. That goose is already cooked.”

“God, but shaving all the time is such a pain.”

“Seriously!” we all agreed. “There’s no going back to shaving, not at this point!”

Honestly, the fact that Haruka-kun didn’t notice even though he’d made—yeesh, I didn’t even want to consider how many—pairs of bikinis and underwear for us proved that he’d tried his hardest to keep his eyes closed. I suppose it only made sense that Magic Hands and Area Analyze wouldn’t be able to tell if you were shaved down there or not.

“I feel kinda bad that he made razors for us when we can’t even use them, though.”

“Maybe we should have told him.”

“Nah, he said he’s going to sell them to all the grown men as beard trimmers. Overcharge ’em all in the process.”

“He never gives up on that!”

We talked about new shops and makeup. As we browsed clothes and accessories, we talked on and on and on, but no matter how much we chatted, the conversation always circled back around to Haruka-kun. I mean, he was the one making all the food, the clothes, the underwear, and the accessories, and we had flooded him with requests to make cosmetics too. When it all came down to it, all roads led to Haruka-kun. Whenever we sat down to talk, *boom*.

One conversation about Haruka-kun, coming right up.

“Okay, so is it just me, or are we, like, getting hotter every time we level up?”

“Nah, it’s not just you. I think my butt’s getting more toned. Plus kinda perkier.”

“My waist is slimming, I think.”

“Yeah, and I’m starting to get noticeable abs...”

“It’s subtle, but our bodies are definitely changing.”

“Sure, but it’s not that big of a deal, right?”

“I mean, it sort of is. I kinda need a new bra, and that’s a whole thing.”

“Ooh, but what if he brings out his snakes the next time we go to get measured?”

“I would straight-up die!”

Still talking up a storm, we went down to the 80th floor and bumped into a storm of another sort that sluiced through the floor. A mass of wind pressure smashed into us.

“Time to rain on its parade,” I said. “This dungeon king is a Storm Skeleton, which means it’s got to be a wind type. Not a problem for us, right, girls?”

“Nope!” the others agreed.

“Let’s see here. It has Windstorm, Twister, and Wind Wall.”

“Oh no, its sword has Instant Kill!”

“And he’s got Revival! Why? He’s literally already dead!”

“What the actual heck?”

Time to bleed this enemy bone dry. Well, if it had any blood to begin with, that is. Safety first and all that, but even so, there was no time like the present!

The skeleton swung a mighty sword sheathed in a great gale of Windstorm. I evaded the whirlwind to fling myself at the enemy and slash upwards. But

before my attack could reach the dungeon king, it ran smack into a powerful resisting force: the Wind Wall.

“I’ve got bombs! Lemme at him!”

“Be careful!”

The skeleton certainly looked like a tough foe, but we figured out how easy it was to circle behind it. But even when we attacked from the front and back in tandem, nothing fazed that old bag of bones. It built up wall after wall of swirling winds around itself.

“Grr! That thing has major magic defense!”

Even slashes that could easily destroy dungeon king armor were of no avail against those Wind Walls. And then his mighty sword came down. It traced a line of devastation through the air. When that diagonal strike had passed...the top half of someone’s body fell away, leaving only the lower half of her body still standing. It had been...Rhythmic Gymnastics Girl!

Or still was, actually, as she had instantaneously bent over backward, the upper half of her body dipping away from the sword that passed harmlessly through the empty air above her. Then she straightened back up, hefted her sword with two hands like it was a club, and pulverized the skeleton’s sword-bearing arm. I had still felt my stomach drop for a second there, even though I had known what she was doing. This move of Rhythmic Gymnastics Girl’s was perfect for luring humanoid monsters into a false sense of security before she struck.

“You want a piece of me? Take this tempest instead, you greedy guzzler!”

I’m pretty sure that’s a regular magic attack, but okay.

“O slayer of the immortal, the spear that skewers demons! I command thee to manifest!”

Um, it skewers demons because it’s a halberd. That’s, like, in the job description. And yes, he’s a skeleton, but that hardly makes him immortal. And

again, this is just your regular attack, isn't it?

“Behold the technique of my secret sword: Ichou Kiri no Tachi (Gingko-Slicing Samurai Sword)!”

Uh, what secret sword? Isn't that the one you always have? And we're in a European fantasy world, so that thing you're swinging around is no katana. Plus, no matter how you slice it, a skeleton's not a tree! Are you sure you've got the right sword?

Now that its sword arm was gone, this skeleton was no better than a particularly bony box fan. We knocked it out in one fell swoop. All the same, I couldn't help but wonder if we were witnessing a massive outbreak of middle school syndrome among the local high school girl population.

“Finish it off, Class Rep!”

“Uh...but I could have sworn it didn't have Revival?” I tried.

“C'mon, we gotta buff your skills. Get in there.”

Stabbity stab.

Oh, great. There went my own Revival skill leveling up. I was always grateful when fights were calm enough that I, with my Hijack skill, got the opportunity to land the final blow. But why did they always twist my arm into finishing off every monster with Revival?!

“Well, you need max Revival if you're ever going to survive the torture that is the Sex God, you know?”

“I need the mental strength, too! I may have Revival, but he'd still fry my brain to a crisp.”

“Nah, with this, I'm sure you'll last 'til morning—or at least give us a good laugh first.”

“What if he doesn't go down without a fight? An unstoppable force of flesh?”

“Hoo boy. Well, good luck, sacrificial immovable object.”

“Nah, you have to say, ‘good luck, sacrificial offering to the Sex God!’”

“Good luck, human meat shield?”

“Tentacle Decoy Rep?”

“Or Eternal Suffering Meat Shield Rep?”

“Use seduction skills, if you have them. Focus his attacks, on one spot. Perfect strategy.”

“Ooh, and the right costume never hurts!”

“Yeah, but imagine making a hundred snakes and infinite Magic Hands focus on a single point...”

“Better bust out the clone jutsu, Meat Shield.”

“Ooh, what if you wrapped yourself around the tentacles instead of vice versa?”

“Yes! That’s it!”

How come they always sounded serious every time this conversation came up? Oh, whatever. They were just joking, so I knew I shouldn’t pay attention to them.

Okay, one dungeon down, one to go. Then if we had time, I wanted to let Arianna-san’s group solo one of the shallower dungeons.

Wait...what the heck was all this “Good luck, Infinite Revival Meat Shield!” business about?

DAY 101

EVENING

We thought you wanted a chance to say, “We’ve already heard the news!” so when we gave you that chance, how come you got mad at us?

OMUI CITY

NOT THESE idiots again!

These moronic, sophomoric, chowderheaded, oafish, obtuse buffoons! They said a fool and his money were soon parted, but no amount of money could part these ignoramuses from their own foolishness. They could die and still have the same level of brain activity. Useless, the lot of them. Into the garbage can they went.

In short, the meatheads were back.

“Haruka, we’re starving!” they whined.

“What’s the lowdown on you and the macho chicks from the First Division?” I asked. “Stalker Girl told me in her report this morning that you’d be arriving two days from now at the earliest. What happened? Are you on the run from the law? If you turn yourself in now, they’ll lessen your sentence. I’ll put in a good word for you, tell them you learned your lesson, and maybe they’ll just lessen you by a head. You know what? Let’s cut out the middleman and take your heads off while we’re here. Now, tell me in painstaking detail all the sexy stuff you got up to with the macho chicks and how you escaped with a price on your heads or, as we terminally online people like to say, ‘Eyyyy that’s my boy let’s goooooo now spill it homie :pogchamp:.’ I mean, I’m sorry to hear you guys ran into so much trouble or, as the internet puts it, ‘lmao get rekt.’”

“Don’t cut off our heads, man! And we’re not on the run!”

I figured the meatheads might come back while the nerds waited for us in the Beast Nation, but what I didn't get was why the First Division and all the macho chicks weren't with them.

Here were my theories:

1. They got dumped. (Lmfao, get dunked on.)
2. They were wanted men on the lam. (For sex crimes, naturally.)
3. They were tasked to come run and tell me about some emergency. (Messenger boy meatheads.)
4. They were lost. (Idiots.)

So what happened? (I hoped it was number 1, said a little inner voice.) What could have caused this? (Lmaaaaaoooo gg, said a little inner voice.) I could have sworn they were making the moves on the macho chicks just fine! (Look at them, talking to girls like a bunch of IRLs, said that little inner voice. kys. Explode.) Well, sucks to suck, I guess. (So sorry to hear that, added the little inner voice.)

"That last one is backward!" the meatheads cried. "You said the quiet part out loud. Stop laughing at our pain!"

"And we didn't get dumped, dammit! I mean. Well."

"Not gonna lie, though, we did kinda come back to ask for your help..."

"Ya know, on second thought, I dunno if talking to Haruka's gonna help. If anything, he's gonna make this situation go down the drain even faster."

Excuse me? The nerve of these people. I'd have them know that not even one of the many people who'd come to me for help had ever left without all their problems solved. Uh-huh, I was a life coach who could solve anything you threw at me, save for my own misery. And wasn't that a travesty?

"Aight, so get this, bro. We did all the trainings with them, just like you told us to."

“Yeah, and then we did like this military drill stuff and showed them how to clear dungeons and whatever.”

“Yo, and we were making hella moves on them, you know what I’m saying? So then we were like, ‘Hey, you wanna go out sometime?’ like all casual and stuff.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it was at the point where I was planning on bringing my girl home with me, right, and being all like, ‘Hey, wassup, come meet my girlfriend,’ when...”

Then all the meatheads screamed: “They started talking about marriage and crap, bro!”

Ah. Okay. How did they not see that one coming? Because they were idiots.

“Okay, so let me get this straight. You guys were dating, rounding the bases, getting all lovey-dovey with them... So, duh, of course it would lead to marriage? I mean, screw you, normies? I mean, I’ve already decided to bust out the moron mines, but I guess neither those nor dumbass detonators will do a thing for your intelligence. Eh, either way, an explosion’s an explosion. Anyway, how about nuptual napalm for a wedding present? Or FAEs? Heck, why not all the above? At any rate, you guys’re going up in smoke, you get me?”

“Yo, hold the phone! We’re just high schoolers, bro.”

“And we barely started going out with them, besides.”

“Yeah, and then their dads, like, all ganged up on us and tried to beat the crap out of us.”

“And they were like, ‘Just you try and beat us,’ and then we did, and then... they started going on about marriage and stuff! What the heck, man?”

This was one of those issues that all got started because these guys never paid attention when other people were talking. And then because there was this failure to communicate, boom, misunderstandings happened, and now the meatheads had no clue what was happening. I’d have loved it if they could hurry up to get civilized and gain the ability to carry on an ordinary

conversation, but that wasn't happening anytime soon. And since there was no help for it, and even my report cards had praised my ability to master the fabled art known as talking, claiming I was taking language "places no man has gone before," I decided to be the perfect role model for clear communication.

"Look, bozos, those chicks are all aristocrats, so it's the norm to marry once they start going out with someone (although it's the going out and in that's the real issue). Ya know what I'm saying? Plus they're getting up in age, so they wanna hurry and tie the knot, you feel me? People get married super early in this world. I hear you're screwed if you get up past twenty and you're still not hitched, you see what I mean? And I would bet that there was a 'If you want my daughter's hand in marriage,' right before that 'just you try to beat me,' so could you listen next time before you beat someone up? Don't reflexively wallop on some chick's dad before you understand what the heck he's saying! Look, you guys are a bunch of meatheads, and your girlfriends are a bunch of meatheads, and these are their fathers we're talking about. Of course the meathead gene runs in the family! So yeah, if you beat them up, then you guys are getting married! That was supposed to be a test, and believe me, you all passed with flying colors. Congrats on the wedding and all, and bombs away!"

You'd think that aristocrats would want people with some kind of social connections, but apparently these meathead old dudes were armed to the teeth and ready for a brawl. Yup, these were clans comprised of nothing but meatheads. Our resident meatheads had passed the test, making them meatheads-in-law. I guess it was tradition among the fearsome meathead clans to use a duel to determine who would carry on the bloodline.

"But dude! One minute they were yelling, 'Hands off my daughter!' and then the next second they want us to get married? Bruh. That's some BS."

"Yeah! My girl's dad kept going on about 'Where did you even find this bum?' and I was like, 'Yo, what? Someone say bums? Sign me up.'"

"Yeah, yeah, mine was all like 'over my dead body,' but I dunno, man, he looked pretty alive to me?"

“Yeah, and wasn’t there something or other about getting approval from the commander guy in the black cloak?” several of the meatheads said.

“Approval? I’m so single that I’ve skipped being a wizard and gone straight to an Archsage—not to mention an alchemist—and you want to talk to me about approval? Are you trying to annoy me so hard I blow you up in one go? Wait. Let me go and develop Incinerating Explosion magic. You guys sit tight and I’ll be right back to char you to bits.”

“Like hell are we sitting tight! And don’t char us! C’mon, man, you’re the last person alive who should be jealous of us.”

Since only the meatheads had returned, that meant that the Demon Size (say it out loud) were still with the nerds, who were out in the field being pastry rodents (pie rats, get it) or children-resters (you can figure this one out on your own). Surprisingly, the Demon Size were now so immensely strong that three of them could take on a lower floor Dungeon King with no problem. Still, I was concerned they might rust out there on the water, what with all that pastry rodentcy. I’d have to run a proper maintenance check on them when they got back.

“If I remember correctly,” I said, “I think grooms are the ones who get the betrothal money in this world. Well, even if they sell for dirt cheap, five dunderheads a pop should still net me some fat stacks o’ cash. You guys sure aren’t that expensive, are you?”

“Stop trying to sell us, bro!”

“Especially for cheap!”

Man, you could never win with these guys. It’s not like buff, powerhouse, willing-to-kill-for-you, meathead girlfriends came along every day. These girls had big bones, sure, but they also had rocking bods, and the meatheads themselves weren’t exactly in a place to be choosing beggars. And trying to marry into noble families? Well, I’m not *saying* they were gold-diggers...you know? But they weren’t cut out for the aristocracy. Yet I guess even someone

like Mr. Meridad could pull it off, so maybe the meatheads could do the same. We had to make sure they had an amazing advisor like Mr. Meridad's.

"What do you have against these girls, anyway?" I asked.

"Nothing! These girls are freaking incredible, man."

"This would normally be the part where I say I'm going to make you explode, but that's such a hassle. Can't you go back in time and blow yourselves up the moment you were born?"

"So what, we lose all right to exist at birth?!"

"Anyway, if you don't have an issue with these chicks, what's the big deal? Just marry them."

"Man, I dunno. I'm not, like, opposed to the idea. It's just... Dude, we're still sixteen. We wanna...you know...fool around before we settle down, you feel us here?"

An aristocratic marriage was a matter of succession, and these potential successors were a bunch of dungeon-crawling dolts. Since they were about as smart as the rest of the meathead clans, it seemed to me they'd fit right in.

"Oh hey, speaking of succession," I said. "These meathead dads are all pretty active, right? I bet if you chunked them in a dungeon for some leveling, that'd do wonders for their lifespan. Heck, I bet they might stop aging all together. That'll certainly make them more active, you feel me?"

"...Huh, that's an option." *Evil grin*

"Yeah, now that you mention it, they do love fighting." *Diabolical smirk*

Being meatheads with the power to fight and all, they'd take up their sword and charge into dungeons, successor or no successor. The meat apple doesn't fall far from the head tree, you feel me?

"Yeah, that just might work!" *Nefarious sneer*

"I'll lend you a few of my carriages. All you have to do is chuck the meathead

clans into them and dump the group off in a dungeon. The rest solves itself.”

“Got it!”

Just then, the door flew open, and the girls returned home from their day of dungeon crawling. Well, they’d been glued to the door ever since all that talk of marriage came up, but whatever. With those kinds of door-clinging skills, I wondered if that made them geckos. Or maybe newts?

“Got what?” they protested. “Just what do you think you’re going to do to those poor men? Oh, and welcome back.”

“Hey ther—actually, why were you guys hanging out just outside the door and not coming in?”

“Oh, I know. I bet it was ’cause they wanted to be like, ‘Don’t bother! We already know everything!’ and we could all go, ‘Oh, shit!’ They were giving us time to prep.”

“You really don’t need to prep for that, I promise.”

Most teenage girls were concerned about getting some, whereas these cared more about getting something to eat. They knew more about martial arts than domestic arts, and they were way more fatale than femme. Yet even so, I guess the word “marriage” piqued their interest. Actually, they were such fatale femmes that you had to worry more about the other guy when it came to fights. I’d rather not mention that because they scared me. Great, and now they were glaring!

“Oh, shit!” went the guys.

“Ya know?” went me.

Jiggle jiggle, went our resident juggler.

“We literally just said you didn’t need to do that. Anyway, you guys can’t throw those men into the dungeons. They’ll get killed!”

Then the girls ganged up on the guys, bombarded them with questions, and rained on their parade so hard it was a cloudburst. The questions and lectures

came one after another in waves. And that was some spooky stuff, I'm telling you!

DAY 101

EVENING

I was opting for the pile bunker over a round of maintenance, but I'm a soft touch when it comes to girls in teeny-tiny gym shorts.

OMUI CITY

OUTSIDE THE WHITE LOSER INN

WHEN WE GOT BACK to the inn, we overheard some very ominous words coming through the door, and like a flash, we all glued ourselves to it, trying to get a clue what the heck was going on. We weren't even done chewing Haruka-kun out for that thing with the Delibaur Corporation yesterday, and now the boys were bringing up *marriage*? ...Yup, all our morning stars were out and ready to start swingin'.

"Wait a sec," someone whispered, "isn't that Kakizaki-kun and his friends?"

"Huh. Guess they're back."

"Aww, what a bummer. That means we have to wear real clothes around the place again."

"That's the pits."

"Wait, so does this mean that Kakizaki-kun's group is getting married?"

"Did they get to third base?!"

"It's way, way too soon for all this!"

I eventually figured out that the other guys were asking Haruka-kun for some sort of advice, but I couldn't help feeling like turning to Haruka-kun in an emergency was basically...one of the dumbest things you could do, right?

"Oh my god, they *did* get to third base."

"These guys know how to move fast!"

“It sounds to me like everything’s set in stone already.”

“I mean, they may be meatheads, but they’re still prime boyfriend material.”

“Okay, but like, Kakizaki-kun? And the other jocks? As *aristocrats*?”

“Oof. Yeah, you’re right. Remember how they tried to run away from the ball?”

The five officers in the First Division were all young ladies descended from good families. They were buff as could be, but still drop-dead gorgeous, with amazing figures and beautiful faces. But...at the end of the day, they were meatheads. We got the opportunity to spend some time together during breakfast on the day after the ball, and I thought they were all really sweet. It was just...well...they and the jocks were very much cut from the same cloth.

Every one of these girls had scores of suitors vying to marry into their families. And yet the girls kept beating up all these would-be admirers, telling them, “I don’t want to marry someone weak.” Since they all boasted undefeated track records, all of them had been single for years. To make matters even worse, their parents would also insist that anyone who wanted their daughters’ hands in marriage would have to get through them first, and pretty soon these girls became so impossible to defeat that no one could ever stand a chance at marrying them.

And so when our athletic guys beat up first the girls, then their dads, and finally their whole family—on the pretext of training, of course—they were deemed worthy to marry the girls, and so the match was arranged. It was a straightforward kind of story. I guess this was what happened when all the major players in it were meatheads.

The conversation then veered off in another direction, because Kakizaki-kun’s group was not especially fond of the aristocracy and all that fuddy-duddy lordship stuff. Then the devil on their shoulder (who sounded suspiciously like Haruka-kun) whispered, “These meathead dads are all pretty active, right? I bet if you chucked them in a dungeon for some leveling, that’d do wonders for their

lifespan. Heck, I bet they might stop aging altogether. That'll certainly make them more active, you feel me?" In order to force these men to embark on an early and permanent retirement, he offered to give them a few carriages and told them to dump the girls' families into a dungeon of their choice.

Wait a minute. This wasn't just targeting the girls' fathers. This was a plot to kidnap an entire family and imprison them in a dungeon!

Even worse, the boys were swayed by the honeyed words of the demon (who still sounded suspiciously like Haruka-kun) and were considering it! It was at that point that we decided we needed to step in.

"Got what? Just what do you think you're going to do to those poor men? Oh, and welcome back."

It was nice seeing them all together just like old times, even if old times had only been a few days ago. I liked seeing Haruka-kun goofing off with the other boys, the boys ribbing one another and horsing around in the dining hall like they always did.

"Hey ther—actually, why were you guys hanging out just outside the door and not coming in?"

Whoops. Looked like we'd been caught. Still, you couldn't expect girls to overhear the word "marriage" and not prick their ears up. We may have been too young for the concept of marriage to really sink in for us, but marriage was a girl's lifelong dream.

We then bombarded the boys with questions and lectures. I mean, Barbarella-san and the other ladies had taken one look at them and fallen head over heels, and they'd been trying to get together with the boys for ages now. They adored the boys' Herculean strength and handsome features. As for the boys' lack of brainpower...it wasn't that they simply didn't *mind* the boys being dumb as rocks. If anything, the complete lack of anything going on upstairs made these girls fall in love all the harder. Yet you had to remember, the First Division ladies were built for battle and had no experience with romance. They

didn't have a clue how to win a man, and it really bothered them. We all hated seeing them look so miserable, so we got together and taught them a strategy to get the boys interested. We wingwomanned them.

And once given wings, those girls took off. Enthusiastic wasn't the word to describe it. I mean, we were talking jumping straight past the marriage proposal all the way to actual marriage talks.

"A teenage boy has to take responsibility for his actions, I guess," said Haruka-kun. "And if the action is getting action, then that kinda means you gotta marry the girl, ya know? Like you need to understand how girls' minds work? And stuff?"

We fixed Haruka-kun with the mother of all glares, quite probably the most solemn and intense glare in all of human history, a glare unlike any the world—heck, either world—had ever seen before. Even Kakizaki-kun and the other boys gave him the stink eye.

That little speech of his was then greeted by crisscrossing jeers of "Look who's talking!" and "Pot, meet kettle!" while the offender sat there, pleading that he was innocent of all charges, officer. I knew it was a waste of breath, but I couldn't sit there and let him get away with it, so I yelled at him too. Of course, it didn't do a bit of good.

"Anyway," one of the girls said, "what're you guys going to do now?"

"You, like, proposed to her and everything, right?"

"It doesn't count unless the guy proposes!"

"Mm-hmm. Especially because Barbarella-san and the four other girls are such late bloomers."

"Wait, are all five of you... Oh my God. Are you guys going to have a collective wedding?! Is this some kind of cult thing?"

"There's nothing cultish about this!"

"Just call it a regular wedding!"

Our onslaught of questions demolished the boys' excuses, and Haruka-kun, who made any situation worse whenever he opened his mouth... Well, he was struggling to breathe as Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san had their hands over said mouth.

"I mean, if you're being serious about going after a girl, then next up is like... marriage, you know?"

"Yeah, way back in the day, asking someone out was like asking for their hand."

"Exactly. Saying he had feelings for you was basically the same as asking you to be his wife."

"And like, these girls are following all the same steps we do back in Japan. They're skipping right to the good part."

"Yo, hold the phone," all the boys roared. "Were you the ones who gave them all those pieces of bikini armor and negligees? Not cool, dudettes!"

Okay, yes. I admit, we did give Barbarella-san and the other girls negligees to have on hand just in case. Apparently, they took "just in case" to mean "whip them out right this instant"! They may have been late bloomers who weren't all that good with their words, but they were military experts. They saw the opportunity and took it—boy, they took it all right—to win the battle, just as any good general should. I think the one who sold them the bikini armor was also in the room with us... Yup, it was the usual suspect!

"Look, they asked me what idiots were into, and when I told them the meatheads drool all over bikini armor, they were the ones who begged me to sell them some. So it's not my fault, ya know? It's just a two-for-one deal on info and physical merchandise, and the fact that the meatheads slobbered all over the armor speaks to the quality of my goods and the honesty of my advertising. With the latest in magical defensive technology, it's designed to offer protection when the layer of outer armor breaks. Sure, there's the issue that it uses up a lot of MP, but it's good enough that you could wear it down to

the mid-floors of dungeons without taking damage. Plus, that was a premium sale on five pieces of armor, so I set a good price and made some major moolah, and everyone went home happy, ya know? So it's really, truly, especially not my fault?"

"There are a lot of points to nitpick here, but... First, when the hell did you take their measurements?" the class screamed.

Haruka-kun admitted to using Jupiter Eye to (precisely) eyeball it and then used his tentacles while they were still clothed to get their measurements, but that was it. Considering how fast Haruka-kun took his measurements and whipped up the bikini armor and negligees, plus how down bad that made Kakizaki-kun and the rest of the boys... I mean, j-just think about what a powerful effect those articles of clothing had. ...*Maybe I should put in an order of my own.*

"Bro, you don't even know. Her *legs*, man. That girl has legs for days."

"Yeah!" every single the boys agreed. "Women in this world are no fair!"

"Yo, and her titties? On point."

"And she's got a hella cute face."

"She's a beefcake, but like, I'm into it."

"Yeah, she's got that rockin' body."

"And when you take all that and put it in bikini armor? My man, we never stood a chance."

Yeah, I bet. As these five waxed poetic about the sight of their five bikini-armor-clad lady loves, the maker of said bikinis who spent all night moaning over even more majestic vistas...was gnashing his teeth in jealousy?

Haruka-kun told us that, given that their Magic Nullifying weapons wouldn't be defense enough, he gave several thousand suits of armor to the First Division as a freebie with their bikini armor and insisted they were only for emergencies. These were all prototypes, just like the gear we were kitted out in from head to

toe, but prototypes good enough to be the treasures of the realm. Prototypes that had been created through thousands and thousands of rounds of trial and error.

So I guess that meant Barbarella-san and the rest of her other officers now had armor designed to fit female body types. But they had plenty to spare, so they sent them to the frontier army, the local defense force, and even some of the high-ranking officers in the Second Division. *Jeez, Haruka-kun! How many prototypes does one guy have to make before he gets a product he's happy with?* With that level of metalworking, it's no wonder how often he needed to go find more iron. He used it all up doing trial runs on armor for us, and now the armor we had was perfected over thousands of iterations. We all had to stroke our armor and get a little sniffly when we heard. These were tears of gratitude, because he'd put so much painstaking, grueling effort into protecting us. The recipient of our gratitude was presently...yelling.

"Okay! I'm off to go do maintenance on their bikini armor!"

"Like hell you are!" said the boys. "That's my girlfriend you're talking about, bro!"

"Hm, did I hear something? Or was that the wind?"

"That was us reminding you of the bro code!"

I supposed inevitably, Mister Manufacturer would have an interest in the bikini armor, but that made all the other boys furious. I mean, you would probably want a Sex God to keep his mitts off your girlfriend, right?

"Oh my God, they called them their girlfriends!"

"Barbarella-san and the other girls would be over the moon if they heard."

"Aww, what a protective boyfriend."

"My girlfriend! That is so cute; I can't even."

"I mean, they have a point. Letting Haruka-kun go could be pretty dangerous."

“For a bunch of reasons!” we all agreed.

“He’s a security risk and a repeat offender, but he’s also blissfully unaware of it. And that’s what makes him so nasty.”

“Facts!” we chorused.

“But, like...who else is going to do maintenance on bikini armor?”

“Yeah, no way am I doing it!”

“Still, I don’t like the idea of him seeing them in nothing but bikini armor.”

“Yeah, Haruka’s bad news.”

“Um...are we about to get some cucking action?”

“Agggh!” the boys groaned. “Dude, that word alone kills me!”

“Nah, nah, nah. It’s just, like, I have a way to put spellstones in armor now among tons of other ways to make it better. Plus, bikini armor is the epitome of a teenage boy’s hopes and dreams, and when I’m the only teenage boy here who hasn’t seen any... It kinda sounds like we have a bullying issue on our hands. When I called the emergency hotline in my head just now, they blocked my number, so I’m kinda wondering what that was all about? Ya know?”

“Probably because you made the poor hotline operator have a mental breakdown.”

“You’re bullying us, not vice versa!”

“Anyway,” Haruka-kun went on, “I haven’t even put a pile bunker on the bikini armor yet. You know? Like, a gun that shoots a spike like a pile driver?”

“A p-p-pile bunker?! No! Keep your eyes off my girlfriend!”

“Nah, don’t worry, it won’t diminish any of the fun, flirty, striptease factor.”

“You looking at her is gonna diminish the striptease factor! Hey, wait a minute—since when did the nun girls have bikini armor too?”

“Safety first means stronger armor, you feel me? Don’t you want your

girlfriends to be safe, you bunch of normie chads, you?!"

"Look who's talking, for real!"

"How dare you have girlfriends you can do bikini armor play with? I'm chartreuse with envy! I'll never forgive you!"

"You're literally the one who made the armor, though?!"

"Anyway, for my newer, stronger edition of bikini armor, I'm thinking of making it come with a set of gym clothes and tiny gym uniform short-shorts? For underwear, ya know?"

"Can't...argue with that one."

"Now you're talkin' my language."

"Man, the legs on that girl, I'm *telling* you."

"And those boobs? Enormous."

"Gaaaaahd, fantasy women are no fair!"

I think Haruka-kun had felt a little left out before, but now he was as swept up in the ruckus as any of the other boys. The guys in our class were all good friends when it really came down to it. Well, all the boys except Haruka were teary-eyed in anguish, but I think they were good friends...right?



DAY 101

NIGHT

A magic orb with a powerful curveball skill is a treasure all on its own.

WHITE LOSER INN

NOW THAT I HAD more space on my person, I thought I'd make myself some new gear and up the average value of our equipment while I was at it. For some reason, Slimey got mad at me when I suggested it. His body slam attack turned him into a curveball tracing a flattened ellipse, and that, let me tell you, was not a technique to take lightly. I soaked in the tub while my wiggly and wrathful magic orb zoomed around the room, changing trajectories midflight periodically in a way that would make him impossible to defend against. The thought of designing new equipment flitted across my brain as I took my armor off, but I guess he had some kind of problem with it. Yeah, I was thinking it'd be kind of nice to upgrade my Sorcerer's Bracelet or something, but since I had quite a long list of items vying for my attention right now, I guessed I'd hold off on that for the time being.

"We'll be setting out soon, so I dunno if I'll have the time to make us new gear," I told Slimey. "But Sister Girl and her crew know how to fight now, so I guess it's fine? I mean, if we don't get a move on, the nuns might lose their minds. Whether we get a move on or not, I bet there'll be a ton of traps that are getting tired of waiting for us... If these were traps that were trying to lure us into the Theocracy, then the smart thing to do would be sneak in and sneak out without setting them off. But I guess these traps are trying to lure us out? Like, into leaving the frontier?"

Jiggle jiggle.

No amount of sneaky infiltration on our part would change the fact that the

Sister Squad would immediately come out of hiding if the church announced they would execute a hostage. It didn't matter how many well-laid plans I came up with. None of them would work.

"Destroying every trap one by one sounds like a major pain. But the priest guys keep telling me indiscriminate mass destruction's no good either. That's kinda wack, huh, Slimey?"

Wiggle wiggle.

The priest dudes were obsessed with the idea of using explosives. I couldn't see this as anything but an eagerness to get captured so they could blow themselves up among the enemy like suicide bombers. I think they were hung up on the notion of losing their lives heroically rather than simply getting stronger and then fighting. That was useless to me, not to mention a waste of good fighting power. When it all came down to it, they couldn't fully trust their own ability. You could get stronger in this world in so many ways—hell, the possibilities were nigh-on endless—but instead the priests had got stuck on the idea of a quick and easy death: an easy way out of the situation. Common sense dictated that their hands were tied, but common sense was just a synonym for surrender that extinguished all other options.

"Being serious about this and having all the brains in this operation makes this predicament a real head-scratcher. Now, if only I had one hundred millionth of the meatheads' stupidity. Then I'd punch my way through before thinking, ya know?"

Wriggle wriggle.

It would never have occurred to anyone with a brain, but the meatheads had their own form of conflict resolution: when you didn't know what to do, smack and bash your way through. Punch until there was no one left to feed a knuckle sandwich. I mean, most of us thought about what result we wanted to achieve and then planned how to make it happen, but going "Fuck it, we ball" and acting on instinct seemed to work out pretty well for them.

“Instead of being smart and thinking of how something could go wrong for us, I guess it’s better to make up lots of ways for things to go wrong for the other guys, you know what I’m saying?”

Wobble wobble.

The priests had thought it through and drawn a conclusion: give up. But no amount of thought could guarantee that their conclusion was correct. You only ever saw how things worked out in hindsight, ya know? When it came to tactics and trickery, there was never a guaranteed right answer or a surefire route to victory. Yup, it all came down to how much you could swing things in your favor and throw a wrench into your opponent’s plan. And as it turned out, I excelled in both of those!

Here was another way to resolve the conflict: Make the enemy show up by threatening to kill your hostage, and when they inevitably showed their face, kill ’em before they could get a word out. Or kill ’em before they could report back. Or maybe kill ’em before they planned their next move, or kill ’em before they protected their hostage, or, if you liked, kill ’em before they issued orders. Talks at the discussion table could always go awry, and you could lose an honest fight. Know what I’m saying?

“When you’re stuck at a disadvantage and can’t think up a strategy, why bother making a plan that leaves you just as disadvantaged, am I right?”

Jiggle jiggle.

If you wanted to beat a guy whose head was swimming with plans, the best way was to hold his head down, tie a rock to him, and let him drown among his own plans. Shockingly, the plan of having no plan and leaving everything up to chance was extraordinarily difficult to counteract. I mean, it’s always a shocker when someone popped up out of nowhere and walloped you six ways to Sunday, right?

“But before we go, I need to stock up on more food. I’m running dangerously low on beef-ish meat and Worcestershire-ish sauce. Yup, I’d better top off the

food supply, because if I don't keep the meatheads topped up, they'll add *me* to the menu!"

Jiggle jiggle!

The girls—who were having the time of their lives going on and on about that marriage thing, and those SOB normie chads who'd been hit with a case of pre-nuptial cold feet—were yelling at each other, so I whipped up a bunch of beef bowls from the beef-ish meat, which they immediately fell upon and devoured wordlessly before scrambling for seconds. The meatheads, I saw, remembered to bring their buckets with them, even with all the girl troubles weighing them down. I mean, I wasn't sure that letting one's appetite drive all thoughts of marriage from one's mind was the best thing in the world, but I'd also heard of people being so heartbroken they lost their appetite altogether. That sounded like it could be fatal. Uh, was that a girl thing?

"I know we have training tonight, and I'm not especially keen on working up a sweat after I've had my bath. I don't want the stuffing knocked out of me before my bath either? 'Cause that would hurt."

Nod nod. Rattle rattle.

After my nice, relaxing bath, I stuck my nose into the training grounds just in time to see Sister Girl and her pals getting a lesson from Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl. The other girls in my class were lying in a heap with Xs for eyes.

Today, I was informed, the Sister Squad got through a thirty-floor dungeon all by themselves. Were the priests there to provide full shield protection, they probably could have gotten through it without even working up a sweat. The priests were just a bunch of pitiful old dudes who craved death—a bunch of escapists—even as the sisters did their best to duke it out. I guess in this fantasy world, the women were more metal than the men.

"Ah ha!" I said. "Nice big, beaming grins you got there. Let me guess: that 'Nod nod. Rattle rattle,' was a big, fat lie!"

Nod nod. Rattle rattle. :)

As if falling down, down, down like I was being buried alive in a crack in time, I mercilessly disassembled the flow of time, expanded it, stretched it to its thinnest, and scattered its pieces. Everything moved sluggishly as I wove through the thick, viscous substances of time and space. Waiting for me at the end of it were two beautiful figures with two beautiful ass-whoopin's.

I broke down my movements into tiny intervals and controlled every one as I swung my staff in grand, elegant arcs. I made every action keener, then sped up and rapidly sliced my way through this distorted time. I wove through time like I was swishing through deep blue water, and then sprang, never minding the distance, bearing down on my opponents with a thrust of my wooden staff like I was flying through space. In slow-motion spacetime, I swung the staff as power spiraled up within me and out through my weapon.

Neither girl so much as took a defensive stance. Miss Armor Rep merely flicked the end of the staff aside. It spun away from the momentum of her terrifying, superhuman power and wheeled off in the wrong direction, out of my control. She deflected my attack with nothing more than the slightest of adjustments to its center of balance. In other words, she was showing off. She was forcing me to get good! But she was really upping the ante now!

She swept my attacks away, deflected them. That was all it took for me to lose my careful form and end up in a new, defenseless position. I calmly took up my staff and launched another move, one even more overwhelming and vicious than the last killing blow wherein I'd expended my full strength. And then, so fast my thoughts couldn't keep up, I moved in and tried to tap her with the side of my staff.

Aaand, she deflected it like it was nothing. Wait, seriously? She could do that?

Yup, she was giving me a smile that said *I sure can*. This was hard mode, now!

My train of thought, pushed to run as fast as it could go, wailed, "Oh boy, she's *fast* with the sword. This girl's on fire." Uh, yeah. I could tell that without the thought acceleration, but thanks.

“Your current body, no good when, make big movements. Move small, precise.”

“When you can’t fully control, your power...no need for speed. Move little, cleanly.”

“So you’re saying to focus on control and use that to get a handle on my skills. Wait a minute. Don’t I need to level up more for that to work?!”

We were about to go to war against other people. I remembered hearing that the Theocracy had plenty of members left in its Inquisition, a fighting force that specialized in one-on-one combat, and even the knights themselves could be overwhelming in their full strength. So why couldn’t we skip all that war business and simply pound the pope to a pulp? He sounded weak to me, ya know?

After I got done with my own pulping, I took another bath and then went back to my room to find that an enormous pile of orders from the general store lady had arrived. Which meant she had drawn all of them up the minute she partnered with the call girl! Tell me, how was I supposed to cope with the heart-rending agony of a teenage boy who partners with a call girl. I had nothing to show for it besides order forms, to say nothing of the girl herself? *What kind of frickin’ escort service is this?*

“Okay, so there’s an order for mushroom bentos... But ignoring that for a moment, we’ve also got a call for three hundred massage chairs. Maybe all I need to do is make a coin slot and a spellstone that can vibrate, and they can do the rest with a blueprint for the chair part? I guess the question is, can any alchemists figure out how to rig up the electrical wires for it? The spellstones won’t be as good if they’re made with a plug-and-chug assembly line formula, but that falls within the margin of error, so I’ll let my Magic Hands handle the mass production aspect. Okay, next up... She wants spellstone-powered washers, vacuums, and fridges? Once again, I think I can make the spellstones and devices here in-house; I’ll let them assemble it locally. ‘Cause they’re too big to transport, ya know?”

Jiggle jiggle.

This call girl really knew what she was doing, since pretty much everything on her list had to do with magical tech. This meant that, once these got out on the market, the Theocracy's own magical technology wouldn't stand a chance. Monopolizing the market for these items would start to whittle away at the church's base of power. That left me with no option but to refuse this order.

Stuff like body soap and other daily household items? Sold wholesale from the workshops, check. Clothes and other odds-and-ends? Those could come from the factories, check. Works of art? Ah, those must have been the various counterfeits—ahem, masterpieces—I put up in the palace for the bluffing—ahem, I mean intimidation factor. Wow, she was ready to pay out the nose for those! Well, I supposed that was only to be expected for forgeries—ahem, imitations of the work of the so-called Big Three of the High Renaissance who'd witnessed the peak of their mastery during the Italian Renaissance.

“But how the heck do they plan on transporting all this stuff out of here? Ah. They ordered everything from item bags and boxes up to a bunch of carts. That answers that question. But we'd better downgrade them to less effective versions and slap some sales restrictions on 'em, or else they could fall into enemy hands and land us in hot water, ya know?”

Wiggle wiggle.

Supply chains and logistics were directly related to military efforts. So even if I made major moolah selling storage equipment, I would only be making our enemies stronger. In turn, that meant I would have had to give out more equipment to our side, which would ultimately count as a loss. Even merchants wouldn't be so focused on money that they'd sell away the peace of the land they lived in, and it was pointless to sell out the future for momentary cash. What good was money when you had no future?

I had sales restrictions on the weapons and armor already, but I figured I'd have to look over and reevaluate all the other items for sale, too. After all, even

building materials could easily be used for military matters.

“Okay, yeah. I’ll put a ban on magic lathes. If we sell those without knowing where they’re ending up, we could very easily lose our technical advantage in our workshops. And we’d better not use screws either, ya know? Oh yeah, and no gunpowder or combustion engines, since those’re getting pretty close to modern weaponry at that point. You can make pretty much anything into a weapon, so let me tone down the prismatic clothes a notch, too.”

I had to protect the frontier’s strength here at the far edge of the world. This town was a city of demons who walked about equipped with clubs and prismatic clothing. An ordinary citizen of the frontier was no doubt a much bigger threat than the average soldier in other parts of the world. Hence why I couldn’t mess around with the frontier. I didn’t want them to lose their superior edge.

This being a frontier, there were tons of monsters around, and all the frontier folk gained major levels killing them. With that magical power, they were turning their prismatic clothing to armor and their clubs to better weapons. I guess that meant I had to lower the potency of the gear a little so it wouldn’t take too much magic to use.

Anyway, as I was ruminating on this, Magic Hands finished up their production job. That meant that the first stage of my side job—the prologue, if you will—was done. But the final stage, or the epilogue as we literary folk call it, was a long way off.

Better take a break. Because then I would enter a horrifying, hair-raising den of vileness and find...!

DAY 101

NIGHT

silk reeling is all about circular movement, which is why I'm always talking in circles. I didn't think it'd have any application in bed, but it turned out to be extremely effective.

WHITE LOSER INN

I ENTERED A HORRIFYING, hair-raising den of vileness and found...locker room stench!

“Here, I finished up the special dingus armor MK II for you dinguses. Go break them in. You’re doing a dungeon crawl tomorrow, so you’ll need ’em. Also, here’s an engagement present of sorts? I mean, congrats on tying the knot? If you don’t want your fiancées to get bodied, then set them up with these on their bodies. Come to think of it, some might say I’m setting you up for a fall? So maybe give up while you’re ahead? Ya know?”

“Dude! This armor’s dope. Thanks a bunch, bro.”

“What’s all this about an engagement gift, though? Are these rings?”

“Oh snap, and they match and stuff? Nah, dude, I wouldn’t be caught dead wearing that.”

Whenever you had a loved one—be she your girlfriend, fiancée, or wife—she was family to you. So you wanted to keep her safe, you know? It’s just one of those things.

“Each of those rings has a spellstone with Automatic Regeneration and Status Ailment Resistance skills to help you out in a pinch. So don’t you dare lose them! Well, you can lose the setting of the ring, but not like the *ring* ring, got it?”

“You got it. Thanks, man.”

“Wait a sec. How the heck do you lose the ring setting without losing the *ring* ring?”

There probably was a skill that would have prevented the stones from ever falling out of their settings, but I hadn’t added it. *Hmm, maybe I should learn the spell for that. Yeah, I’m jealous, okay?*

“And with that, let’s pack these living dead off to the graveyard of life and use the Holy magic Automatic Regeneration skill to finish them all off. Ya know?”

“Oh man, it’s sinking in that we’re legit getting married.”

“Yeah. For real. It’s hitting me all over again that we actually got isekai’d.”

“Dead-ass, how we’d end up like this?”

“And speaking of dead, don’t call us the living dead!”

I mean...it’s not like they were thinking anyway. These guys were no thoughts, head empty, 24/7. Yeah, and now that they were in thick with the nobility and stuff, they needed to learn to watch out! They had nothing approaching self-awareness, no brain matter or intelligence to speak of. Zilch. Nada. Goose egg.

“I mean... You guys did the deed, so, like, go die?” (As an inner voice whispered, “A pox upon thine engagement.”) “Congratulations?” (As that inner voice went, “Just blow up?”)

“I mean, yeah, I guess... But don’t congratulate us when you’re cursing us under your breath!”

“And you’re the last person on the planet who’s got any right to be jealous of us!”

Envious and bitter and cursing I may have been, but I most certainly did have a right.

“So you say, but how do I stand a chance at getting a girlfriend when I’ve got two mistresses, five mean girl slaves, and no girlfriend? You can’t get married without a girlfriend—or I mean, you can, but that’d be so pathetic it’d cause the world to start sobbing, you know? Man, my sex appeal has shot off so far into

outer space that we've lost contact with it and don't know its current location. Like for real."

"All right, you got me there. Actually, wait a sec. Even if a regular high school romance is off the table, it looks to me like you're going around picking up hot chicks left and right!"

"Yeah! How come you keep sweeping all these hot girls off their feet? I've never even seen you hold a broom, bro!"

"The way you go around picking up hot chicks and bringing them home is like a kid champion at pickup sticks. That's way too much pickup game, man."

"Seriously, what is it with you and women?!"

We didn't have endless yammer fests every evening, but we boys could have our own sort of meetings, too. The conversations were comprised entirely of teenage boy things—i.e., sex—but we still conferred on important issues, just as the girls did. What could I say? Boys would be boys.

"Anyway, I'm sending you guys home, of course. I can't let you stay in a world with no family, no friends, and a bunch of people trying to kill you. The nerds are off trying to dig up some lost something-something relic thingy near the Beast Nation, and you guys should be out there looking for that too! Not cruising for chic—I mean, marriage! Why don't you clodpolls start digging holes and see if you can unearth some old ruins or gold coins or something?"

"I mean, like, we can. But bruh. We didn't turn up anything like that in all the dungeon crawling we did, you know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah dawg, there's nothing like that out there. But ya know, if you can't send us home directly, we could always try raiding that white room with the god dude. Then I guess we gotta get through the Theocracy first, huh?"

We had no leads on how to find a way back to our world. I'd figured something would turn up in the deepest depths of a dungeon or some ancient ruin—you know how these tropes worked—but no dice. Since both the forest

and the dungeons proved fruitless, our best shot was the church. Our hopes were slim. Even Sister Girl, the Archbishop's own daughter, knew nothing about it. Nope. No folktales, no folklore, no folking clue. A big fat load of nothing.

"What if I made a truck and had it hit us? You guys could be my test subjects. Yeah, getting hit by a truck's isekai 101, ya know?"

"Don't try to hit us with a truck!"

"That's a trope for reincarnation isekai, dude! And this is a summoning isekai story!"

"And even if you did hit us, how the heck would you be able to tell if our souls ended up reincarnated anywhere else?"

The meatheads were cleverer than they looked. There was a huge flaw with the isekai truck plan: I didn't have any good data on what the infamous isekai truck's model or carrying capacity was, hence I didn't know how many kmh it needed to smack you at to yeet you into another world. If I messed it up, we ran the risk of pulling a *Back to the Future*. Now, if there was a truck that could hit you in the present and then go back in time to hit you in the past, then we'd be in business. A two-for-the-price-of-one DMC isekai truck? Wow, now I wanted to see if I could make one.

"So what're you gonna do about the Theocracy, Haruka? We're going with you, by the way."

"Yeah, yeah. We don't wanna let the girls get blood on their hands, if nothing else."

"Like...they're just not cut for killing people, know what I'm saying? But then again, you'd think Oda-kun's gang couldn't hurt a fly and they fight like nobody's business."

"Yeah, I feel that," I said, "but they insisted on going with Sister Girl and her group. It's gonna be the most dangerous spot for them, but they're ready to go in guns blazing. I want you guys to stay on standby and be our reinforcements,

and in the meantime, you can hunt down more of those slavers in the Beast Nation. Got it? I mean, it's too early in the game for me to be doing anything but spying and diplomacy government stuff. That's pretty boring, ya know?"

The girls didn't need to have the experience of taking a human life if they could go home afterward. Nothing good ever came of having blood on your hands. Memories of murder had no place in a peaceful life.

"Yeah, I guess you got a good point... We'll be ready to do what we gotta do, though."

"We can be as ready as we'll ever be, but it'll still be hella rough after we go home."

"Yeah. 'Cause it's like getting geared up to live out the rest of our lives here, right?"

"You think the girls realize that, chances are, we're all gonna die here?"

"Yeah, they know. That's why they refuse to let that happen. The girls, the nerds...they're the real heroes."

Take Miss Armor Rep, Dancer Girl, and Slimey, for instance. Each of them was a threat big enough to destroy the world. Now that they were weakened by Servitude, if some creature with that same former strength of theirs succumbed to the darkness at the bottom of that dungeon they swarmed out of in a deluge of monsters... Well, that would have been beyond a dungeon deluge. That would have been pure evil taking over the world.

Every dungeon emperor led dungeon kings who, in turn, commanded a horde of monsters. The threat they presented was so huge it couldn't be tackled by a bunch of mortal human beings. Even if humanity fought, it stood no chance of winning. Their only choices were to run and hide or try to defend themselves. That's why true heroes who would save mankind were so vital in this world. The girls and the nerds were trying to become those very heroes.

"Not like they stand a chance, though."

“Yeah, you could get to level 1000 or something and you’d still be shit outta luck.”

“Especially if Miss Armor Rep, Dancer Girl, and Slimey joined in the rampage. Then you’d be shit outta luck squared... Maybe it’d be fastest to cut out the middleman and end the world ourselves, huh?”

“For sure.”

Plus, we didn’t even know how many classes of dungeon emperors there were. Heck, it was a miracle that the world hadn’t ended already. Even so, becoming heroes the way the girls and the nerds wanted was only an impossible hope. Hope. One of the evils that dwelled in Pandora’s Box, the worst of all the ones remaining at the bottom. Just a wish, a desire that never, ever stood a chance of coming true. Hope. Ya know?

When disaster struck, all the meatheads had to do was kill. There was no rhyme or reason to them, just: Is there disaster? Yup. Cool, then let’s kill it. They would try to handle the entire thing by themselves. Maybe that made them heroes, but not true heroes. They were murderers and butchers, a people defined by fighting who lacked hope and dreams of their own. When they saw destruction on the horizon, they would greet it with a smile and rush to slaughter it. But they would have no leader, kill on no man’s orders, and they would only die for their efforts with the smile still left on their lips.

I’d picked up a few of these dungeon emperors as my servants. Yup, I’d lost my chance at being a hero. What kind of hero has a dungeon emperor make him breakfast every day and chastise him day in and day out? Besides, no matter what danger or threat I faced, Miss Armor Rep protected me.

Yet if they did harm, that would make them my enemy. And so to keep the world safe, I would kill them.

“...Hey, wait a sec,” said the meatheads. “Are we the bad guys?”

“I mean, if our roles’re to die anyway, it shouldn’t matter if we kill people on the way down, right? Plus, we can’t die *now*.”

“Yes, yes, congratulations on your upcoming marriage, oh lich kings. May I offer you this fine curse to commemorate the moment? Ya know?”

“You’re supposed to congratulate us, not curse us! But thanks. For the rings ‘n’ all, too.”

Yet it still hadn’t dawned on the meatheads, them being meatheads, that this had set the wheels of fate trundling down a different course. I decided to formally announce that this was a moment of destiny—an event flag, in other words—that proclaimed the future.

“Isn’t making a promise to marry someone right before a war some kind of suicide flag?” I suggested.

“It’s not, bro!”

“Even if you got dumped in a spectacular fashion before battle, the flag’s already flying so high your fate’s not gonna change, ya know? Anyway, I’m going to go back to my room and make your girlfriends’ armor for a congratulatory curse. Plus, I know their measurements by heart? Although I wasn’t looking?”

“Forget them! Scrub them out of your memory! But please make the armor, we’re begging you! We’ll pay for them and everything!”

“How am I supposed to make them armor if I forget their measurements?” I said. “Well, thanks for doing business with me, come again? And stuff?”

Anyway, back to my room. I went to hang out with the meatheads to take a break from all my side hustles, but the volume of my side-hustle work was only increasing by the minute. Now I had to make an additional five sets of armor. Well, at least I was making money?

Back in my room, I closed my eyes and made a detailed 3D model in my head. All the armor my classmates and our various associates had on right now was quite good, but if I had a girlfriend, then I was sure I’d have wanted her to be wearing the safest armor possible too. I decided I’d make my wedding gift to

the meatheads be armor for their macho girlfriends, and my wedding gift for the macho chicks would be dresses and other clothing they could wear on their own time. Yeah, I knew the meatheads would come barging in yelling at me if I threw underwear into the mix as well. If only the meatheads got to see their undies, wouldn't that count as a kind of discrimination?

The armor they had on them at the moment were only some prototypes I'd chosen to reuse, so I hadn't put any mithril on them or anything. Plus, these girls were close-combat brawlers. Under the guidance of the meatheads, they'd learned an evasion-focused style, but it would still take a while for them to unlearn all their old bad habits. *So I'd better make them something thicker and heavier until they learn how to dodge, right?*

"Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl have their own armor, so I'm constantly making armor for girls I can't ogle and rub down and get my Magic Hands all over. Still, without measurements, I'm sure that the fit of this armor will be a lot less accurate. But if I touch them, I'll get taken to court, ya know?"

Jiggle jiggle.

The girls had large builds, but they moved with the lithe grace of wild animals. They had muscles upon muscles but were also toned as could be. Okay, now I was starting to get kind of ticked off. I mean, they were gorgeous and had truly behemoth bosoms, but they also had a wild, rough quality about them *and* the elegance that came from growing up in a family of aristocrats!

"Okay, you know what? Those suicide flags have my support. Yeah! If it's not the jealousy, it's the absurdity of this situation. If it's not the envy, it's the wish that they could share some of the good luck, ya know? This fantasy world's got such big inequality issues that only one teenage boy doesn't get the girlfriend flag, just the double mistress flag. This is completely discriminatory, you feel me? Now that it's come to this, I guess my only choice is to force a summit of the Teenage Boy Rights Violations Committee. You know?"

Wiggle wiggle.

There, that would do for their armor. I could tailor it to fit once the macho chicks arrived.

“Now I’d like to get all their weapons in order, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen them fight before? I mean, I guess I can use their height and body shape to work out something reasonable and make them some swords and shields, at least.”

Jiggle jiggle.

I didn’t have enough room to work, thanks to all the forgeri—pieces of fine art I’d made. Even the paintings took up too much space, and this room was obnoxiously small for all the statuary in it. *Not to mention, all these random vases and plates I made are cluttering the place up. Let’s get ’em out of here.*

All right, now what outfits should my assailants wear tonight? Or, I reflected, giving the matter careful consideration, perhaps they should be outfitted in nothing at all. As I pondered, I sensed one girl dressed in a sailor suit, complete with miniskirt, and another in a new cheerleader outfit walking down the hall.

And the minute the door opened, those dominatrices of deviousness pounced. I used my silk-reeling technique to repel them—but they were fast! If they got their hands on me, I knew I’d be a goner.

Chansi, or silk reeling, was a kind of tai chi technique that generated power through twisting, circular motion and then used that power to repel foes. Like the “reeling” part indicated, it involved picturing a line of power from your toes to your fist that you reeled up in a large spiral motion, like a spool of silk thread. By concentrating and moving in tandem with your breathing, it let you control the power of your entire body. I wasn’t sure yet how effective it’d be against girls with such devious skills!

“Whoa, hold on!” I said. “I mean, where’d my turn go? Have you seen it anywhere? I haven’t been able to find it at all lately. I wonder where I could have left it... Whoa, that was fast! When’d you swipe my equipment? Wh-oogh! Hah, whew, hold on a sec there. Did you seriously learn qi activation to counter

Lascivious?”

Dancer Girl combined the spiral movements of her normal dancing with tai chi spirals, and then she used tai chi to bathe herself in magic. Now that was one killer technique! I didn’t stand a chance against two dungeon emperors using it on me at once. I mean, I wouldn’t have stood a chance even if there was only the one! Not only was it a finisher of a move, but the person using it was pretty killer, too. And two of them using it! Forget standing a chance, I didn’t even lay down in defeat a chance! As their torsos circled, they described spirals with their arms and legs, creating an interweaving attack of twisting cores and arms.

“We’re hooome!” they sing-songed.

Silk reeling was like a great river that flowed in silence but possessed enough colossal mass to bore through the stubbornness of rock. That silent power was now aggregated in this intricate technique, their bodies perfectly unified in the pinnacle of hard yang and soft yin giving way to one another. They were using that to sprawl on the bed and tempt me over. Yeah, you couldn’t pin down the movement of those spirals, but they sure pinned me down right there on the bed.

“Are you guys already tai chi masters? I mean, you guys are already ultra-powerful enough as dungeon emperors, so who knows what you’ll be like if you master kung fu as well? Martial arts were developed over centuries for teenage boys to learn to resist powerful forces, but dungeon emperors have already mastered these powerful forces, so if they master martial arts too, how’s a poor teenage boy supposed to resist? Yeah, I knew it. You’re not listening to me... N-no way! You can use your spiral technique with your mouth?!”

Gwah! Yeah, they’d mastered that grinding spiral technique all right. Now with qi activation under their belts as well, the dungeon emperors were about to give Lovemaking and Lascivious a run for their money with a storm of counterattack attention to my nether regions. My everlasting 1-Up mushroom, the physical manifestation of the concept known as “teenage-boyness” went 1-up and 1-up and 1-up as they ate and devoured and banqueted and gobbled

and glutted. I started to worry about that poor mushroom going extinct due to over-harvesting! *I can't take it anymore!*

DAY 102

EARLY MORNING

As it turns out, cooking the chicken and the egg together does nothing to solve the age-old dilemma.

MONSTER FOREST

I WAS OFF-KILTER—and so I immediately kicked off the ground, which generated enough momentum to force my listing body back upright and on its correct course. That just made me off-kilter in a different way.

My new body reacted way differently than it used to, which ended up reflected in the way I moved. My stats screen showed that I was producing truly unbelievable output that shook me like a ragdoll. All the forces within my body tried to go every which way, throwing me off my course and making even basic movement a lawless free-for-all. My footwork should have given me a solid foundation, but it in turn was a hot mess. Every time I lost my balance, I tried fixing it by putting a foot down. When, inevitably, I got all wonked up again, I had to kick out again once more. I was aiming for something like the graceful, flowing footwork of ballroom dancing, but it ended up more like a tap dance wherein each tap was an attempt to avoid keeling over. It simultaneously changed my direction and sent me tilting at a different angle. I had my hands full trying to play Tap Dance Dance Revolution while fighting a frenzied, chaotic battle.

“Hmm,” I said. “I think my senses and instinctual reactions are pretty high-spec now too, ya know?”

Wobble wobble.

As I had suspected, my nervous system got a speed boost too. The responses to these neurotransmissions moved at such incomprehensible speeds to where my processing skill Wisdom couldn't keep up. The data got all entangled. This

created a major traffic jam of the nervous system, and my brain tried to make do by turning control over my limbs into complete and total chaos. Anarchy, disorder, pandemonium—bedlam!

“Between the rate at which muscle tissues contract and the nervous system’s reaction time, there’s too many components to this speed stat,” I complained. “Talk about poorly defined.”

Jiggle jiggle.

It was all I could do to maintain a proper fighting stance as I stumbled and fell, twisting away to dodge attacks just in time and using the recoil to get back to an upright position. My body contorted as I wriggled and whirled as I flew, raining down attacks. Naturally, using Airwalk on such unsolid ground made me keep slipping midair, somersaulting, and rolling backward as I went. I made b-air-ly any forward progress. It was a totally impossible task, you know what I’m saying?

Upside down, defenseless, and unable to get the hang of moving in air as I was, I slid about dodging monster attack after monster attack. I buzzed around uncontrollably, kicking out with Airwalk at every angle imaginable, changing direction like mad, and all the while skittering out of enemy reach.

I was booking it. There was no delay in movements, so my body would start reacting the same instant the thought crossed my mind. So when my thoughts were moving too slow to catch up, control went out the window in a state of total panic. My accelerated thoughts became even more saturated as even more of my mind went to pieces and fell behind.

I bet the goblins were probably thinking something like, “What the hell is that guy doing up there?” Almost certainly they were laughing their butts off at me, which, let me tell you, really ground my gears. I was gonna kill them!

“I’ll dance over to you in a slow, graceful waltz and chop you up into mincemeat!” I swore.

Gwooar!

The sensory feedback my body was giving didn't line up with the rate at which time passed, and everything was a chaotic mess. Therefore, I decided to simply minimize all extraneous movements. Over-exaggerated, elegant swings were the goal. Besides, it wasn't like I was fighting anything difficult. They were just goblins, you know?

With a sweeping gesture, I pulled out my cane with a focus on form, not power—like a samurai drawing his sword. I stayed relaxed, loose, and limber, as I let centrifugal force swing my stick through the air for me...only to collapse in a painful, pell-mell heap? *Time to get rid of the witnesses!*

"Guess it's about time to head home. The others'll be waking up soon, ya know?"

Jiggle jiggle.

In my head, I had pictured myself gliding forward and slicing through my foes like I was a dancer. But in reality, I ended up hopping/lurching along and hacking down the goblins with many a stumble and fall in between. It was a horribly embarrassing sight, which meant that all the goblin witnesses had to die.

"Yup, it's a safe bet to think of this like combining a series of minuets into a medley rather than trying to change the tempo. But if I show up to a 90th floor dungeon king with this laughingstock of a scherzo, they'll completely mop the floor with me, ya know?"

Wobble wobble.

"Nah, but people do say that you gotta ease yourself into things before you're on a roll. It's more effective to let your body warm up to new stuff at a more conventional pace. But I'm *already* on a roll, so I guess I don't need to ease myself into it? Let the good times roll? And I killed a good twenty goblins when I was tossing and turning through the air, so I guess you could say things took a fatal turn?"

Jiggle jiggle.

I could already picture my classmates rolling up with some dissenting opinions on the matter. There was a simple explanation for it all, but I bet they'd yell at me to stop rolling.

I gotta work my way up to it. I have to take my time to get used to how all this works now. It's best if I tune my mind and body onto the same wavelength and then let them all start working as one totally naturally. Teenage boys weren't always known for doing what's best, especially when it came to matters of what's breast. And anyway, I was getting stronger in an effort to avoid death. Dying to get stronger not only defeated the purpose but defeated me, too!

"I mean, it's the age-old dilemma, ya know? I know people tell me there's no real answer, but when I asked the girls which came first, the chicken or the egg, they didn't miss a beat and all went, 'Both. In chicken-and-egg rice bowls, please.' When I asked the orphans, they all said, 'Omelet rice.' So I guess the answer to the riddle is 'Why not combine and eat them?'"

Slimey made an especially happy wriggle at that.

Anyway, my point was, why shouldn't I do things in combination? Like combining training with real fights, fine-tuning with test runs, action with thought, brawn with brittleness, lectures with letting off steam. If it was all a big cycle of cause and effect, that meant both aspects were inevitable? So, like, why not combine them?

In other news, I still couldn't get past level 25. Even if all that meant was that I'd have to go through another readjustment process to get used to my new stats, I still felt like it would be a better idea to try to level up. When I was improving the girls' MK-G armor, the wear and tear on the mean girls' armor caught my eye. It's true enough that letting your armor turn your enemy's attacks was a smarter move than wasting your energy dodging, and the meatheads practiced that strategy all the time. But they were just meatheads. I'd only made their armor especially strong in the spots that covered their most vital regions. The mean girls, on the other hand, didn't have such an aggressive fighting style. Thanks to the experience share, any experience they earned

flowed back up the ladder to me. I could see them getting so excited about this that they'd fling themselves into harm's way. The meatheads' wild animal instincts alerted them to danger, but the mean girls, for all their biting talent, were no animals. If anything, I think Tiny Tanuki was closer to being an animal than they were.

"Oh well. I guess I'll do a bunch of fights, get some battle experience and some EXP under my belt, and fine-tune things until I level up. That'll be killing two birds with one stone, since I'll get a bunch of spellstones and delicious rip-off bargain sales? You get used to being a killer once you start taking lives, and then once you're used to it, you can keep on killing. So I'll make it work somehow or other. I mean, you probably wouldn't call this an ordinary task in the day of a life of a teenage boy, but I'm a good boy, so I guess it'll be okay-ish? You feel me here?"

Jiggle jiggle.

I was covered in bruises from head to toe since I kept falling and bumping into things, but since so little of my skin was uncovered, I had very few cuts on me. Yup, no falling to pieces for me yet. All I had were cuts on my face, my only exposed patch of skin. If I went full throttle, I'd destroy myself. But it wasn't as bad as it used to be. Unless I unveiled a dimensional slash from my magic bracelets the likes of which would cause total destruction, I *theoretically* wouldn't kill myself while practicing.

"Yeah, but I guess tai chi still isn't the best option for fighting in the air, huh? It uses your own mass and weight as part of the attack, so you'd think it'd pair well with Gravity magic. But actually, when you use it in the almost-weightless arena of air walking without footholds, the rotational force makes you spin like crazy and crash to the ground. And the sad reality of falling hurts, ya know?"

Wiggle wiggle.

Well, the sun was coming up now, so I figured I'd wrap up here and head back to the inn. Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl were probably up now too. They'd

been sent off to sleep in a very thorough and very sexual way, the kind that wouldn't be especially easy to recover from. Even so, I figured they'd be waking up any minute now. ...*Should I be scared?*

Ah ha, and here was my morning dose of glares. Nothing like a refreshing, bracing round of glares in the morning. Even the birds were singing, twittering away with a *GRAAAWR*.

Wait a minute. That was awfully big for a bird. *You think that's a monster?*

Glaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaare.

Jeez, I was on fire with the glares today! I'd mastered qi activation when the girls attacked me last night. Maybe I'd also picked up a new glare ability along the way. Wait, were only my eye skills leveling up?!

"No, but I have a right to take revenge (aka my turn), but maybe that's not recognized in the lawless land known as the inn at night? But I guess if we put it to a democratic vote I'd end up losing every time, so my hands are tied. What happened this morning was my impulse control taking a running leap, and when I activated my quite healthy teenage boy powers with the essence explosion of *fajin*, it released a ton of energy along my meridians, which led to a sudden morning—well, you can call it a competition of an athletics sort—and boy did I try my best! So I didn't do anything wrong?"

According to Zheng Manqing, the disciple of Yang Chengfu in the third generation to learn Yang-style tai chi, Master Zuo Laipeng reportedly once said, "Power comes from the bones, and strength comes from the muscles." And there was *plenty* of coming from this teenage boy—an explosion of rapid-fire, spontaneous emissions. Oh yes, the ways of qi activation were profound, and I was well into it. And being well into something else felt so good that I never stood a chance. *I'm a teenage boy, you know?*

Lovemaking was such an epic, fearsome technique that with nothing more than the feminine and masculine energies mixing with a squelchity splort and a few high-pitched voices moaning and groaning in sploogy goodness, I could run

for hours (to great effect, mind you!) on low MP. This technique incorporated breath control, so when ragged breathing and faux-seductive voices turned to genuine yowls, it was only natural that their inner qi activation would go wild and leave them writhing in pleasure. It was a gorgeous, breathtaking magnificence of lewdness and chaos and derangement and frenzied, roiling depravity. I fired over and over in a massive explosion. Yup, it was invigorating, all right.

“In Japanese martial arts, we call a stamping motion *furinari*, but we call the Chinese version of that *shinkyaku* or ‘shaking legs’ and the *shin* or ‘shake’ part is a technique that combines both the reactive force and the body’s own strength. That all pairs well with Vibration magic, so when a teenage boy gets his legs quaking and Vibration magic brings on a lotta shaking inside, you can really rack up destructive power. It felt so good I maybe accidentally took it a bit too far? But it was inevitable? Ya know?”

Yeah, so don’t glare at me?

I took that same technique I’d perfected and elevated into an art form late last night, got up early, and brought it into the forest for a test run. But these goblins were no match for it. I guess it was too overwhelming after the two dungeon emperors and I went to town on honing this skill?

“Combining martial arts and high-speed movement leads to an uncontrollable mess and an awful lot of falling. But I guess if you’re stuck with a lot of falliage, it doesn’t hurt to be in a place with a lot of foliage.”

Jiggle jiggle.

Take the momentum of my high velocity and the inertia of my weight. Then add magic and skills, mix ‘em all up, and presto, let it all out on your enemies. That was Life or Death, the skill that unleashed those forces over the shortest distance at the fastest speeds for maximum efficiency. From stillness to movement, from an inner bridled force to an outwards release, from absence to existence—if I couldn’t control all of that, then I couldn’t keep any of it

together. And when it wasn't all focused into a single technique, then I was too weak for my poor stats to handle.

"I'm so darn weak that I fooled myself by throwing all my skills together and smashing the enemies to bits. Once I got a little stronger, I couldn't hold them all any longer and ended up getting weaker. That's three steps forward and an infinite amount of moonwalking backward!"

Wiggle wiggle.

Ah, growth! Yeah, I may have been making some progress, but it was far too slow for my taste. I was that guy who always wanted to figure out the murderer from reading the character profiles in the mystery novels, you know? And I almost always got it right, too. So you see what I mean, don't you? I was moving too slowly?

"O-m-g! Makeup palettes! Oh my god, and they come in a little box too."

"Give me one that's got an orange eyeshadow!"

"Where's the pink shadow?!"

"I'd like a blue eyeshadow for more muted tones around the eyes, please."

"Ooh, purple is so grown-up... What should I do if it's not for me?"

"Where's the blue and the green? Gimme, gimme, gimme, now!"

"Hey, that's mine!"

"How many can we get per person? What's the rule here?!"

"Stop hoarding them! Come on, you have way too many. You have to share!"

"You want the pink and purple? Over my dead body!"

"We only get so many boxes per person, but we can choose what to put inside each of them separately...? What if I want them all?!"

"Exactly! You said it."

"More! We demand more!"

“Guys, peep my haul.”

“*Peep?* I know it’s cheap, but that’s no call to start cheeping!”

“No, no, not that one. I want to place another order!”

“Where’s the side-hustle crime king at, huh?”

“Huh? I could have sworn I saw him crushed flat over there a second ago.”

“Where’d Haruka-kun go? Where’s our place to check out?!”

“Over here! I’ve got him pinned.”

“Make sure he doesn’t roll away!”

“Yikes, that’s silk reeling!”

“He’ll make a clean getaway if he fend us off. Dogpile him, girls!”

“Aye, aye, cap’n!”

“He’s over here!”

“He went that way!”

“Charge!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Squeeze, squash, smush.

“Got him!”

And speaking of moving too slowly...

Who the heck taught them how to pin down my silk reeling? When I twisted, I was met with a *bwom* of resistance, and when I turned, I was bounced back with a *jiggle*. Then when I rotated, I was trapped with a *squoosh* that left me unable to move, caught between a soft place and a soft place.

And which one of you nullified my silk reeling with a boi-oi-oing?! Whoever it was absorbed my kinetic energy and let it rebound with a springing of some real tai chichis... Don’t look at me like that, I didn’t say anything!

Glaaaaaaaaaaaaaare.

“No, no. I wasn’t touching her boobs! I was repelled with a *jiggle* and resisted with a *bwom*, and they embody an incredible technique that I should have been able to dodge but got hit by and bounced back by and sucked into instead! Yeah, you’d think I could’ve sidled out of the way with fancy martial arts footwork, but she nullified my silk reeling with a *boi-oi-oing*! What kind of dark magic is that?! A silk-reeling-repelling *boi-oi-oing*? That’s next level!”

“You are 100 percent guilty, and you’re trying to confuse us with that explanation! We sentence you to a 10 percent discount on all our additional orders.”

And that’s how I ended up with more orders even though I was innocent of any titty transgressions. I wanted to revolt against this tyranny, but we teenage boys were a powerless minority in this teen-girl democracy. Plus, the meatheads, who *should* have been over here with me in the minority, had faded into the background when faced with a squad of chubby thighs squeezed into tight, tight shorts. Useless, all of them! I was totally going to send that little nugget of info to the macho chicks as an anonymous tipoff. I hoped they gave the meatheads what for!

Yup, that’s how I got caught in a *bwombardment* of additional orders. And yeah—now that the boys were here, the girls had gone back to their black booty shorts, but the color did little to diminish their raw offensive capability!

Then the tridents-that-the-girls-insisted-were-forks-wielding many-headed and many-limbed force of *Sturm und Drang* fell upon the breakfast of bacon and mushroom carbonara with a howl, utterly routing the bucket-toting meatheads in a huge fight right out of an action movie.

“Haruka, we’re hungry!” the meatheads whined.

“Yeah, bro, we can’t get past the girls. Can’t you give us something to eat?”

“Yup, the girls are way above you in level now. But more importantly, if you can’t pluck up the courage and the fortitude to plunge into that melee of

chubby thighs and short shorts...then you don't get breakfast? Because you abandoned me in my time of need a few minutes ago? You can go starve for all I care!"

Their stomachs kept growling as they blubbered, and they looked so pitiful that out of the kindness of my bleeding heart, I sold them some mushroom bento boxes at five times the regular price. *Here, because you're such poor things I'll throw in a single slice of bacon each. And with my good deed done for the day, it's off to the dungeons.*

DAY 102

MORNING

This cockatrice is more of a henatrice. I know cockatrices're based off mongooses, but she's taking the "goose" part too literally!

DUNGEON

THE DUNGEON of the day was a small guy. Just 50 floors. I tackled it with a lone chaperone, Slimey, because the girls split off into two groups and took Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep with them. Yup, I guess they'd all blown through their savings buying makeup. I would've wondered why they were ordering more if they were flat-out broke, but they were beyond reason.

I pushed off the ground and dove into the dungeon. Using the force of that stomp to propel me upward, I shifted my weight forward to propel myself to even greater speeds and delivered a smashing one-handed blow with my staff. With the other hand, I parried one orc attack, dodged another as I darted in elbow first, and pivoted to avoid the orc lashing out with a kick as it fell.

Yup, Diamond Fist gave me hand-to-hand combat capability, but I could only exercise it on upper dungeon floors. Charitably speaking, I'd estimate that my physical stats were about level 50 or so, which, when coupled with the effects from my equipment, meant that I was theoretically brawny enough to brawl all the way down to the mid-floors. But...even on these upper floors, hand-to-hand combat inevitably ended with me falling to pieces.

"I'm physically strong enough to not get OHKO'ed on the upper floors, right? I mean, some might say you shouldn't take on dungeons if you get pummeled that easily, but who wants to listen to them? Anyway, my body's learned to take the heat a little, so it's probably not an issue if I put it through the wringer so long as I'm careful. I think? I mean, I'm just fighting orcs."

Jiggle jiggle.

Hence why I was trying out a mighty martial art known as *bajiquan*. But *bajiquan* was useless for any sort of long-ranged fighting (it turned you into a sitting duck), and the complexity of the footwork turned it from some ultimate, invincible technique into a super-powerful close-range-focused martial art. Even so, martial arts that let you take out foes in one high-speed hit via stomps and honed, rapid movements don't exactly grow on trees. Plus, with all the variations of moves and the ways they could be chained together, *bajiquan* had endless applications in battle. Because of its focus on super close-range attacks, it had tons of powerful techniques that involved shoulder or elbow jabs, which other schools of martial arts tended to overlook.

A burly orc swung a club at me. I swooped in under the range of the weapon and smashed into the brute with my elbow without ever slowing down. My elbow alone wasn't enough to finish the job, but my own top speed meeting the momentum of the orc did the trick. At the moment of impact, I leaned forward with all my body weight and stomped on the ground for an extra burst of speed.

"Life and Death's all about moving as fast as I can at super close range. Kinda reminds you of tai chi, huh?"

Wobble wobble.

Tai chi wasn't great with distance, but *bajiquan* let me use Teleport and close the gap as fast as Ground Shrink or Blinding Step would allow. If I used a staff, that gave me even wider range. If that staff could get longer mid-strike, then we were really in business.

"It'd be kinda cringey to whip out the staff-fighting martial art *xingyiquan*, so I'm not doing that. And hey, adding my hydra to Snake Fist opens a new realm of options... Although we're not really in kung fu territory anymore."

Jiggle jiggle.

Pulling off a full-body, close-range attack in a split second was pretty tricky, you know? *As it turns out, crafting a fantasy version of wriggly, writhing*

Tentacle Snake Fist takes a lot of effort.

I spun around and glided out of the way of the orc attempting to brain me over the head with its club. With one light hand on its shoulder, I used my own body weight to pull the orc to me in one fluid motion. As its torso tipped forward, I smashed my knee into its face, cracking its skull to bits. It lost its balance entirely, which served to dash it against the floor and my waiting knee. *Yeah, kung fu techniques can either mess a person up real bad or else outright kill them, which makes it not so ideal for casual competitions.* If you wanted to do someone in, kung fu was the way to go.

“If I use the orc’s own strength against it, I guess my own level and stats don’t matter a bit, huh?”

Wiggle wiggle.

Tai chi moves offered both offense and defense, which gave a lot of flexibility to play a situation by ear. That made control of your own body and the ability to read your opponent’s moves crucial. But this wasn’t all that difficult, because the orcs weren’t exactly the sharpest tools in the shed and I was a pro at polishing them off with one hit. And because kung fu was basically a matter of chaining together different moves, even I, with my lack of control over my own body, could fight like a well-oiled machine. That was, so long as I could execute each move perfectly. Yup, right now it was crucial for me to have an efficient fighting style that would take out foes ASAP.

My POW wasn’t anywhere near good enough to let me beat up orcs with good old punching and POWing. But martial arts provided efficient destruction, so even the less physically gifted got a shot at taking out their foes. All the moves used logic to kill. Their lethality came from a combination of forces. That’s what made martial arts so dangerous and turned them into a face that only a middle schooler going through their edgy phase could love. Good thing I kept so much martial arts knowledge from my edgelord days, huh?

“Anything I whack with my staff’s a goner up on these upper floors, but when

I try to aim while dodging, it turns this into a matter of technique over brute strength, ya know? I mean, the only reason I'm going through all this song and dance is because my stats are too weak to let me use my skills. But I guess it doesn't matter how weak I am since all I'm doing is fighting orcs. Or was fighting, I guess."

These moves required me to start in *hanmi*— a fundamental stance with one leg and one arm forward, presenting my side to the foe and turning my chest away. I then piled on all the complexity I could handle. When that wasn't enough, I threw other moves into the mix to trick my enemies and lure them into a trap. Yup. All my past experiences had taught me one thing: if I tricked 'em, I'd make it through some way or another. If I managed to kill them, then great, one less opponent to worry about. And if I didn't, then I had to keep on whacking away at them until they finally went down, and that's all there was to it.

"I'm not trying to get jacked or anything. I just want to kill monsters. So I figure all I need is the strength to kill, you feel me? I'm a background NPC who can't level up, so I'm not asking for much."

Jiggle jiggle.

I had to get better stats so I could protect my body from falling apart, but I took so darn long to level up it wasn't even funny. At this point, all I wanted was having the skills to kill stuff. I was happier being a weak killing machine than a buff powerhouse capable of protecting myself.

"Well, there goes the last of the orcs. Whaddya think, time to get a move on? If I don't get stronger fast, our local worrywarts will worry themselves sick. Although I wish they'd worry more about not squashing me flat in those bargain sale battle royales!"

Bobble bobble.

A pack of wolves sprang up to take a nibble at me. I raised my hand like I was bringing it up to shield my eyes and shoulder slammed into one of the wolves'

heads, throwing my entire body weight into the maneuver. At the moment of contact, I stomped on the ground with all my might. With that one single blow, it was bye-bye wolf head.

“Ha. I’ve weathered many an onslaught of biting from the mean girls, and whenever they slack off, Tiny Tanuki is there with a nipping to pick up the slack. You really think a biting attack will work against me? Ha! Seriously, Tiny Tanuki is no joke. That girl’s a speed demon.”

Wobble wobble.

Shoulder checks were a close-range tai chi technique that paired well with my Aegis Shoulder Shields. Adding spikes to the shoulder shields might’ve upped the destructive ante even further, but I shuddered to think what it would do to my sex appeal. I guess I still had a while to wait before this fantasy world hit its Mad Max era.

“Some level 33 Brown Wolves, huh? Looks like someone forgot to shave their whiskers. Or a lot more than that, actually, since they’re all covered in hair.”

Jiggle jiggle?

With small, quick motions, I put together my sequence of moves. Doing justice to the simplest, most basic form of the move, I practiced over and over again until I had perfected the right starting stance and follow-through.

“I dunno if it’s just that animalish monsters are a different beast (har har), but I feel like they’re more difficult to beat than other monsters. Because sure, they’re big, but they also have low centers of gravity. Wait a minute. Is this a flag saying that I need to study Animalish Fist too? Crouching tiger vs hidden wolf? Well, it’s game over for them the minute I pull out any vinegar, so maybe I don’t need to go through the hassle of learning a new technique.”

Wobble wobble!

What was that, Slimey? You can never be too prepared? You know it, brother. Preach. But in this case, was that a “Psst, Haruka, you ought to learn Tiger Fist!”

Wobble wobble! or a “Psst, Haruka, you better stock up on vinegar!” *Wobble wobble?!*

“These may only be combinations of different set moves, but I feel like it’s starting to really come together for me. Hey Slimey, why don’t you go tell the worrywarts what you said to me? You know, the *Wobble wobble* thing.”

Wiggle wiggle!

“Ouch! That’s harsh, bud. Hey, I’m making headway in my battles today. And my trip-and-fall count’s still only in the double digits, okay?”

To give credit where credit’s due, I was tripping and falling quite a lot. When I tripped and fell onto an enemy with enough force, it counted as a tai chi attack. I was sure it gave the monsters some comfort to know that my crash landings were not only perfectly safe for me, but doubled as an easy, effective, OHKO. Yeah, the comfort of the grave?

“It sure is a pain picking up all these spellstones, though. At least tai chi doesn’t send me flying all over the place, so the spellstones stay put too. Whenever the three dungeon emperors and I take on a dungeon together, we instakill enemies so fast it takes ages to pick all the spellstones up.”

Jiggle jiggle.

My staff glided in a circle and then sliced through my next foe in a horizontal flash of light. I wasn’t about to go hand-to-hand with a pile of rocks, ya know? And it was a metal golem to boot. That meant it was bound to be made of a lotta metal, and that’d hurt my hands for sure. Not happening. Granted, I had changed my leather gloves into gauntlets and snuck in an extra “Brass Knuckles: Power, Speed +30%. Knockback. Fainting Spells (Qi Wizardry). +ATT”, so hand-to-hand combat might not have been so bad. Either way, I didn’t want to end up in pain! I knew that, relatively speaking, I was dealing with some sort of pain or another all the time, but I stood by my principles: pain sucked. Which is why I used my staff instead.

“These Brass Knuckles let you add skills to them bold as—ha—brass, so I tried

adding some Qi Wizardry Skills, but I don't know what effects those'll have? And stuff? Maybe I should have gone for Fire Knuckles or Gravity Knuckles instead."

Bobble bobble.

I crouched, dodged the swing of the golem's stout metal arm, and leaped forward while simultaneously letting the momentum from my push off the ground guide my slashing staff. That momentum about bowled me over too, and I slipped and skidded behind the golem before opening it from its left shoulder to its right hip in one flowing motion. Then I finished it all off with an elbow strike, which doubled as the motion to right myself.

"I was aiming for the gallbladder, but it felt like I hit the gallium bladder! No kidding was that a level 49 Metal Golem. I can't feel my entire elbow!"

Now it was time for the final floor: floor 50. *Off to say hi to the dungeon king.* Once I did, I'd figure out whether to make it catch these hands or catch this staff. Of course, if the dungeon king turned out to be a smoking babe, then I'd have a list of other considerations, but apart from dungeon emperors, I'd never seen a smoking babe spawn in a dungeon. Maybe they were a special bonus that came with having a hundred floors? Shoot, if all the bosses turned to hot girls after a hundred floors, then I'd say it was high time we started level-grinding the dungeons themselves! I'd become a dungeon master because, oh baby, I was ready to catch 'em all. I mean, I already had the Ring of the Dungeon Master and everything? *Yoo-hoo, monster girls? You there?*

"Well, I tried to raise the hot-girl flag, but all I got was a level 50 Cockatrice giving me a serious stare-down. Although cockatrices are female while basilisks are male, so in the very broadest sense of the term, I guess this qualifies as a monster girl?"

Jiggle jiggle?!

This so-called "queen of the serpents" looked more like a rooster to me. I guessed that's because a rooster comb looked like a crown, ya know? And stuff? And the cockatrice had feathered wings, even if they were kinda batlike.

Only its tail was a snake.

“How come this queen of the serpents is a rooster whose only snaky bit is the tail? And could you knock it off with the cock-a-doodle-doo-ing? What business does a serpent queen have making cock-a-doodle-doo noises?”

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

This so-called serpent queen/overgrown rooster crouched down and advanced on me with a slither.

“Oh, so you’re now acting like a snake, huh? It’s too late for that, bub. You blew your cover the moment you cocked your first doodle-doo. There’s no coming back from that now.”

Cockatrices oozed a deadly poison that withered the ground where they walked, because the cockatrice was a desert creature—or, rather, it’s a creature that made deserts. It left a trail of poison that killed any creature who touched it, and its breath turned all living things to stone. And here she skulked towards me, oh queen of serpents, oh cockatrice, oh...giant chicken.

“I mean, this dungeon is a bunch of rocks anyway. It’s less a desert than a boulder patch, but I guess you don’t really need to worry about extinguishing life when it’s all a bunch of rocks anyway, so...no harm, no fowl? Oh yeah, isn’t the glare of the cockatrice supposed to turn you to stone and kill you? Is that why she keeps glaring at me?”

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

This big ole bird stared me down with snake eyes. I guess she hadn’t yet made up her mind about which critter she wanted to be.

“Look, I dunno if this level 50 Purportedly a Snake Chickenatrice is actually a dungeon king or not, but I’ve gone through the poison on the 99th floor of the Ultimate Dungeon and lived to tell the tale, so your Petrification skill’s a joke. Hey, wait a minute. I raised the monster girl flag, and all I got was a chicken. She’s a monster girl in name only!”

I'm just saying, these dungeons could be a lot friendlier to us flag-raisers.

“And wait, how come you fell over twitching when all I did was glare back at you? You can dish it out but can't take it, huh? C'mon, I've stopped glaring, so get back up. Don't you dare die from that—think what that'll do to my sex appeal and my image! Everyone knows I have adorable eyes, right? Please, help me out here. Hold on, the tongue flopping out of your beak's a snake? You're really laying that snake thing on thick! Wait, no, no, no! I wasn't yelling at you, I promise. I'm not mad at you! Come on, help me out he—oh shoot, there goes your HP.”

It was definitely a chicken, but when I tried picking it up and adding it to my “Snakecharmer's Necklace: Can insert seven items. Intelligence +40%, Snake Replication, Poison Production, Scale Hardening, +Defense.” It went in for some reason? Well, you know what they said: if it looked like a chicken, sounded like a chicken, and acted like a chicken, then it's a snake.

“Cockatrice: Spell Eye (Petrification), Curse (Petrification, All Poisons, Status Ailments), Venom (All Antidotes, Petrification, All Poisons, Status Ailments), Flying Bonus (small).”

“So why is it taking up a snake slot?!”

Wiggle wiggle?

I wanted to throw the thing out. A snake with Flying Bonus (small)? Get real. It was a freaking chicken. And the Petrification thing—yeah, I know, that was the selling point of a cockatrice. And everyone knew that cockatrices and poison went hand in hand. So whatever, I could live with that. Status ailments were all fine and dandy, too. And if it came with the antidotes to boot, fantastic. My problem was, skipping the Spell Eye thing...the Curse.

“You're telling me I can curse people now? Funny you mention that, 'cause aren't the meatheads off in a dungeon right now? Whoops, wouldya look at the time? Gotta run, I've got some urgent stuff to do. Catch you later! Look out, meatheads, because here comes a celebratory curse!”

Jiggle jiggle?

But I mean, that cockatrice was still making chicken sounds, you know? This fantasy world didn't make any sense. Whoever heard of a snake that went cock-a-doodle-doo?

DAY 102

MIDDAY

Maybe the real chicken-lizards were the friends we made along the way.

DUNGEON

ONCE AGAIN, Haruka-kun had told us that he'd be fine on his own. After all, he was only going to take on a shallow dungeon. Before we knew it, he had wandered off to a mid-floor-class dungeon. We knew he would be okay since he had Slimey with him, but even as I spoke, I imagined he was tripping all over himself, caked in mud and blood and flailing his staff everywhere.

Haruka-kun had trouble leveling up, but he kept training over and over until he developed skills and martial arts abilities. And then he'd lost them all. So now he was off on a quest to regain his strength, fighting all the way with a body so frail the stress of daily life could do him in.

"Let's keep it up, girls! The dungeon king's a level 87 Asclepius Cyclops with Automatic Healing, so let's finish it off in one shot."

"Got it! Spread out, everyone."

"I call dibs on the right leg."

"I'll distract it and keep it focused on me!"

"Cool, and I'll poke its eye out."

"Okay! Then that leaves the left leg for me."

Haruka-kun never listened to a word when we protested him going off on his own. I even explained what was going on to Kakizaki-kun and his friends after they came back, but when I asked them to stop Haruka-kun, all they said was, "Nah, bruh. He's fine. This is Haruka we're talking about." They totally brushed me off.

They'd never seen Haruka-kun turn up looking like a bloody mess! Yes, they'd seen him vanish on dancing feet, slice a row of monsters in two with one fell stroke, dodge sprays of blood from his foes as he hacked and slashed, and parade through the bloodbath as nonchalantly as if he'd been on a little stroll. They hadn't seen him sliding and staggering home, bedraggled and foul with both his own and monster blood.

I wanted to knock out our assigned two dungeons ASAP and run to meet up with Haruka-kun. Even if we showed up and found he didn't need our help, I still wanted to be there to congratulate him on a job well done. Even if I didn't have to, I wanted to be there for him as he struggled on, fighting with a burning desperation. These monsters had better hurry up and die if they knew what was good for them!

"Let's wrap this up and go pick up Haruka-kun. It's murder time!"

"You know it!"

We rained so many arrows and Blind spells down on the creature that we soon couldn't see its single eye behind the blast of scorching light. Our shield wall deflected its spear attack, and within moments, its legs buckled under its own weight and our flurry of attacks. The cyclops fell to its knees. *Perfect. Looks like we'll be able to knock it out in no time.* After all, Haruka-kun was even now struggling for dear life in the mud and the mire. Never once giving up.

"I'll take its head off!"

"You got it. We're here for backup if you need us."

It could have had Revival, it could have had Automatic Healing, it could have had anything, everything but the kitchen sink as far as I cared. *Just die already so we can go find Haruka-kun!* He was down to his last scrap of health while fighting away all on his lonesome. He was waiting for us.

"My lightning whip will tear this cyclops to shreds. Go, hundred lashes!"

With a shockwave that broke the sound barrier, my Thunderbolt Chain Whip

pelted the cyclops's neck with a volley of lightning strikes. The wounds were cauterized on the spot as my whip tore chunks of flesh off its flabby neck. Then the titanic creature slowly crumbled to a heap as its head fell off and rolled away from its neck.

Whew. We were done. Now it was time to go back up Haruka-kun.

The minute we stepped out of the dungeon, we found Haruka-kun had, in fact, already turned up to give us back up. *And uh, I have to ask...what's with the chicken?*

Cock-a-cock-a-cockerel-a-doodle-doo!

Jig-a-jig-a-jig-a-joggle-jig!

“Okay, now you're literally calling yourself a rooster! If you're at the point where you're slipping a cockerel into the middle of your doodle-doing, your snake act is cock-a-doodle-done-for. Come on, hydra, you tell her. It's fine for the queen of serpents to be a rooster. How else is she supposed to rule the roost, ya know?”

Ssss?

Okay, so I guessed he was in a fierce debate with a snake, a chicken, and Slimey. Right now, he was trying to one-up the chicken by “debating her with facts and logic” (read: he abducted her), but even the hydra looked taken aback by Slimey's deductive methods and flow of logic. Then Haruka-kun used induction to attack the contradictions in the chicken's statement, arguing that just because the precepts were true didn't prove the conclusion was valid. They sure were making an awful racket standing there in the entrance of the dungeon like that...which was impressive, considering it was all coming from a single guy with a slime on his head.

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Wiggle wiggle?

“See, you're the one crowing about how much of a bird brain you are!

Whoever heard of a snake that flaps its wings? Your bird head is the only part of you doing the talking, and your snake tail's not saying a word! Back me up here, hydra. You tell her tail that she's the queen of the serpents, and it's high time her snake part showed the chicken part who's boss."

Ssss?!

"No, hear me out. Say we're in some battle, looking all cool and doing our Snake Fist thing, and then she pops out crowing like a rooster? We'll be laughing stocks! Everyone'll be like, 'Snake Fist? More like Chicken Fist, *snicker snort*' 'More like chic-kung fu, *snort guffaw*' Look, I've already proved with perfectly logical reasoning how weird it is for her to be in the Snake Fist when she's not even a snake. And she won't stop making chicken noises!"

I guessed it was a long story. *You know what? Let's ignore all that and go home.* And at least they were having...fun?

Plus, Haruka-kun had a hydra sprouting out of his right shoulder and a cockatrice out of his left—not to mention Slimey riding on his head. We had nothing to worry about this whole time. He was a one-man allied dungeon kings association.

"He's got a dungeon emperor on his head, an infinite supply of tentacles, and isn't he up to a hundred hydra heads now too?"

"He may not be able to walk straight, but even in mid-floor-class dungeons, he's an unstoppable, one-man allied dungeon kings fall-on-his-association!" Uh-huh, it'd take a lot more than monsters that obeyed ordinary logic to defeat such a supremely absurd person as Haruka-kun. Even if he were tripping and stumbling and couldn't walk in a straight line not only did Haruka-kun spring back to his feet, but he somehow managed to bring down a cockatrice and capture it for use as a weapon. Even dungeon kings were powerless in the face of his absurdity!



“Oh hey, there you are. I ran all the way over ’cause I have an urgent question to put out to the people. Now, for democracy’s sake, tell me: what would you call this?”

Haruka-kun pointed at the cockatrice, which gave us a smug look and shook its snakey booty at us. *Uh...what is he asking, exactly?*

“That? Isn’t that a chicken?”

Cock-a-doodle-doooooooo!!!

Believe it or not, the cockatrice was holding its weight with its cock-a-doodle-doo’ed arguments, but if you didn’t know any better, you would have thought this fierce debate was nothing more than an especially zealous ventriloquist act. Then Haruka-kun struck a hawk pose as if he was trying to threaten the chicken! Said chicken happened to be on his shoulder, so I’m not sure how he thought that would work. It was also a heck of a trick to tell what pose he making given the cockatrice and hydra on his shoulders, Slimey on his head, and the cloak covering the whole thing.

“Would you shut up already, you chicken-oil salesperson? I can see you now, calling up some kind, innocent monster and telling them, ‘Hello sir or madam, I am the queen of serpents currently living in exile and I will need to transfer a number of funds into your bank account in order to come home and retake my snakey throne,’ and let me tell you, ma’am, you have been caught, nabbed, discovered, identified, and apprehended red-handed! Also, I’m down to scam people?”

Jiggle jiggle!

Cock-a-doodle-doooooooooooooooooooo!

Some kind of comedy act was unfolding, one so bad it was giving us all a headache. The hydra and the cockatrice were both S-rank, calamity-class dungeon kings. I wouldn’t have pegged them as the sort of creatures you’d want to do a comedy bit with, particularly when the slime on Haruka-kun’s head

was an apocalypse-class slime dungeon emperor. The man of the hour himself not only outstripped calamity-class, he blew past catastrophe and calamity to be a total annihilation-class monster serial kidnapper.

“Oh my god. All of you, shut up already. Especially you, chicken bully 1 and 2!”

Bobble bobble!

Cock-a-doodle-doo?!

The snake and the chicken looked remorseful, but Slimey acted like he didn’t know what I was chewing him out for, and the principal offender of this noise complaint was firmly convinced that he was a total bystander. Nope, not his fault, it had nothing to do with him.

There wasn’t a hint of shame in his voice as he said to the chicken, “*Ooooooh*, you’re in *trouuuuble*,” and cackled, blissfully unaware of the hypocrisy. The whole way through the dungeon, I’d been anxious to get out and come find him, but my anxiety was gone the minute we met. Now I kind of wished I’d saved myself the effort.

“Wow, you told all of them off at once! You’re so good with animals. You must have learned how to handle them back when you were in charge of the class pet in elementary school.”

“A chicken, a snake, a slime, and an animal in bed all in one go? You’re incredible.”

“Well, it didn’t have much of an effect on that last one.”

“Oh my gosh. Is this...the Pied Piper of Hamelin come again?”

“Sorta, but I think the chicken’s the only one who fits the Pied Piper aesthetic. And that’s not even a chicken. It’s a cockatrice.”

“Uh-huh, but she could, like, make a band out of them anyway, ya know? ‘Cause the hydra was out here grooving and moving and rapping and tapping and bapping away on the trumpet just yesterday.”

“Yeah, and he made a killing on tips from the crowd in town!”

Haruka-kun had been doing something of the sort yesterday under the cover of getting us back on our feet, but it apparently allowed him to make a pretty penny. That meant he could pay his rent. Once we got back, he'd be in for a lecture!

"Hey, did you know that cockatrices are actually based on mongooses? In ancient Greek literature, the Egyptian mongoose is called an *ichneumon* or 'tracker,' which translated to *calcatrix* in Latin, and that turned into *cocatrix* in Middle French. So it's basically a mongoose?"

Cock-a-doodle...doo?

We all set off for town as Haruka-kun kept up a heated discussion with the chicken on his shoulder. Haruka-kun was always giving the gatekeeper grief about the way they let everyone into the city, but I had to wonder too: why on Earth did the gatekeeper let him in? Haruka-kun, the shadiest character in the entire frontier? And he was still beefing with the bird the whole way through!

"So to begin with, the Egyptian mongoose gets its common name *ichneumon* 'cause it's a predator of snakes and crocodiles, and when that got mixed up with the basilisk in medieval England, the original meaning got all turned around. Now it's a snake monster instead of a monster who hunts snakes, ya know? And the chicken part came about because the 'cock' part of the name was reminiscent of a cockerel, but chickens really had nothing to do it. So why's a mongoose actually a chicken trying to pass herself off as the queen of the serpents?"

Cock...a...doodle-doo?

The chicken was stunned by the loss of its *raison d'être*, having learned of its hidden backstory and gotten its existence denied in the same breath. A look of great sorrow and bewilderment crossed its face. It had lived its life as a cockatrice. This denial shook the foundation of its identity.

When Haruka-kun saw that, he panicked and launched into a scathing roast crossed with an attempt to cheer the legendary creature up. "It's okay, this is a

fantasy world anyway. Who cares if the reason you exist is some cockatrice-and-bull story?"

Slimey and the hydra joined in too, all trying to make the poor cockatrice feel better. The chicken seemed, for some odd reason, touched. I felt like I was starring in the world's weirdest soap opera. Yes, it was quite dramatic and heartwarming the way they all passionately hugged and made up, but the fact that all the monsters were coming out of Haruka-kun's shoulders also made it very surreal.

This was how Haruka-kun always tricked us into thinking things were fine and that we had nothing to worry about, even when things were not fine. Even though I knew it was all a ruse, I had the hardest time staying concerned as I watched him. There they were, all four of them running off into the sunset... although Haruka-kun was the only one running.

If he tried to go through the gate like that, I was sure this would finally be absurd enough for the gatekeeper to draw the line... Right? Right?!

DAY 102

EVENING

Looks like I'll have to put a cleaning and disinfecting skill on those daggers

WHITE LOSER INN

THE JOCKS were happy to be back in the frontier and testing their chops against its challenging dungeons, but the priests...looked dead inside. Apparently, Haruka-kun had yanked them away from the rest of our group and forced them to tackle a dungeon with Kakizaki-kun and his friends.

Their eyes would have looked more at home on dead fish, but from the looks on the rest of their faces, something had changed. They no longer wore the ghastly blank looks of people ready for death. In fact, it looked like a huge weight had been lifted off their shoulders. They clearly no longer entertained the concept of volunteering to die.

"The scales have been lifted from our eyes," said one of the priests. "Why would we ever want to throw our lives away in battle when we could turn our minds off and wallop away instead?"

"I once had such strength of spirit that I did not fear to die a martyr or follow my lordship to the grave. But now I'm a believer in punch first, ask questions later."

"Before you seek God's salvation, try clobbering first. Clobbering solves everything nine times out of ten!"

"God told us to extend a hand to those in need, but it turns out extending a knuckle sandwich is just as good."

"One can prevail through any of God's little tests if one only pummels their way through. And if it isn't a test from God...well, a little pummeling never hurt

anything.”

“If a good beat-down doesn’t do the trick, then that calls for even more thrashing! Whooping butt is my copilot.”

“Haruka, we’re starving!” the priest-breakers complained to the priest-breakers-breaker. “When’s dinner gonna be ready?”

“Did you seriously come back just to get free food?”

Word had it that the priests had been forced to join a battle with Kakizaki-kun and his friends. When left to their own devices, the jocks went beast mode. So I guess being made to join in broke the priests’ power of rational thought and unlocked their own beast mode. Everything they were saying still sounded pious enough—except for the part about beating up people!

I rounded on Haruka-kun. “Why are the priests brainwashed?!”

“Yeah, Haruka-kun! The church teaches some pretty nasty stuff, but this is way worse.”

“What kind of god tells his followers, ‘Turn the other cheek so I can slap that too’?”

“That sounds like a demon, not a god! Please don’t worship that!”

“And how on earth did they end up espousing the virtues of pummeling people? The priests used to be so serious and sober, but now they’re giggling sinisterly. What’s with that dangerous glint in their eyes?”

“Yeah, they look like total villains.”

The priests looked like whole new people. It was less that we’d discovered a new side of them and more that their personalities had been swapped out for completely different ones. It felt like some dramatic mental breakdown scene in an anime.

“These old priest dudes were convinced they couldn’t win against the Theocracy, so they were dead-set on strapping bombs to themselves and going kaboom in the middle of the enemy, ya know? Yup, they’d abandoned all hope

and were trying to run away from reality with suicide bombing or a noble death. So I put 'em with the brainless battle bozos and triggered their own brainless battle mode? And stuff? They had issues with analysis through paralysis, so I infected 'em with idiocy. 'Cause, yup, they're idiots?"

The priests had seemed so somber previously because they had already resigned themselves to death. Their calm smiles were those of men who had given up and accepted their fate. Thus, they trained themselves as human suicide bombers to give their deaths meaning, to protect their people through a kamikaze attack. *Mm-hmm, that would do it. Haruka-kun hates seeing people give up. He detests people risking their lives. If you die on him, you'd better have some sort of plan to come back to life, or else you'll make him apoplectic. You can never give up hope. Not in front of Haruka-kun.*

We could never give up, not until he did. And Haruka-kun would never, ever give up. You could kill him, and that still wouldn't stop him. Besides, killing him would be a pretty tall order in and of itself. This was how he'd made it so far—to this very day, surviving. Fighting. Feeding his chicken... I guess he'd finally warmed up to the cockatrice.

"Oh my god, this is getting ridiculous. Now one of the priests is licking a dagger."

"You'd think it'd be filthy from all the monster stabbing."

"He used to be so kind and devout. He was so focused on living a humble life of poverty. What the heck happened?"

"Which 'he' are you referring to? The priest licking his knife or the priest adding spiky shoulder pads to his cassock? Oh, or the one with the nail-studded bat?"

"No one breathe a word of this to Arianna-san. She's already been through enough. This'll just make her cry."

The priests had been kindly, yes, but at heart they were cowards. History was full of major cowards who'd fallen prey to evil. Hence why Haruka-kun had

drawn inspiration from Kakizaki-kun's group—the absolute madlads who were born to be a part of this fantasy world.

Back when we were in school, everyone knew the jocks in our class because of the sports they played and thought they were hot, but I always got the impression that they were kind of cold. There wasn't really anything that made them happy. Yet it turned out they were...meatheads all along? At first, I didn't have the faintest idea what Haruka-kun was talking about when he called them that, but no. They really were meatheads. And total strangers from the kids I'd once known. They were friendly, easy-going, and cheerful. A smile was never far from their lips, and honestly, I'd never seen them smile like that before.

It was like they were born to be warriors here in this fantasy world, whereas back home, these same traits would have gotten them labeled as weirdos. At heart, they were berserkers who craved battle. They delighted in putting their lives on the line, and they loved death like it was a true friend. Our peaceful home world offered them no such opportunities to get their blood thrumming, so they'd lived in a perpetual state of distant apathy. Now liberated from the chains of their eternal ennui and joyless existences, they accepted the labels of barbarians, meatheads, and idiots with nothing more than a laugh.

“Bro, Haruka, I'm hecca hungry!”

“I'm wasting away here, dude!”

“Meat, man, we need meat. Wait, don't give us raw meat. We're not dogs!”

“Homie, there's such a thing as being too healthy, you feel me? And mushroom bentos 'round the clock counts. I'm dying here, man. I legit think I'm not getting enough meat and blood in my diet.”

“We're hungry, Haruka! Feed us!”

Yes, now liberated from the chains of their joyless existences, they were a bunch of meatheads with very healthy appetites. They were truly mere shadows of the cool, distant guys they used to be. *If only their old fan clubs could see them now.*

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll feed you. But you made sure those old dudes got to have some proper fights on the lower floors, didn’t you? If all they picked up from you dumbos is how to lick knives, then dinner tonight’s gonna have to be a knife bowl. I guess you’d have to swallow it down in one gulp? Actually, that sounds like fun.”

“No, it doesn’t! And we didn’t teach them jack about licking knives.”

“Knife bowls? Nuh-uh! Anyway, we threw ’em in the deep end once we got to floor 70, so they got tons of fighting experience.”

“Yeah, and we also dragged ’em down to floor 80 and made them fight with us.”

“We took their bombs and shields and stuffs. Left ’em with only their daggers, so we’re talking some major close-range fights.”

“They weren’t all that good at it, but hey, at least they got good enough not to get themselves killed.”

When Oda-kun’s group had joined the jocks, they’d described Kakizaki-kun’s group as mad beasts. These berserkers savagely attacked monsters like carnivores going after prey. They were never like that around us. Even Oda-kun’s group said they couldn’t keep up with Kakizaki-kun’s friends when the latter was on the warpath, so I shuddered to imagine them letting loose in the middle of a pack of monsters. And then the poor priests had been dragged along and shoved into this madness. It was enough to make them lose their minds and...take up knife licking, I guess?

Pelting the other boys with insults and rice balls all the while, Haruka-kun set about making dinner with a spring in his step. He filled the table with dishes of fried rice with karaage and *babaocai*, sweet-and-sour Sichuan pork belly stir-fried with green pepper, hot-and-sour soup, kung pao chicken, and chow mein. Chinese soup spoons in hand, we fell upon the food in great delight. There were even gyoza, shumai, and steamed buns! They looked so good we were smacking our lips and dancing with glee. Haruka-kun said something or other about

making a lot of meat dishes in honor of the other boys' return. It was a spread all right: a vast and varied array of complex goodies. The battle was on!

"If nothing else, we gotta protect the fried rice and karaage with our lives!"

"For sure. None of us want a repeat of this morning."

"Yo, grab the buckets before the girls get here."

"Oh shoot, here they are! They're too fast! Those compression shorts turn 'em into monsters!"

"Aghh! Okay, fellas, it's on!"

"Come on, boys! No hogging all the fried rice."

"And the karaage."

"You need to eat your veggies, too."

"Yo, you're taking a whole plate of chicken for yourself? Girls, go easy on us. Please?"

"Hm... Nope, not gonna. But thanks for asking!"

"Ouch! You guys're cold."

"Excuse me? We're pretty hot, actually. Some would say stunning, even!"

"How're we looking on fried rice, bros? Did we get to keep any of it?"

"No... I couldn't save it."

"Itadakimasu!"

"Make sure you eat your veggies. But hands off the steamed buns!"

"Wait, what happened to the steamed buns?"

"How terribly unfortunate. Someone has absconded with the steamed buns."

"Hey, Class Rep!"

...Munch munch munch skrumpf skrumpf guulllllp

"You swallowed them all!"

“Don’t worry, I left enough meat buns for everyone.”

“But you ate all of the red bean buns yourself!”

After another finger-lickin’-good food fest and before our bath, we had a one-more set. The knife-licking, nail-studded-bat-wielding, spiked-shoulder-pad-wearing priests set on Kakizaki-kun’s group and beat them six ways to Sunday. The boys had taken the priests to the 80th floor of a dungeon for training, which meant that—not counting the priests, who were more of a bother than a help— a mere five meatheads could take on and defeat an 80th floor amongst themselves. Haruka-kun didn’t so much as bat an eyelid when he heard. This was the same thing as saying five of the boys equaled twenty of us girls.

“Please! Teach us your ways!”

Nod nod. Rattle rattle.

We attacked Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san with a flurry of spears and swords, but they parried all of them and slipped right past our shield wall. In the blink of an eye, they tore our perfectly impregnable battle formation to shreds. Angelica-san’s cape whirled behind her as she mowed down a grove of spears and a thicket of swords, her own thin blade sparkling. The arts club girls rushed up to assist our routed vanguard, but our instructors sent them reeling. Then the teachers cut through our disorganized frontline and aimed at Arianna-san’s group in the rearguard.

“Hang in there, Arianna-san. We’re coming!”

“All right!”

You could have mopped the floor with us in a melee. We didn’t stand a chance when we were all scattered like this. Now we kept our distance as we regrouped. We would be cut off from Arianna-san and the other nuns in moments. Our best bet wasn’t to fight the dungeon emperors, per se. Instead, we needed to bombard them with attacks and drive them off the nuns. However, when we tried, they ended up parrying the entire onslaught... Yet that let us reconvene with the nuns. We gathered up in formation once more, this

time adding Arianna-san's group into the attacking force. We arrayed ourselves in a semi-circle of five parties surrounding Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san. Even then, they cut through us and smashed our formations. We got positively wrecked!

"Thank you so much!"

"I guess we learned not to rush, huh?"

"Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san are fast and accurate, so we need to be speedy too if we don't want to get skewered."

"Yeah, but if we're too speedy, they'll capitalize on that and take us out."

We trained our defensive capabilities against Angelica-san as we each strategized and struggled to gain the upper hand. We improved our offense on Nefertiri-san, who toyed with us, her shield flickering and flashing in a beautiful dance before she lunged in for a counterattack. Then Professor Slimey, a new and sudden addition to the roster, hammered home to us the importance of making split-second decisions with his endless variety of truly incomprehensible fighting methods. Right, we'd all wanted to try squaring off against them after they had learned tai chi and grown so much stronger—although they were already as powerful as could be. *Don't tell me there's a rank above dungeon emperor!*

Naturally, the usual suspect was to blame: the notorious Mr. Haruka. I'd heard you needed to master tai chi to stand a chance against Lovemaking. It sounded like all three of them were engaging in some grandmaster qi wizard battles every night.

Anyway, time for our girls' meeting.

"Rub-a-dub-dub!"

"Oh shoot, I'm out of my bubbly body shampoo."

"Don't worry, you can have some of my bubbles ;)" *Squeezity shlickity shlick*

"Whoa, she's sharing the bubbles from her own body!"

“It’s kinda hot when the bubbles mingle together like that... In some sense of the word, you’re mixing bodily fluids!”

“Guys, don’t just stand there. Help me before I drown in bubbles!”

“Fear not. You are in the princess’s good hands. Oh, how I would love to be the recipient of Her Highness’s bubbled bosom...”

“...Is it really an honor?”

“Oh heavens. I fear that if I live much longer in the lap of luxury, I shall never be able to return to my vows of poverty.”

“Wow, this sauna has a steam mist system now.”

“Ooh, a steam sauna! Thank you so much, oh sauna provider.”

“It’s so nice of him to do things like this for us.”

“Yeah, he keeps making little renovations here and there.”

“I don’t know how he does it, but these towels are getting softer by the day. Don’t they feel like literal clouds now?”

“Ugh, yes. I am completely addicted to them.”

“The potstickers we had for dinner today were transcendently good. Even his cooking is next level.”

“Oh my god, they were sooo good. I loved them.”

“Hey Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san, what’s the word on any new products coming down the pipeline?”

“Mules, and, a few, new additions. To makeup kits.”

“Ooh, I want a pair of mules!”

“Also clothes, for warmer weather.”

“Yay, summer outfits!”

“And a cream. To make skin, better.”

“Helps it stay moist, always. And avoid sunburn.”

“It has Status Ailment Resistance, (tiny). But he worries, about, no physical resistance.”

“Oh yes, now that you mention it, he asked me a few questions about elven herbology.”

“That’s Haruka-kun for you. Ever the worrywart, huh?”

“A wise man, once said, ‘You can never be, too prepared, to kill people.’ It’s a good saying.”

“No, a wise man most certainly did not say that! That was a serial killer speaking!”

“That’s yet another of his made-up proverbs.”

“He’s giving our home world a bad rep.”

“Oh, yes. He taught us, proverbs. ‘I’ve made your bed, now die in it’? Meaning, be prepared, to slaughter enemies? Very deep. I like it.”

“That saying was plenty deep before Haruka-kun got his hands on it!”

“Now it’s less about taking responsibility for your own actions and more about killing people.”

“Well, if you do kill someone, it’s awfully nice of you to make their bed first. It’s kinda hard to keep on top of the household chores when you’re a corpse, you know?”

“I mean...you’re not wrong, but you’re also missing the point.”

We all got along so well. We had once been no more than classmates to one another, but at some point along the way, we’d grown to care for each other. Now we were more than dear, irreplaceable friends: we were like a family. We defended and assisted each other, risked our lives for one another and trusted everyone else to watch our backs. All the girls who sat around me grinning were my friends. They had journeyed all this way with me and weathered all those

horrible moments together. We were like brothers in arms. Family. Kindred spirits. Sisters. Now we were so comfortable together, we said whatever silly things came to our heads without any worries about what was considered proper or polite behavior. I knew for certain we would never have grown so close if not for being whisked away to this fantasy world.

“Focus! Get in, zone! Make your mind and body work as one!”

“Don’t get, cold feet. If Lovemaking gets the better of you, then you are, what is the word...toast.”

“Aggggh!” *Blub, blub.*

“Sync qi with breath. Let it, permeate, through whole body.”

“Must be perfect. Or the pleasure, gets inside. Destroys you.”

“Urrrk!” *Splash.*

Along with these harrowing accounts of their late-night activities, Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san regaled us with the epic saga, *The Masters of the Mattress*, in which the two did battle against the terrible Sex God and learned of his arts. Without tai chi qi activation, the Sex God’s Lovemaking would fry your brain and body and leave you in a puddle of ooze. Here I thought Haruka-kun was trying to get stronger, but no, he was also turning himself into a sex fiend. Lovemaking sent undulating waves of qi through the body to drive someone wild.

Okay, I like the steam sauna, and I agree that it’s important to learn tai chi. But do we really have to meditate naked?

DAY 102

NIGHT

For someone who's clearly transcended nuttiness, you'd think I'd have better post-nut clarity.

WHITE LOSER INN

THE BATTLE of the sexes was determined from the outgo. The lineup? The two lovely asses of Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl. Yup, I was in heaven?

The old adage “Curses, like chickens, come home to roost,” turned out to be true, because I had a couple birds keeping me company tonight, you feel me? But the minute the door opened, I found myself outnumbered by that pair of schemers. Even though I’d mastered tai chi, I soon realized that wouldn’t be enough to hold my weight in this match. So I tried using *mizongyi* to leverage a heroic resistance. Tai chi was the ultimate art for super-close-range matches, but *mizongyi* specialized in wrecking people by targeting pressure points and other vital areas. And since the girls had never seen it before, they didn’t know how to handle it. So I jab, jab, jabbed away!

“Supposedly created by Yan Qing from *Water Margin*, *mizongyi* (lost track skill) is also called *mizongquan* (lost track fist) or *yanqingquan* (Yan Qing fist). Like the names suggest, it’s known for its distinctly deceptive footwork. It uses agile maneuvers, sudden turns, and abrupt dips and ducks to dodge attacks and slip inside the opponent’s guard. I’m still a total novice, so I don’t stand a chance against two tai chi masters!”

The purpose of fighting them off was just to buy myself some time. I wanted to use the cockatrice’s Curse to increase their sensitivity, engage in a close-quarters “brawl”, and then...well, my roosting chickens and I were rounding home, but that’s almost the word for it! Yup, that sure was a good saying.

Unable to avoid my touch as the curse permeated their bodies, Miss Armor

Rep and Dancer Girl teared up. Their faces reddened as their breathing grew ragged. Thanks to Curse, their sensitivity skyrocketed every time I touched them. A whole quintet of sensitivity ran up and down their bodies as I jabbed pressure points and vital areas! Yup, I stroked and fondled and rubbed all over, to enormous effect. It more than made up for the disadvantage I had in hand-to-hand combat in such close quarters. Twisting my wrists in the way unique to *mizongyi*, I caressed them with Sensitivity Boost and turned the tables in my favor!

The two were already breathing heavily and twitching faintly. Now even a single touch could bring me victory! A lone fingertip grazing their bare skin made them spasm with pleasure, and they dropped like flies.

“And now that I have the upper hand, I can overwhelm you with my unlimited arsenal of options. That’s right, enjoy an infinite number of grotesque tentacles ft. a hydra and cockatrice collab!”

“Aghh, ah, ah!”

I unleashed the beasts. Even as it occurred to me that a chicken had no place being in the bedroom, I bound their limbs with my tentacles. The hydra peppered their juicy bodies with sweet nibbles, each bite injecting them with a sensitivity-boosting poison, and it let its tongue play out across Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl’s forms. When I tried tickling the two with the cockatrice’s feathers, they both started mewling, shivering, and twitching for some reason.

“Come to think of it, the cockatrice boosts powers of flight, right? Not that I wouldn’t mind joining the mile-high club, but...Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl look pretty far gone, even without that help.”

“Ah! Ooh, ah, ah.”

Yeah, I wasn’t sure what effect Flying Bonus (small) was having, but it looked like Dancer Girl’s and Miss Armor Rep’s brains had long since flown the coop. Their bewitching eyes were blown wide open, and drool trickled from those lovely lips. They were so messed up they couldn’t even twitch anymore. The sky

was the limit, but from the looks of it, these girls had blasted off and reached heaven already. Nice job, cockatrice!

“Anyway, I’d better punish you for having such bad manners to barge in on me without knocking or announcing yourselves. I mean, that’s how this trope works, ya know?”

I fondled a twin set of deliciously amber-colored globes while I played with the other girl’s sweet, pale flesh. Proper manners were once used to distinguish between the battlefield and the civilian realms, and that had now been sublimated into a code of etiquette. As a disciple spreading the good word of proper behavior, it was my duty to harden my heart and give these two a good, strict spanking until they were whimpering and mewling!

I stroked them with the cockatrice feathers all the way up their smooth inner thighs, eliciting twitches and convulsions from the immobilized pair. Those feathers were the real deal. I wasn’t sure if their heightened senses or the feathers were to blame—it could even have been the Flying Bonus (small) rocketing them to the stratosphere. Whatever was making them writhe in bliss was clearly out of this world.

“In these fantasy world battles, deep diving into your skills can open new doors to let you come out the other end victorious. I’m all about opening doors (and legs) and diving in deep to come...out the other end in pure paradise!”

The endless mass of writhing tentacles and teasing snakes held Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl in place. I toyed with them, making them shudder and twitch endlessly in bacchanalian revelry. I could see from their eyes that they were no longer present, but the wrecked smiles lingered on their faces as they fought for breath. Yup, they’d chew me out for this big-time come tomorrow morning.

“If I’ll be lectured no matter what, I might as well get the most bang(ing) for my buck! I say buck, but no one’s trying to buck the system; or rather, everyone involved’s making it far too tempting for me *not* to buck them. Anyway, there

are some beauties of booties in front of me, and after all the hanky-panky and panky-hanky and getting it on and onning it get, I wanna dive in!”

Now that they were taking a snooze break after all that twitching and moaning and seeing stars, it was time for me to log some time in my side hustles. If I were to look at Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep now, I’d be obligated to perform my teenage boy duty, and since even 1 percent of my teenage boyness would execute that task with great zeal, I knew I had best distract myself with my freelancing work. *Let me just put a towel over them first. Don’t look, don’t lo—oh mama, I looked.* Eh, what the hell. How about another round for old time’s sake?

“Ahhh! Ooh!”

I was become *Sturm und Drang*, the apostle of force and vitality and vigorous movement, ya know? Look, I was a teenage boy. What else was I supposed to do? Yup, I tried hard all right.

“All right, let’s get down to work. I got sidetracked a couple times, but this time I swear I got the girls covered up properly. So we’re good now, right? I still want to take another look, though.”

Putting a towel on the girls was a tough battle, the ultimate challenge for a teenage boy like me. I mean, when I started from the top down, then those lovely long legs of theirs demanded a rematch, and—well, I don’t want to make a mountain out of a molehill, but when I started from the bottom up, the terrific temptations of their marvelous mountains presented such an ordeal that before I knew it, I found myself marching up and down the hill. These nights dragged out so long that whoever said, “There is no night that never finds the day,” was a filthy liar. With my thought acceleration, I felt everything dozens of times over. A single day seemed to stretch out for an eternity...yeah, especially at night?

Yup, thought acceleration also prolonged sensations. That made pleasure last longer, but it was still bearable because it was stretched across the slowed-

down time. But that's why, even when diluted like that, mind-blowing pressure would decide the battle. Whenever Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl outnumbered me, scrambled my mind, and cut me off from my thought acceleration...that diluted sensation went back to its full strength, at which point I was a goner. That's why I was scared. The night was long, and the lecture would be even longer.

"Anyway, why's a perpetually single sixteen-year-old boy working a side job to make five sets of wedding presents? This is so pitiful I doubt I need to go around saying, 'I hope you explode' anymore. No one will mind if I cut the middleman and explode them myself, right?"

Well, while my mind's temporarily free from horniness, I might as well get cracking on crafting. I'd do my best to get over the pitiful tragedy of my sorry lot in life and then try very hard in bed with an unbroken chain of strategies dreamed up in my post-nut clarity!

"I mean, people keep telling me I graduated nuttiness and entered my post-nut period ages ago, but I've never seemed to get any clarity out of it. Dealing with all my teenage boy emotions is hard, you know? And stuff?"

So the idiots worked in small parties like adventurers, but the macho chicks were in the army and probably wouldn't need to be fighting constantly, right? They would be fine with heavy armor. They were still learning more evasion-based battle tactics, and if they were going to be taking lots of hits, they'd be best off with sturdy, well-sealed armor with good defensive capabilities. Well, they'd probably get hot and sweaty with all that getup on, but if they popped out of their armor all slick and glistening, I doubted the meatheads would complain. Yeah, talk about a perfect wedding gift.

"Hmm. They told me about their fighting styles, but I never got to see them in action. I don't have a very detailed picture of how they move in battle. Eh, I can use their musculature to guess that they'll need to make horizontal twisting and vertical extending motions. Even so, it's tricky to tell if they use two-handed swords or one-handed swords with shields. Those require different stances,

and... Oh right, I forgot about the pile bunkers!”

Since these suits of armor were wedding gifts, I’d asked the five meatheads if they had any requests to throw in on top of them. The response was unanimous: pile bunkers. *What else do you expect from a bunch of teenage boys, ya know? We’re creatures of adventure and romance whose dreams of derring-do invariably include pile bunkers.*

“I bet the macho chicks use kicking in battle, so that makes shaping their leg armor a real challenge.”

Coming up with a new design was always the most time-and-energy-consuming part of my production process. The longer I spent trying to visualize the ideal product, the more options I eventually had to choose from. When it came down to it, you couldn’t compromise on life-saving safety equipment. I tried to come up with a balance between my perfectionism and the need to cut corners for efficiency. For these questions that I stood no chance of answering on my own, I couldn’t rely on my usual method of fine-tuning. I had to make the closest educated guess I could. See, even if one of the macho chicks got bopped by a monster, I knew none of the idiots would blame me for it. So this armor had to be better than the best there ever was. If it wasn’t perfect, then what was even the point? If something bad happened and no one was to blame, then the fault rested squarely on my shoulders. That’s why it was my duty to live up to that responsibility. There was no point in anything but total protection. *So it’s no wonder making this armor’s posing such a challenge.* I didn’t have enough time to figure it all out, so I decided to turn on thought acceleration.

On armor, flat surfaces were fragile. They provided no way to divert force nor let attacks roll off of them, so they’d eventually collapse under enough pressure. The ideal solution was to make something with as many curved surfaces as possible. The best design was one where any attack would glance off, no matter where it landed or at what angle. But see, people weren’t shaped like spheres, so that’s impossible. So I sought the next best thing. *Yeah, I mean, Slimey’s shaped like a sphere, and look how powerful he is.*

“I can wear light armor too once I hit level 30, but right now I can’t make anything better than my ‘Clothes Set?’. Though it’s kinda sneaky how I can fit seven other pieces of armor inside it.”

I couldn’t make the macho chicks something like that. I also couldn’t give them equipment with super strong skills, or else those’d backfire and eat up too much of their MP. When armor and skills were *too* good, it ended up working to the detriment of the wearer. *In the end, moderation is key, ya know?*

“I bet their fighting styles will change as they level up out here in the frontier, but for now they’re the close-range brawler meathead types, right? So maybe I should go for something that provides solid defense and makes it easy to fight? Problem is, that’s about all I can do for them, anyway.”

I corrected the bend of the curved surfaces by a few tenths of a millimeter and adjusted the thickness throughout to make them uniform such that the force of any collision would be dispersed. God was in the details, as they say, and these little finishing touches could be the difference between life and death. I examined the armor, nitpicking all the way. Was it good enough for someone to bank their life on it? Was this really the best I could do? I kept asking myself if this was as far as I could go, if I wouldn’t find a better solution if I kept trying. Were these really the only options available to me? There was no limit, no end in sight. The only things stopping me were my time and magical effort.

“Yeah, these are far from perfect. Definitely not ideal. They’re just half-baked armor sets better than the absolute best armor around, so...I guess they’re done? I mean, this is the best I could do, so it’s not like they’re going to get any better, ya know?”

Then I added mithril to the armor, which made their skills stronger and added a host of new skills. As an artiste, this was always the hardest part. The more I poured my heart and soul into my work in pursuit of perfection, the more mithril took my work to the next level. It served as a reminder that I could only do so much on my own. There was a cap on how good I could make my

equipment even with mithril. This part of the process reminded me of just how little I knew. It showed me how far I still had to go.

Time flew by when you didn't work seriously, and you ended up with nothing for your efforts. It was only in the intense moments when you gave your work your entire soul that you could make new discoveries.

"Yup, I'm a high school boy with a never-ending list of assignments, but I guess since there's no more summer vacation, I never have to turn them in? I mean, no vacation equals no teacher yelling, 'Summer's over, turn in that homework!' I kinda miss that. It sucks to get isekai'd to a world with all assignments and no summer vacation!"

Now five suits of dull gray armor glinted before me. While they were covered in a thin layer of iron, the suits themselves were made of mithril. That made them relatively lightweight for heavy armor. One of my solutions to the difficult puzzle of making something lightweight and moveable was to focus my design on the concept of preserving life before all else. Naturally, the idiots' armor had so many weak points it practically screamed the concept of speedrunning death, but the stronger parts were as tanky as the meatheads themselves. So I made the macho chicks' armor the complete opposite of their fiancés' kit. Only idiots could use armor that stupid. They really were idiots, ya know?

I was done putting my blood, sweat, and tears into my side jobs. And now I had two terrific, top-of-the-line, ten-out-of-ten temptresses waiting for me! (Is two ten-out-of-tens a twenty?) And yeah, they were passed out right now. Even so, I was prepared to fight the good fight. For this heralded the start of Long Night: Chapter Two, Wherein Haruka Tries His Teenage Boy Hardest and, Like a Phoenix Rising from the Ashes, Uses Revival to Give Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl the Fight of Their Lives!

DAY 103

MORNING

Léon Foucault was trying to prove the Earth's rotation, but all we ended up proving was we were over the weight limit.

WHITE LOSER INN

I LOVE ME SOME GLARES. *Huge fan.* But how come Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep were glaring at me with tears in their eyes? What were they so pressed about? I guessed my lesson that it wasn't polite to go barging in without knocking had backfired. I had thought it best to give them a scolding they'd never forget and gave them my lecherous worst, but now they were pissed. *Bring on the lectures!* They even had me kneeling on the floor in repentance.

"Oh hey, here's a messenger from the army. Ugh, he's an old dude. Well, at least I have options. Should I fight him? Beat him up? Send him to his grave? Option D: All of the above?"

"Please don't do any of those things, sir! All I'm here to do is bring you a message. Why are those your only options? Obviously, your choice should be to listen to what I have to say!"

The sun was shining, the birds were singing a cheerful tune. This old dude was so utterly tone deaf he had to mar the morning melodies with a mighty mound of middle-aged man malaise. And yet, preposterously, ridiculously, absurdly enough, Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl would not let me attack him. Which sucked. Yeah, even though his arrival sprung me from the dungeon emperors' teary-eyed, glarey-eyed lecture, they wouldn't let me pass this lovely morning giving him a righteous beating.

"The troops from the capital have as of this morning marched all the way to the entrance of the neo-pseudo-dungeon. Presently, they are finishing a short pit stop at Fort Murimuri and will set out once more. We expect them to reach

the city by nightfall.”

“Thank you,” said Class Rep. “Would you mind verifying the plans with Lord Meropapa? We hope to take the First Division and the Imperial Guard to watch our dungeon training tomorrow, and we would then be ready to depart the following day.”

Well, apparently the messenger’s message was for my interpreter. I wondered why they thought an interpreter was necessary. We all spoke whatever fictional language existed in this world. Thanks to the fact that it was a straight shot on flat ground from here to the capital, troops and messages could both be here in no time. The way was so flat that any guard with Farsight up in a watchtower could see all the way to the horizon and immediately spot anyone approaching.

“Ooooooh, guess whose gonna meet their guuurrrrlfriends?”

“Now’s your chance to go, ‘Hello there, my darling dearest. I’ve been dying to see you.’”

“Hey, anyone mind if I set you guys on fire? Just a smidge of immolation. Just enough to burn away your memories and wild fantasies of your girlfriends. Oh yeah, and maybe burn you to a crisp too?”

“What part of ‘smidge’ do you not understand?! And we’re not gonna call anyone darling dearest!”

I found myself annoyed and pulled out my gun tonfas, but the meatheads hid behind their shields before I could fire away. These idiots were smarter than they looked! Yeah, but they had a good point: it probably wasn’t best to light a fire inside. If I did, Poster Girl would join the crabby crier club.

“Go for it, lover boys! Yeah, I see you cradling those bouquets like they’re your fiancées. ‘Oh, the night was so long without you in my arms, schmoopsie-poo. I could barely sleep a wink!’”

“Homie, we slept like logs.”

“And who the heck says ‘schmoopsie-poo’?”

I was so aggravated that I grabbed the grenades and nail-studded bats I’d made for the old priest dudes. The moment I picked them up, the compression shorts crew locked me in a boobily bodacious full nelson. *Hey, you know I can’t kill the idiots unless you let me go, right? The grenades would bust open the shield wall, and then I could go to town clobbering them with the nail-studded bats. Sounds like the perfect plan to me, ya know?*

Then the sandwich suicide scramble of the compression-shorts-clad teenage girls began while the idiots morosely munched away on their own cucumber sandwiches. I mean, they had to eat their veggies, you get me? *Not like a healthy diet will fix the meatheads’ lack of brainpower.*

“You don’t need to worry about going to meet the macho chicks. I mean, they don’t need an escort back ’cause I already have their new weapons and armor done. If you want, I can also sell you flower bouquets for totally rip-off prices, plus those nice tuxes I made for the ball. I’m fresh out of white horses to go riding in on, but there’s always the horse that pulls my carriage. Sure, he’s turned a nice charcoal color, gotten a heck of a lot bigger, and sprouted another four legs. Yup, he’s sure been trying his hardest. I kitted him out in horse armor and sent him into the monster forest every day to trample goblins and kobolds. He seems to like it, ya know? Want me to give him a jingle?”

“Nah, bro, we’re gonna go to the dungeons today... Uh, you sure that horse of yours isn’t a monster?”

“Yeah, the messenger dude said our girlfriends would be here this evening. Anyway, why does your horse have eight legs? Is that Sleipnir?”

“Yo man, thanks for the armor. You really didn’t have to—whoa, that horse is enormous!”

“Man’s casually setting Sleipnir loose to graze. Damn, dude, I wouldn’t be surprised if that horse turns out stronger than some dungeon kings.”

What were they going on about? My horsey was a gentle steed who obeyed

my every word and always came running when I called. Granted, he was bigger than most normal-sized carriages at this point. But that didn't change the fact that he was a widdle cutie pie.

Whisper, whisper... "There's no point in arguing with him. Haruka-kun's too attached to that horse."

"But that's Sleipnir! That's a dungeon king-class monster, bro!"

"Yeah, but it's totally tame, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh. And doesn't it play with the orphans all the time? It even takes them for rides and stuff."

"Isn't that a mythical horse, though?! How the heck did Haruka-kun domesticate a creature of legend?"

Anywho, my goal for today and tomorrow was to get to level 25. I wouldn't have any opportunities to level up once we set off for the Beast Nation, and our next stop after that was the Theocracy. I would have liked to whomp the pope and ship him off COD to the old dude in the white room, but strangely enough, those god-lovers were exceptionally greedy geezers. I could do the cliché thing and spout a one-liner like, "If you're such a big fan of god, why not go say hi to him for me?" The fact that the pope required such cajoling was a pain in the tuchus, know what I mean?

"Hey, you know what? I bet that if I make a bunch of cat-, dog-, and rabbit-ear headbands with matching tails in honor of our trip to the Beast Nation, then that'll sweeten our relations with the beastfolk. That, or they'll be super offended. Not sure which, ya know?"

People were shallow and stupid creatures. The minute you mention any kind of limited edition, commemorative, or discounted product, they're all over it. *You know what I say? Bring it on.*

"Register-kun, ring me up for a set of bunny ears! Ooh, and a bunny tail!"

"Do we get a discount for buying one of each, Register-kun?"

“Hey, Register-kun! Which of these’re dog ears vs wolf ears?”

“How *chomp* come *chomp* you *gnaw* made *gnaw* a tanuki *snap* one *snap* just *bite* for *bite* me?!”

“Ooh, elephant ears? I guess there must be, like, elephant people out there. Wait, they come with trunks too?!”

“Ohemgee, I LOVE the bear ears! And they even come with cute little mittens and slippers!”

“Dibs on the bunny ears!”

“Omg, panda ears? There’s a panda tribe?”

“I dunno why there’s penguin pajamas when that has nothing to do with the beastfolk, but that’s not gonna stop me from buying them!”

“Hey, Register-kun, make me koala PJs! This is discrimination against marsupials.”

“Yeah, and there aren’t any demon-horn headbands and tiger-print bikinis, either!”

“Give me back those lion pajamas! They’re mine!”

“Those round rat ears are ah-dorbs, but I don’t think that’s what they mean when they talk about the rat tribe...”

“Oh my gosh, foxes!!!!!!! Fox ears! Aaaah, foxes, foxes!”

“Hey, he made fox pajamas, too.”

“Get out—he’s got hoodies for sale with animal ears on them!”

“Where?! And count me in for the PJs!”

Squee!

It was the perfect plan: set out the goods, set up a box for them to drop their cash into, and flee the scene! Yup, it was truly the perfect plan to keep me safe. So then how come the girls started chasing after me to demand extra orders?

“Calm down already. Buy what’s in stock first and then place orders for more. And speaking of stock, how are we out of bunny ears already? I made fifty pairs!”

“Look at those floppy ears. It’s a St. Bernard headband!”

“Oh, shoot. I thought these were kitty cat ears, but they turned out to be tiger ears. Did I just fall for his trap?”

“Literally, where are the black cat ears? I wanna be a void kitty!”

“Wait a sec, I want panda jammies too!”

“What’s this ring? A nose ring? A cow’s nose ring?! Who would want that?”

“This one’s got deer horns! That’s, uh...kinda stretching the definition of animal ears.”

“Oh, this squirrel one is super cute.”

“Ooh! Squirrel tails are so fluffy.”

“Hey, look! He’s bringing out animal-ear hats over there too!”

Squee!

I was flattened under a wall of pushing and shoving. I was soon buried and swept away in a mass of teeming teenage girl flesh. *Good timing! I have just the thing.* I shot a magic thread at the ceiling and tried to zoom away into the air. But the girls dogpiled on me, preventing me from rising very far and making me dangle from the ceiling like a bagworm.

Considering I’d made armor and rings for their girlfriends, I knew the meatheads would come to my rescue at any moment. Yup, the idiots...beat a hasty retreat! *Curse you, you traitors! Not you too!*

The sphere of girls clinging to me in tighty-tight compression shorts swung in a circle through the air like Foucault’s pendulum. I guess this planet rotated just like Earth back home, but the girls didn’t seem to grasp the gravity of the situation.

“I know the way to weigh yourself involves waiting until just before a meal, but even if there’s no way you’d weigh yourself after eating whey, you’re still dead wei—aghhhh!”

“Don’t you dare tell maidens they’re heavy! You’re not allowed to say that!”

You know, I’ve always wondered what the difference is between forbidden speech and fivebidden speech. But now wasn’t the time to worry about that when I was under a close-quarters concentrated attack of girls clinging to me and physically suppressing my freedom of speech! They must have picked up the skill of *fajin*, releasing explosive power in a single move, through tai chi. *But could you please save that for using on monsters?* Not me, a harmless human, even if I did look like a bagworm at the moment.

“This is about three times heavier than a pile of thirty orphans. If we assume the average orphan weighs twenty kilos, then a single teen girl would wei—arghhh!”

“Don’t calculate the weight of a lady! Just like Hello Kitty, we all weigh about the same as three apples, thank you very much!”

But that didn’t make any sense, mathematically speaking. This thread could slice through and tie up monsters weighing in the metric tons, and it looked like it was going to snap at any minute. It wasn’t made from multiple fibers woven together, so it could only bear so much weight. If the average girl weighed over fifty kilograms, we’d be in hot wate—*ahh! What was that?!*

Turned out the thread from Akutagawa’s “The Spider’s Thread” between heaven and hell could be made of steel, and it’d still end up breaking. Some of us here were over the weight limit.

Thwack! Trample, trample, trample, stamp, kick, stomp, thud, boom, pow!

DAY 103

MORNING

What's with the stony glare? I thought you were having a ball rolling around!

ENTRANCE OF A DUNGEON

I WAS MAKING NO HEADWAY on leveling up in the mid-floors of those shallow dungeons, but when I tried to solo a deeper dungeon, all my classmates got mad at me?

Once again, they assigned Slimey to chaperone me and gave me a shallow dungeon with fewer than fifty floors to tackle. That left me with only one solution: the “Oopsies, did I clear the wrong dungeon? Ain’t I a stinker!” plan. I was positive everyone would accept that I had innocently wandered into the wrong dungeon. It was such a brilliant, logical, inoffensive stratagem that would prove that I hadn’t done anything wrong. Therefore, I messed up and oh-so accidentally showed up at the deepest dungeon in the entire frontier... Wait, did I get the wrong dungeon in my wrong-dungeon-getting plan?

“Huh. That’s weird. I thought people weren’t allowed in this thing, but someone’s definitely been through here recently. I’m not sure if they were fighting, running for their life, or having a grand old time raising hell and doing a monster mash. I’m all for grand old times, but if it’s a grand old time between an old dude and a monster, I’m willing to spend cash and chip into their fun by drowning them all in poison! Or I could douse them in oil and light them all on fire, ya know?”

Jiggle jiggle.

I sprinted inside. I didn’t want to waste any time on the monsters on these upper floors. So I’d use quick surprise attacks and slash through them all until I got down to the twentieth floor, where I sensed those signs of life.

Even though these were still the upper floors, there were a surprising number of monsters left. *Whoever's on floor 20 must have dropped straight down and not fought any of them.* Well, I dispatched all the monsters in no time, but the moment I went down the stairs to floor twenty, a big ole spider popped out.

“Spiders can be a real handful if you don’t smoke them out.”

Not because they’re a monster or because of their skills. Spiders are just bad enough on their own. People always associated spiders with making webs, but actually about half of all spider species caught their prey in other ways. Even without webs or other traps, spiders were still wicked strong. Many of them were venomous, and they had no blind spots thanks to their compound eyes. They could detect vibrations, which made it impossible to creep up on and attack them. Also, spiders had sharp claws on the end of each of their eight legs and sickle-shaped jaws or chelicerae, which jabbed into prey and injected venom into them. Don’t get me started on spider silk. Spider silk was five times stronger and twice as elastic as nylon. If you constructed a web with strands as thick as a pencil, you could, in theory, stop an airplane dead in its tracks. This miraculously strong and sticky substance was great for traps. You could even use it to ride the wind! Far too powerful.

The scary thing about spiders was their intelligence. Most spiders had a huge cephalothorax, and about 80 percent of that cephalothorax was just for the brain. Some spiders had brains so large their neural cells spilled over into their legs. Others had such enormous brains they showed up as big bulges on the head of the spider in its spiderling stage. The massive volume of neural cells in this titanic brain structure enabled spiders to make quick decisions, turning these arachnids into seriously dangerous and frightening creatures. To make that into a monster and give it skills and magic on top of that? *Yeah, that spider will outwit me unless I smoke it out first. Believe me, spiders are much more intelligent than the meatheads!*

“Not to mention, this critter’s enormous.”

Wiggle wiggle.

Its body alone was the size of a carriage, and when it spread out its legs, it filled the entire passageway. That titan opened its monstrous jaws and lunged at me, trying to capture me with a pincer attack. The stabbing motion and its jumping power scared the bejeezus out of me, but this spider was toast the minute it jumped.

“Whoever’s got the high ground wins. Wasps are a spider’s natural enemy, right? How do you think they do it?”

I used Airwalk to launch myself into the air, somersaulted over the spider’s head, and began to freefall. Jumping spiders also leaped at prey to catch them, but once airborne, they couldn’t jump again. The spider started to reel in the silk through its rear end to pull the brakes, but it was too late for that. Spider silk that lets you move in all three dimensions was a useful thing when you’re responding to a surprise attack. When something had the read on your every action, that silk might as well be a bungee cord. As I sailed by, I smashed the spider’s cephalothorax to bits. The way spiders were built meant they couldn’t do a thing against attacks coming from above, which was a major disadvantage for giant spiders, you feel me?

“Hey there, spider chow. I stole you from the spider, but don’t worry, I don’t bite. I mean, I don’t bite in, like, a cannibalistic sense, but if a cute girl was like, ‘Bite me, daddy,’ then I certainly wouldn’t mind some noshing and nibbling in a teenage boy sense. But I don’t eat girls who’re all tangled up in sticky spider thread. If anything, I feed ’em. Let me put it simply: eat my mushroom.”

The spider had poisoned this girl, but the poison wasn’t deadly. I guessed the spider had saved her as a snack for later.

“A-ack... P-please help...the others. We’ve been...attacked by...tons of spiders.”

“Yeah, I getcha. Well, I think they’re all goners now.”



Spider Chow's haggard expression suddenly froze. Then her look of surprise vanished, and she howled with grief. Yeah, she started sobbing and wailing and keening?

"No! No, it can't be. No, no, no!"

I shoved a mushroom in her mouth, and she coughed and spluttered.

"Nah, I was talking about the spiders. Your party's fine. I checked and all three of them are A-okay. Well, maybe just B-okay. I don't know how well they're doing, but at least no one's dead except for the spiders. Unless your party was all spiders?"

I guessed in a shocking swerve, Spider Chow was actually friends with the spiders? Anyway, she wouldn't stop blubbering, so I crammed a mushroom into her wailing mouth to shut her up. I wasn't sure—and I gave the matter serious thought, let me tell you—if one would be enough. *A teenage boy can't help being a teenage boy. You see a mouth wide open and you wanna stick your mushroom in it.*

Only four people survived the spidey showdown. I hadn't made it in time to save the others. I rushed down here as fast as I could and made it in the nick of time for Spider Chow and her friends, but hey, the nick of time still counts. Except she was glaring at me? She had incredibly expressive eyes, so this glare was out of this world. As she munched on her mushroom, she stared major murderous daggers at me!

Munch, munch, munch, cough! Wheeze, wheeze... "Why the heck would I have a party of spiders?! When I say, 'the others,' I'm clearly talking about people! And speaking of people...are the other three all right? Do you really mean it?"

Tears dripped down her face like she couldn't believe it. She still begged me to know more, clinging to hope. She wanted so badly to believe.

She tried to wriggle closer to me, but she was trapped in a big ole sphere of

spider silk that sent her rolling away instead. Yeah, it looked like she was having a ball.

“Don’t just stand there, do something! Why are you just sitting around watching me instead of coming to help? Don’t give me that ‘Huh?’ look, buster! First you watch me roll around like this is a game, and then when I call you out on it, you look surprised! What’s your problem? On what planet would you find someone *happy* to roll around in a big ball of spider lunch?!”

She reminded me more of a ball of snow being rolled into a snowman, now that I thought about it. And hey, that was still fun! Besides, if someone were to take up stopping, dropping, and rolling, you’d think it was their hobby or something, right?

“I mean, they—the non-spider they—looked like they were having so much fun rolling around eating mushrooms. I thought I’d only be getting in the way if I stopped you. And then you started rolling too. I assumed you guys’re the Roly-Poly Club? Right? It’s only natural?”

“No, I don’t think anyone would ever look at the situation and think we’re the Roly-Poly Club, whatever that means! And how could anyone possibly enjoy themselves when they’re stuck in a giant spider web? And what the heck happened to all those spiders?”

“Oh, those? They unfortunately ran into a tragic accident, by which I mean they had a head-on collision with my shoulder pads. A horrific mishap, no survivors. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. My sincerest condolences and stuff.”

Yup, it was a tragic accident! All spiders perished when I slew them with my shoulder pads.

“You don’t need to offer your condolences. Those spiders weren’t my party members. But...how did you manage to kill them with a couple of shoulder pads?”

“Uh, because they’re spiky?”

“...Your shoulder pads are spiky?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“...How, pray tell, did those spiders have a head-on collision with your spiky shoulder pads?”

“It’s no biggie, I just kinda...leaped at them and stabbed them? Ya got me?”

“So you’re telling me you leaped at and stabbed...that horde of spiders?”

“Yeah, I mean, I’ve got twenty-four guns mounted in my shoulder pads, so the spiders kinda just accidentally got charged at and murdered, you know?”

“What’s with the passive voice? Accident! And what’s with the condolences when I’m clearly not affiliated with the spiders? How can you kill twenty-four of them in one go, completely purposefully stab and slaughter and slice, and then try to pass it off as an accident?”

Good, it looked like she was feeling better. She was kicking and screaming and...rolling away? Yup, she really was having a ball.

“Yeah, I get that a lot. People always seem to get the wrong idea about me. But hey, shields are defensive equipment, ya know? So it’s not my fault?”

“Those spiders had super tough skin, but you completely skewered them! In what universe are those shoulder pads classified as defensive? They shredded those spiders!”

“I mean, on most of them, the shoulder pads just shot open holes for me, and I went in and did the stabbing.”

“Okay, if your shoulder pads are doing any kind of shooting, they do not count as defensive equipment. You clearly had zero defensive intent the moment you charged at them. Besides, you said ‘most of them’! That means that some spiders were taken out by plain old shoulder pad stabbing, right?”

As I rolled the still-screeching Spider Chow, I opened a gate and trundled her back up to the surface. Slimey followed behind, gobbling up the stray bits of spider silk she shed with a *glorp* and a *blorp*. I lined up all four of the party

members in their cocoons. *Hmm. Okay, what next?*

They all looked at me in stony silence.

“What’d I do now?”

“Seriously? You could have helped us out of the webbing at any time there instead of rolling us outside. And now we’re out of the dungeon and you’re looking at us like *what next?!?*”

“No, don’t say that. He rescued us.”

“Thank you very much.”

“We are so very grateful.”

These guys ended up being a gang of adventurers who’d only recently come out to the frontier. They’d taken a carriage all the way up to the border, but then the smallest girl in their party got kidnapped and carried off to a dungeon. The rest followed her and ended up as spider lunch. Some adventurer old dudes meant to snag themselves an adventurer girl to prey upon but ended up getting prey for spiders. *I guess that’s someone’s kink?*

“You’d have to be out of your mind to kidnap a girl like Spider Chow. And why’d they try to hide in a dungeon? Then to go and get eaten on top of that... What kind of adventurer ends their life as spider lunch?”

“The kidnappers had monster repellant equipment. They also wore some kind of powder on their clothes that monsters can’t stand.”

“But it didn’t work on the 20th floor, and the place was teeming with spiders...”

“We thought the 20th floor would be a piece of cake for adventurers like us, but we couldn’t do a thing against spiders like that.”

“Yes, even though we had equipment with Paralysis Resistance, we were overpowered. Even the kidnappers were fully armed when they tried to take on the spiders, and they didn’t stand a chance either.”

Well, no wonder. These adventurers were kitted out with stuff like Status Ailment Reduction (miniscule) and Poison Resistance (weensy). I didn't even know there was a (weensy)! In some sense, I guess that technically counted as rare equipment, as in it was rare to see status ailment reduction as opposed to, ya know, immunity. If it only reduced the effects of the spider venom, that paralysis was still bound to kick in eventually. Plus, this was one deep dungeon. Even on the upper floors, there was a world of difference between shallow dungeons and deep dungeons in terms of monster difficulty and quantity. Any person on the frontier could have told you that. The idiots had once told me that all the dungeons outside of the frontier were pretty shallow and not anything to write home about in terms of difficulty. Despite that, a couple of non-frontier adventurers waltzed right into a deep frontier dungeon with many a giggle and chortle. No wonder they found themselves trapped by monsters they stood no chance of beating, you feel me?

"We were chasing after our kidnapped party member! There was no giggling and chortling, believe me."

If they'd at least swung by town first, they could have taken a few quick lessons at the Adventurers' Guild and got proper equipment before diving into the dungeon, but they took on a dungeon that was dangerous even by frontier standards. Normal civilians weren't allowed into dungeons like that. And I mean, their equipment was shoddier than the clothes the housewives in town wore. The housewives had them beat in the strength department, too. The highest level member of the group was only level 35, and the weakest member brought up the rear at level 28. *This dungeon was too hard for them? Shocker.*

"This dungeon's especially deep. You gotta have levels in the triple digits if you want to take it on. It's not like people hovering around level 30 are allowed into the other dungeons either. You won't get anywhere unless we swap out your equipment for frontier-quality stuff. Heck, the stuff you have on might not even be safe enough for the outskirts of the monster forest."

"Thank you. We didn't know any of this, since we've only just arrived, you

see. Hey, wait a minute— isn't that ordinary clothing and a wooden stick?"

"I had no idea this dungeon was so dangerous... Wait, so then why are you wearing such ordinary clothes here? What level are you? Oh, is that impolite to ask?"

"Who, me? I'm at level 24, but I know I'll be hitting level 25 any day now! Heh heh, how do you like them apples?"

"Then you must be in grave danger!"

"I thought we couldn't go into this dungeon unless we're over level 100! What the heck were you doing in there?"

Yeah, you did need to be screened by the Adventurers' Guild and get their permission to take on dungeons. But that was just a way to say low-level adventurers needed permission first. I wasn't an adventurer.

"If this place is only for adventuring mavericks over level 100, what are you doing here in those frumpy clothes?"

"And how did you make your way through twenty floors and annihilate all those spiders?"

"Um, is it just me, or is that terrifying weapon you have on...a pair of shoulder pads?"

My shoulder pads—or as they were more accurately known "Aegis Shoulder Pads: Vitality, Power +50%. Automatic Defense. Physical Defense (ultra) Magical Defense (ultra). Reflection. Absorption. Slash Parrying. Bludgeon Parrying. Magic Blast. +Attack +Defense"—used to have six layers, three to a side, but I'd succumbed to temptation when I was putting in the mithril. Now I had twelve on each side. *Treat yourself*. Unsurprisingly, the first time I used all twenty-four in battle did not produce stellar results. Yeah, there were so many of them, I found it easier to give up on controlling them for defensive purposes and instead turned them into stabbing devices.

"I mean, shoulder funnels that'll annihilate the foe in one shot without any

human intervention are pretty handy, you know?”

“Are you sure you’re talking about shoulder pads at this point?”

“Outside of the leather boots and gloves, the rest of what you have on is just regular clothing. And your only weapon is a wooden stick... But those shoulder pads are very high-class equipment!”

“Did you blow all your equipment budget on shoulder pads or something?”

“I think most people spend their equipment budget on a weapon, but since he’s using his shoulder pads as a weapon... Well, if the shoe fits?”

“Those shoulder pads are simply amazing. He was zigzagging through the air, shooting and stabbing one spider dead after another.”

“Accident, he says. What accident? In what world does carnage coupled with a good stabbing count as an accident?”

Yup. Rolling these cocoons of spider silk all the way back to town was bound to take forever. *I could probably give ’em a hearty kick, but I doubt that’ll get them far enough... Well, hey. There’s four of them. Why not call it four-wheel drive and let them do all the hard work?*

DAY 103

MIDMORNING

I was just trying to do Spider Chow a solid by rolling her back to town. But then the guild lady glared at me, and my agile heart didn't like that one bit.

OMUI CITY

ADVENTURERS' GUILD

FOR SO LONG, I had dreamed of one day reaching the frontier: the land of legends, the heart of hardships. I couldn't even recall now when I first decided to train and join my companions in our quest towards the frontier.

The life of an adventurer wasn't easy. Whenever I found myself with extra cash, I always had to sink it into better equipment. Occasionally my carefully-assembled kit would break or melt. Repair costs were brutal, and the money I made passed through my hands like water. No matter how much I earned, high-grade equipment remained a dream just out of reach.

One day, I heard word that the frontier no longer stood poised on the brink of ruin and instead was rallying into a golden age. Rumors flew: the infamous monster forest had been eradicated. Adventurers conquered one dungeon after another. It sounded preposterous to me, but sure enough, spellstones and mushrooms from the frontier started showing up in our local stores.

And that was that. I couldn't bear to stay home any longer. I set off for the frontier...which ultimately resulted in a member of our party getting kidnapped by a gang of roguish adventurers. The rest of our party set off in pursuit, and the rogues lured us into a dungeon and attacked us.

We saved our friend, but luck was still not on our side. We quickly found ourselves powerless against giant spiders that devoured the rogues and bound

us up in balls of webbing. I didn't know if they were full after eating the men and were saving us for later or if they planned on feeding us to their baby spiders. Not like I'd ever know! Every single one of the spiders was dead.

Looking back on it, I almost wondered if I dreamt it. My brain was a fog, but I could never forget what I saw through bleary eyes. Spiders should have been nothing for us B-and C-rank adventurers, but there was nothing we could do against these giant arachnids and their monstrous strength. Just then, a boy hurtled through the air, and they were dead. He ran over to me as I lay, wretched—I had been pierced by the spiders' sickle-like jaws when it carried me in its mouth—and healed me and all my companions back to perfect health.

I stared at the carcass of one of those beasts that had been so dreadfully powerful in life. I thought to myself, *Surely you would need an entire adventurers' guild to slay even one of these spiders.* The black-robed boy just grinned and walked up to me as casually as if he'd met me on the street. Like nothing had happened, just like he wanted to make small talk, he approached me as I hovered on the edge of consciousness. And he called me...Spider Chow.

Everything from then on was an ordeal and a half. There were a million things I could say about it, but the long and short was that he took us back with him to the Omui Adventurers' Guild. Fortunately, my other three companions and I all made it in one piece.

"Oh my, that sounds like quite the disaster," said the guild lady. "Well, we appreciate that you wanted to come and join us. We're more than happy to welcome anyone who wants to fight for the frontier. If you need anything, just let us know."

"Thank you."

The receptionist lady who questioned us about the entire affair treated us in a kind but firm manner. She acknowledged our efforts even though we were total strangers to the frontier. *What a beautiful lady. How dignified and wise...* She looked at us with compassion, but when she glanced over at the boy who had

come to our rescue, her eyes narrowed in a concerned—yet respectful, mind you—glare.

“It’s such a shame that your introduction to the frontier involved a kidnapping by ne’er-do-wells and an encounter with monsters in a deep dungeon. But I especially apologize that you met *this* walking disaster,” she said. “Never fear. The worst is behind you now. Even with the frontier as bad as it is, you’ll never face worse than this boy. If you totaled every calamity this frontier has ever faced, the sum would be smaller than the calamity standing in the room with us.”

“Hey, time out,” said the boy. “I worked my butt off bringing those adventurers here, you know? Doesn’t it make me a very nice young man to skip my planned dungeon crawling and double back to escort them to town? This is ageism? Yeah, it’s nice young man discrimination? And to top it all off, you haven’t even changed the bulletin board. Hey, watch where you’re aiming that glare!”

This conversation was too baffling for us to make heads or tails of it. Both the receptionist lady and the black-cloaked boy were, by all appearances, being quite rude to each other, and yet there was a friendly tone to their banter. Furthermore, the other staff and adventurers were outwardly adopting an, “Oh great, there they go again,” attitude, but I could feel that they were amused as well.

Most adventurers’ guilds were little more than dens of skulking ruffians and villains willing to start a fight for the fun of it. From the moment we felt the cool, level-headed gazes upon us as we registered at the reception desk, we knew this guild was cut from a different cloth altogether. You could tell from the first glance at their polite behavior that these adventurers were made from nobler stuff. The staff were likewise cordial and conversant with them, not like the standoffish employees of other guilds.

“Every single morning, you complain about that bulletin board. The minute I think you’ve finally left with that smug smirk on your face, I find out you’re

waltzing right into dungeons brazenly! You aren't allowed to go dungeon diving, so would it hurt you to keep your dungeon transgressing on the downlow? Why are you always swaggering out of dungeons and dumping spellstones on us? Do you not know the meaning of the word 'off-the-record'? Could you please try to be a little more furtive?!"

"Wait, he's not even an adventurer?!" my party mates yelped.

"He's not even registered with the guild?" I said. "But he seems like the best adventurer on the frontier!"

The atmosphere had shifted the moment the boy had walked into the room. He was only level 24, yet suddenly all these powerful adventurers jerked upright, sat up straight in their seats, and...refused to make eye contact with him. Everyone evidently knew this boy who wasn't an adventurer, and yet he made himself right at home here in the Adventurers' Guild.

"And that's not all! I asked you why you're going to mid-size dungeons, and you tell me you can't fight. Someone who can't fight has no business in the depths of dungeons, or so I'd think! Going to mid-size dungeons in this state is beyond reckless. What, now you want to go destroy all the deepest dungeons? And within the next few days, is that it? I know you're worried about the frontier, but we have the dungeon situation well under control."

"No, it's because I keep falling and stuff, you feel me?" the boy protested. "And I saw that Spider Chow's peeps had fallen over too, so I thought it'd be nice of me to roll them back to town. Now when I roll up, you act like I did something awful? You'll hurt my poor, agile heart."

That's right. We'd been rolled all the way to the town at blistering speeds by the largest horse I'd ever laid eyes upon. I promptly fainted, and next thing I knew, I woke up in Omui.

"*Fragile* hearts, we can work with. But agile hearts? If your heart's so *agile* it's outpacing your wits, I say it's high time we make it stop. If you're going to help someone, then you should act the part! Like a hero! Instead, you came

barreling in on a horse wheeling along a party of adventurers trapped in balls of spider silk. How did you even get past the gate with that bull? Oh, I'm going to chew out that gatekeeper, see if I don't!"

The rolling had come as a surprise to me too. I had to admit, it had been so much faster than the carriage we took on our way to the frontier.

"Nah, they told me they're in a rolling club or something, so I thought I'd roll out the welcome wagon by rolling them to town. Plus my horse did such a good job I left him outside with some tasty snacks to munch on? Yup, my horse didn't do anything wrong. Sure, he may be bigger than most horses, but he's still a good boy. Yeah, he's a cute widdle horsie, ya know?"

"The horse is not to blame here. My issue's with the person who was having fun making that horse roll these poor adventurers!"

Just when I had begun to wonder if anyone would come along and rescue us, we had been whisked off to town in our cocoons and presented to the people of the Adventurers' Guild we had so yearned to meet. I should say...I didn't remember mentioning anything about us being in a rolling club!

"There's no such thing as a rolling club, and we're definitely not club members!" I said. "Who the heck would have told you that?"

"Well, I'm just glad the kidnappers got what they deserved," the receptionist lady said. "Still, I'm concerned that such strong monsters are on floor 20. With dungeons that deep, you can't afford to make mistakes. Not even on quick scouting missions."

"The spiders were strong," the boy agreed, "but they were only spiders. They were just kind of a hassle, you know? Well, to be fair, I probably would've had a harder time smoking them out if they were in a bigger room. But it was no big deal killing them on that floor, you feel me? If I don't clear that dungeon by nightfall, then my classmates are gonna steal it from me, ya know? Now that the idiots are back, we're facing a critical dungeon shortage, so I'm trying to low-key knock this one out today, got it? I'm going to peace out and leave the

Roly-Poly Club here. I saw you guys were making yourselves a nice little Spider Chow Club in the dungeon too, but you need to be careful about picking up too many hobbies, you know? Your Roly-Poly Club thing actually looked like a lot of fun, I gotta admit. I think I might wanna pick it up too. This could be the next big thing for the frontier. Right?”

He wasn't even an adventurer, and yet he insisted on going back to that hellish dungeon. The guild receptionist looked concerned, but she didn't stop him. She just watched him go.

...Wait, I'm forgetting something!

“Thank you!” I called after him. “I didn't thank you properly, but I really appreciate how you saved all of us!”

“Thank you very much,” my other party members chimed in. “You saved our lives!”

By the time he'd found us, I'd given up all hope. I was so paralyzed even my fear was frozen, and I just lay there rigid and numb with desperation. He came and killed the embodiment of my terror, those giant spiders, like they were nothing. Before I knew it, that same fear that had held my heart in a vice was gone. I mean, I was too busy yelling at him to notice for a good while, but I guessed while I'd been chewing him out, I finally felt like myself again.

“Huh?” said the boy. “Are you asking me to join the Roly-Poly Club? I won't lie, I have been on a roll lately, but I've also kind of been on a falling and rolling kick recently. My classmates don't seem to be too pleased about that?”

This boy rolled me all the way to town, saddled me with some weird club, never even actually helped me out of the spider's web until we got to the guild, and kept claiming our rescue was some sort of accident...but that didn't change the fact that he had saved us. That was only scratching the surface. Those spider fangs and claws did a number on us, so we should have been mottled with puncture wounds. He healed us so well it was like we'd never been hurt at all. Despite how much effort he expended, he acted like it was nothing and

merely left with a wave. He didn't even look back to say goodbye. If only he had told us his name! If only, just once...*wait, but I never asked, did I?*

The receptionist informed me that this boy in the black cloak went by the name Haruka. He wasn't an adventurer, and back home, we would have treated anyone at level 24 like they were still wet behind the ears. The guild didn't allow him into any of the frontier's dungeons. His tattered villager clothes and armor (apart from those bizarrely opulent shoulder pads) paled compared to those of the average pedestrian. He saved our lives, but all he said was, "Oh hey, I was passing by and saw you lying on the ground there. So I rolled up. Ya know?" and rolled us away. That was it.

Now the receptionist lady was telling me that they'd let a boy like *that* enter a dungeon where none but legendary-rank parties could gain entry? And no one made any move to stop him. Haruka wasn't an adventurer, but everyone in the guild knew him. Plus, he clearly felt at home in the place. The seated high-level adventurers acted like fleeing villagers and scooted out of the way whenever he passed. It made absolutely no sense.

Anyway, we had no equipment and barely anything else to our name, so the receptionist lady suggested we take out an Adventurer's Guild rookie loan. This generous plan would offer us a few crash courses in adventuring and have us running pre-picked quests for experience. Meanwhile, the guild would provide our lodging and meals while taking a cut from our loot trade-ins until we paid back the loan. It also lent us weapons and armor, and offered something called "mushroom insurance" in case of illness or injury.

We all bowed and agreed to take out the loan, whereupon they had us take a simple proficiency test in the training yard and assigned us weapons accordingly. And these weren't run-of-the-mill weapons either. The Adventurers' Guild had a looming mountain of dungeon armor loaded with skills, the kind of swords and spears you'd expect from a top-of-the-line blacksmith, and god-tier armor and cloaks.

"The rookie loan financier's policy is that dying or getting injured equals a

huge loss on his investment. He'd rather spend more to make more on your equipment and potions. And, since it puts more money back into the general store and other businesses he partners with, he claims this system makes him a major profit in the end. We also keep making money, but since he invested so much capital in us to begin with, we never stand a chance to pay him back. Yet, strangely enough, he always seems happy enough when we pay him in scraps. He certainly makes enough noise going, 'Woo-hoo, I'm rich! I made a killing! I'm the fattest cat alive!' We've also seen a dramatic drop in the number of casualties and injuries among our current adventurer pool thanks to this system. No one who's come back to us severely wounded has died since the program began. With all our members outfitted in this armor, levels have skyrocketed. It's easy to pay off your loans in no time."

"As ridiculous as that sounds, it does make some logical sense," one of my party mates said.

"But wait, doesn't this mean Haruka only ever gets a tiny amount of his money back?"

"Yes, if everyone comes back from their adventures safe and sound, no one is ever losing any weapons. That means his investment never goes down!"

"But what about consumables? Oh, I get it now. Between the mushroom insurance and how nice this equipment is, I bet nobody gets hurt."

"So you're saying he lends out weapons that never get lost and receives a steady trickle of petty cash... But if he sold all this equipment instead, he could retire and just be rich."

"Yeah, but you know what? The way this is explained's giving me major déjà vu."

It was really a sweet system. Honestly speaking, it was a total lifesaver. I did feel like it was almost too good to be true, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that Haruka wasn't losing money. In fact, he was making a tidy profit. I was sure the king of the frontier, Duke Omui, was financing the project,

too, in his efforts to train adventurers. So this living legend of a lord made a little money, managed to hold the line while the frontier had stood on the brink of ruin, scrubbed the corruption from the kingdom's government, and... established rookie adventurer loans, I suppose.

I asked the receptionist lady about the inn where Haruka lived so that I could go thank him and also checked out the inn where the guild lady had pointed us for cheap rooms. Haruka had saved me, but he'd used a very expensive medication on me in the process. Now I needed to raise the cash to pay for it, so I'd start on that first thing tomorrow. If I didn't save up enough for my own medication, then how would I ever properly express my gratitude?

DAY 103

MIDDAY

By my very rational modern-day logic, I did nothing wrong. But no matter how many times I draw this conclusion, Slimey still gets mad at me.

DUNGEON

38TH FLOOR

I HADN'T ANTICIPATED the thing with the Roly-Poly Club eating up such a big chunk of time, but at least the horse had fun rolling the cocoons around. Yeah, he sure had a ball.

"But if we don't wrap this up today, my classmates will tell me off for innocently wandering into the wrong dungeon, so let's go knock it out."

Jiggle jiggle.

Everyone makes mistakes, right? One of my 108 catchphrases was, "Five second rule: if you drop into a dungeon within five seconds, it doesn't count. Hate the crime, not the offender. I haven't done anything wrong." But my classmates refuted every part of that and always got mad at me. *Some people are just too narrow-minded, know what I'm saying?*

The air changed the moment I entered the dungeon. I inhaled a breath through my nose and exhaled from my mouth. This proper breathing technique naturally refined my qi and sent it coursing through my body, unifying my physical self into a singularity of *taiji*, the Chinese philosophical concept of the meeting between yin and yang. I also added my magic to the mix to give my physical capabilities a boost. This created a purer, more natural enhancement than Magic Entanglement. Then I used Magic Entanglement on top of that to entangle my magic, skills, and qi into one cohesive unit, inside and out. *Because yeah, I don't wanna spend any more time here on these upper floors if I can help*

it.

“Entangling myself from the inside out is sure giving Wisdom a workout. Maybe this is kinda overkill for floors in the 30s? Yeah, I’m blowing through these monsters so fast I’m vaporizing their spellstones.”

Wobble wobble.

I blazed through these upper floors in no time, but I was starting to get side effects. It felt like when my body kept disintegrating. I vaporized monsters the moment I hit them so fast that they didn’t even leave spellstones. It was fighting that dealt a major blow to my wallet, but everything went by so fast because I was also dealing major blows to monsters. They all went down in one hit, and not having to go back afterward and pick up spellstones made things even faster. Granted, I was blowing through my MP, but MP Absorption could keep up.

These first floors were so easy I didn’t even worry about a monster taking me out in a surprise upset. I pressed on downward, flying through one floor after another. I let my Universe Staff extend to a full three meters and set about taking names and cracking monster skulls. With the quick, ferocious movements this martial arts style was known for, I made my staff dance. It whirled in a circle around me as I let it grow and shrink to drive back the monsters. At the moment, my sole concern was getting the basic form down—my mind and body were still on two different pages a lot of the time, but Wisdom used the data I gathered in fighting to calculate adjustments to fine tune the control over my mind and body. All I had to do was keep picking up sensory data.

When I tried adding a thin layer of Teleport magic to this Magic Entanglement heap, I instantly got a huge burst of speed. At the same time, I became even harder to control. I wasn’t about to self-destruct yet, but I was overclocking my system. Yet my refined qi and my qi activation buffed my strength stats, so I just managed to keep up this precarious balance.

“Yeah, I guess my lack of perfect control causes this overclocking to begin

with... Pity about the spellstones, but I'd rather bust monster to bits than go to pieces myself."

I whirled like I was swinging a scythe and pivoted again as if I were mowing down monsters with a sword. I dominated the scene as I advanced, scattering foes left and right with my unstoppable spinning. The rain of blows created a sphere-like whirlwind cocooning me, and woe to any monster who dared advance on me in that zone of absolute defense. Woe to the spellstones, even! I felt kinda wasteful as I hacked and slashed through the first fifty floors, but I figured I'd have a good ninety or so floors to tackle over time. I couldn't afford to get cocky with any of the floor bosses or other monsters along the way.

"And all these brawny baddies are sure to give me lots of EXP! But all the same, they're a real handful."

Jiggle jiggle!

This level 50 reflecting snapping turtle was quick to try to take a chunk out of me, and I couldn't figure out how to get a hit in edgewise. Reflecting monsters didn't usually give me much trouble—I just obliterated them before the reflection part kicked in. But this turtle was giving me a run for my money. If I tried attacking it while my control was all wonky and (horrifically) Reflect kicked in, I'd turn into a Haruka has-been. I may have had godlike attack powers, but my defensive capabilities were as thin as a paper shield. Even a graze from Reflect would cook me in an instant.

Therefore, I held back all my extra skills and focus on landing a controlled attack. Like water droplets coagulating under a drain, I built this attack piece by tiny piece. And as those dripping water droplets can eventually bore through rock, so too did I assert control over myself, focused modicum by modicum. This would work. It had to. Because I was a master when it came to dripping on and boring into things; I tried my hardest and got plenty of practice every single night!

I focused; neither tensed nor relaxed. I simply stayed as I was, neither seizing

up nor allowing myself to tremble. I simply stayed rooted to the spot.

I moved in accordance with how my body felt—how my thoughts directed me. I did not fight the air turbulence pushing past my body, nor the inner discordant currents within me. I was a conduit for them to let them flow through me, and yet I did not let them overcome me. I did not fight them. I did not lose control.

Circles within circles—spirals within spirals... *If I stay perfectly calm, then I will naturally achieve the inevitable.* If it wasn't so inevitable, hey, I'd make it happen! By "it," I meant forcing my brain and body to cooperate with one another. I would fuse the spirit of Zen, the concept of *taiji*, and the soul of a teenager into one bright point in space! *Okay, tortoise, stop trying to bite me. You've snapped your last snip!*

My staff slid into the ultra-hard tortoise shell like a hot knife cutting through butter. The Universe Staff didn't hold with a lot of things: no Reflect, no turtle defenses, and absolutely no biting me, darn it. It sliced through their shell and stabbed the tortoise in the heart.

"Yup, I don't care who you are—be you mean girls, Tiny Tanuki, or snapping turtles, there'll be no biting on my watch. But compared to the wild mean girls and vicious Tiny Tanuki, a reflecting snapping turtle is a piece of cake."

Wiggle wiggle.

Just going by the results, Spider Chow and the Roly-Poly club hadn't had much time left. But they were pretty beat-up—basically half-dead—by the time I got there. I found them so paralyzed and out of it they couldn't feel pain. Sure, it turned out their memories of the event were too hazy for them to develop any long-lasting psychological trauma, but that was nothing more than a lucky break. I know I wasn't obligated to rescue the kidnappers, too. They were a bunch of old dudes anyway, so no loss there. That didn't change the fact of the matter: I'd still been too slow to save their lives.

Since my body required deliberate control and I couldn't react off the cuff,

there would eventually come a day when I wouldn't be able to move fast enough. That's why it was so essential that I shaped up and learned to control myself, but experience had taught me that I didn't rally unless I was on the brink of death.

"It's not even like I'm one of those people who gets going when the going gets tough. It's more like I don't get going at all until everything's gone to hell in a handbasket, ya know?"

Jiggle jiggle.

So that means a dungeon with more hair-raising stakes should do the trick. Hence, I decided to push myself to the brink to see what happened—although come to think of it, actually putting myself in danger was probably a bad idea.

"See, some folks can do anything when they put their mind to it. But me, I can do literally anything if death's on the line. Yup, I get serious whenever I stand no chance of making it out alive otherwise. Whenever I have room for failure, that's when I start tripping and rolling all over the place. Yeah, the way I operate kinda sucks?"

Bobble bobble!

And now Slimey was mad at me. I guess he didn't want me going down to the lower floors, as he made his objection known with a vicious body slam courtesy of his viscous body. That was a *bobble bobble* of rage. I guess the inhabitants of a world stuck in the Middle Ages just couldn't wrap their heads around my modern-day, highly logical explanations.

If I didn't get myself half killed, I'd never level up or learn to control my body. So it was the safest course of action to keep going further into the dungeon. Right?

If this dungeon turned out to have ninety floors, I'd be dead meat by the end of it. But on the flipside, if it only went down to floor 80, then I just might stand a chance. I mean, I'd never died before, so why start now, ya know?

I basically had two choices: die here, or level up and learn how to control my body. So long as I didn't die, problem solved. Yeah, everything good, we're all chill?

There, a perfect three-part syllogism. After all, I'd never died once, so why wouldn't that hold true moving forward? No one ever seemed to get that part. I mean, probability gave me a 100 percent chance of survival. So I'd be fine, right? Yeah, I did have moments when Lifesaving kicked in and drained me of a hunk of MP, which meant I may have sorta kinda actually died for a second or two. But if it was only for a second or two, then no biggie. Five-second rule, right?

"Yeah, so basically I'm immortal, except when I'm dead! Isn't that cool?"

Jiggle...

If I got to level 25, then that meant that Miss Armor Rep, Dancer Girl, and Slimey could get to level 50 as well. Considering that there was a level wall every ten levels, level 25 probably had an even higher wall. That explained why I was stuck at 24 and why the dungeon emperors couldn't get past level 48, double my level. This also meant that even the demon scythes would likely eventually hit a wall once they got strong enough. If all the mean girls evolved into Queen Bees, then they might hit a level cap too. They weren't there yet, but you never knew what could happen.

Even if it wasn't level 100, getting over the level 50 wall was super important. That's because all my enhanced skills would suddenly level up at that point, too. I couldn't forget that I had used Servitude on Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl and basically kidnapped them. They stubbornly refused to leave Servitude, which made things safe enough for now. But I had an obligation to get them over level 50 and lessen the threat they posed. That was such a crucial, life-threatening matter that it only made sense I threatened my own life over it, you feel me?

"Sure, I may end up on the brink of death, but I almost never die. So what's

the big deal? You can't avoid a bit of risk for safety's sake, you know what I'm saying?"

Wriggle wriggle!

Slimey still wasn't happy with me, and this time he *wriggle wriggle* body slammed me. Honestly speaking, I doubted any of the three dungeon emperors posed much of a threat to the world. If we turned up anything that was more dangerous, this fantasy world was a goner. And the church had had Dancer Girl chained away...which meant that who knew what else they were hiding? Because of that, we needed to ensure our safety as best we could, which meant I had to get the dungeon emperors to level 50. Yup, right now the best way to guarantee maximum safety was to put myself in harm's way. A little death never hurt anyone, so Slimey could give me a pass, right? Safety first and all that?

"Yowch! Slimey, that last body slam was a direct hit! Come on, you're worrying too much."

Jiggle jiggle?

I wondered why my explanation about the importance of safety just wasn't getting through.

"Listen, I know you're worried about me. But getting past the level 25 wall is also a matter of my personal safety, right? Back where I come from, we say, 'safety first' which I think means, 'don't let a little death come in between you and safet—' Ow! Come on already, I told you, I'll be fine! Back where I come from, there's this thing called a flag. Flags are always true portents, and now that the idiots have set the marriage flag, they're doomed to die. That means I'll be perfectly fine? So chill out?"

Wiggle wiggle!

Cane Mastery made quick work of floor 50. Control was my biggest concern, so it was kinda touch and go for a bit. I dodged all the enemy attacks, entangled all my skills beautifully, and confused the monsters. So long as I wasn't fighting

a huge enemy, my spinning staff kept up a solid defense. The offensive-defensive combo of Cane Mastery handled these enemies with ease.

Pretty soon my speed alone wouldn't be enough to bowl my enemies flat. Even if controlled Magic Entanglement could let me cut, shoot, or stab the monsters to death, it was gradually becoming more difficult to settle fights with my haphazard Entanglement and shoddy level of body control. While I was glad the monsters were dropping spellstones, picking all of them up was a royal pain? That's why I needed to master my skills and martial art techniques. I couldn't just imitate rote moves; I needed the proper control to let one technique flow into the next.

So that marked the end of prep work. I needed to act on reflex, not simply copy the standard martial arts forms. It had to be natural. *That's why they call it the natural stance in martial arts, duh.*

"Hiiii-yah!"

Jiggle jiggle!

Yup, whenever I went back to square one, instinct took over, and I found myself yelling. *Why does this keep happening to me?*

"I mean, that hiii-yah is just to announce that things are finally looking up for me. Or I guess it's the hiii-yah for when I'm going back to the basics? Returning to my roots? It's not a bad hiii-yah?"

Bobble bobble!

So I tried not to consciously control my body, instead moving naturally and without thinking. With that natural movement came an inevitable "Hiii-yah!" Yup, there I went again. What was up with that, for real?

I meandered along in natural stance, my Universe Staff dangling from one hand. Yup, I looked like a total shambling ambler! A frog monster leaped at me, and I just kept plodding along and, in the process of plodding, slashed it to shreds. The next frog went down in a similar vein, and another frog bit the dust

when it met my staff in the follow-through. I wasn't striking down monster after monster in a fit of fiery rage. Nor was I filled with remorse and regret. I just kept swinging my staff and making a froggy fricassee whenever I felt like it. I was so in my element that it was no wonder the hiiiii-yahs started slipping out.

I scattered the rain of madly hopping frogs with my whirling staff as I toddled along nonchalantly. I was just taking a stroll down the street. My body kept lashing out with random responses and jetting off at unexpected speeds. Still, I'd grown used to its tricks. I made the proper adjustments before carrying on my killing spree, not even bothering to suppress my body's random jerks and jolts. Let it do what it needed to do. I simply had to wait until this was the norm for me, and if it never became the norm? *Well, then I'll fake it until I make it.*

"Anyway, what are a bunch of amphibians doing in a dungeon? Shouldn't you be in a swamp or a pond or something?"

Here on floor 59, these level 59 Panzer Frogs came hippity-hopping out of nowhere. They just jumped me with no prior warning, no advance notice—not even a reservation. Had this been in a swamp with unstable footing, a passel of these frogs leaping out of hiding at me would have put me in a real predicament. They were a dark, swampy gray for camouflage, and they were almost impossible to dodge when they came blasting out of cover like a spray of bullets. If my feet had been mired in mire, then I would never have been able to get out of the way. But, uh, this was a regular dungeon? Not a swamp. So I beat them all!

"There sure are a lot of monsters that would be hard to stop outside of dungeons, huh? I guess that's what makes dungeon deluges so dangerous. On the other hand, it does make dungeon fights easier. Especially when this floor is so slippery. The frogs keep losing their balance and missing their jumps."

Ribbit-ribbit?!

Now I felt like I was getting the hang of it. Even when I slipped, I didn't stumble and land on my butt. The frogs just barely grazed me, and my shoulder

pads caught all their blows. Yeah, whenever I collided with a frog, I used a stomp and a shoulder slam to send it flying. *That definitely counts as an attack, right?* I wondered if it would work on the boss for the 60th floor... Eh, even if it didn't, I'd make it work. After all, wasn't that the point of a boss? They made people work!

DAY 103

AFTERNOON

When the going gets tough, the buff get hoeing...and I get up to blocking, hampering, and stymieing!

DUNGEON

96TH FLOOR

THE 60TH FLOOR went by like nothing, the 70th floor was a breeze, and even if a few bullets breezed my way on the 80th floor, I didn't get hit. I reached the 90th floor with less than half my HP and a score of wounds from head to toe—so perfectly fine. If a bit sore.

I still hadn't worked out how to control my body, but the tai chi moves helped me stabilize some of the chaos as I rocketed through the air. I could now steer my body well enough to mask the disorder in my internal control and link it to my other techniques. Little by little (emphasis on the little), I started to move the way I wanted. I was still a walking nightmare, but I was learning to predict the nightmare factor and compensate for it.

It was only in the boss battle on the 80th floor that my disorganized lack of control over my body caused me to break my battle stance. Even then, I still maintained the upper hand throughout the battle. This dungeon was deep, sure, but it was really doing it for me. It had tons of hidden treasure rooms, which was a blessing for my wallet. The lower floors might have presented me with tough fights, but I could still clear them as I accustomed myself to my new body.

Things might not have been perfect, but now I could at least move around in a way that would satisfy my day-to-day needs. So it was fine, right? There may have been violent, chaotic jerking gestures from time to time, but never to the point I was totally haywire. Yup, and that was why I was in a good mood by the

time I reached the 96th floor and the battle against the dungeon king. I thought the fight was wrapping up surprisingly quickly, but at the last second, I plunged into an unending fight.

I stopped time.

Nothing flew past me in this temporal stasis. No attacks, nothing, nada—save time itself. Thought Acceleration made it slow to a crawl, and I entangled it around my body. I flicked my Seven-Branched Sword to shake off the wisps of time clinging to it and moved to mow down the boss with my beautiful swordplay.

“Look, I have to hurry up and get home, because the idiots might be—bleeagh—flirting with their girlfriends. It’s not like I have a bone to pick with you, but I don’t need a ton of skellies and you’re standing in my way, ya know? People say you and your spouse’ll often have a bone of contention, but I’m not sure where that’s located? I mean, I’m looking at a skeleton right now, and I don’t see it? Anyway, once you start fighting with your spouse, you know she’s gonna harp on that issue like a dog with a bone. I’d stick a paper on your back that says, ‘@ Any passing doggies: Bite me,’ but I doubt anyone but the kobolds would take you up on that offer. Still, if I threw one of your bones for the idiots and told them to go fetch, they’d probably take the bait.”

A black slash grazed me, sapping my strength and made my body feel like lead. And even my divine sword wasn’t enough to finish off the beast as the sword’s power got swallowed up in a hazy darkness. Uh-huh, I was facing yet another skeleton trapped in the darkness. The darkness it was wrapped in reminded me of Miss Armor Rep the first time I saw her, but this was a lot weaker. Sure, it was terrifically powerful, and I could tell it was talented, quick, and devilishly smart, but it was still not much to worry about. It was a slave to the darkness, and even with the darkness’s support, it didn’t stand a chance against Miss Armor Rep. She had struggled against the darkness during our fight, which made it work against her. But even then, she was stronger, faster, and much, much more impressive than this ole rattlebag.

I wouldn't let myself be done in by something this weak. If I were to lose to something that wouldn't fight for itself against the powers of darkness, then I didn't deserve to have Miss Armor Rep under Servitude.

In a display of superior skill and well-honed technique, the skeleton moved with elegant, flowing force. Had it not been caught by the darkness that dwelled in the depths of the earth, it might once have been a swordsman of great renown. Its soul had been lost, swallowed up by the shadows. *So renown, schmenown.* All I had to do was drive back the darkness, butcher the beast, and snuff out the flame of its life.

Wiggle wiggle!

"No, Slimey! Don't you dare touch the darkness. It's filthy, so you can't go touching or eating any of it. I'll give you some candy to snack on later, but be patient until then, all right? Yup, it's time to wrap this up quickly. Whoa, watch it! Shooting darts and breaking up a tried-and-true sword technique's cheating. There's nothing tried or true about cheating! It may be a skeleton, but that's just another way of saying an old dude; losing an old dude and getting major moolah from the spellstone it drops sounds like a win-win to me? Okay, time to try my hardest. I dunno if it's a Skull Lord or whatever, but if I use this spellstone to make a killing on the black market, then I'll be a Skullduggery Lord all right! Although my get-rich-quick schemes always seem to backfire? Yeah, did I just skulldiggery my own grave?"

Jiggle jiggle...

The skeleton bore down on me with an onslaught of sword strikes. It didn't even let up long enough for either of us to catch a breath, but I guess it didn't have to worry about that, being a skeleton and all. But it was filthy with the darkness! Monstrously mired in mirk! *Not exactly surprising. 'Cause yeah, it's a monster?*

The tip of its sword danced through the air as the blade changed direction, leaping about in shifting trajectories, and—gah! Shooting blow darts at me at

every spare opportunity!

“I’m not even asking for you to give me a breather! I just wish you wouldn’t use blow darts when you don’t even have any lungs!”

An ever-shapeshifting sword that constantly dipped and darted as it chased different targets...was not my biggest problem. My problem was with those blow darts that came blasting out of nowhere instantaneously and at point-blank range. I couldn’t read what the skeleton was up to thanks to all the shadows. No matter how I hacked away at them, the looming shadows were too thick for me to dispel. The skeleton’s eye sockets were as empty as an abyss. I saw no sign of life or mind inside. Only the darkness.

“Yup, good thing I picked up tai chi.”

Tai chi offered great offense and defense, with solid protection, quick strikes, and guards that could simultaneously double as attacks. Those skeleton’s sword techniques had, no doubt, been passed down for generations on end before being honed by the bone warrior itself, but compared to the history of tai chi, it was nothing more than a passing fad. Next to tai chi, where every technique had been refined and improved over thousands of years to reach its purest form, the moves of this swordsmonster were nothing but parlor tricks. If anything, the blow darts were way more obnoxious!

We clashed and shot at and swiped at one another. The darkness soaked up all my attacks like a sponge, but every time I nicked the skeleton, I shaved off another snippet of shadows. But even when I dodged its dark blade, I still got hurt. Those wounds sapped my strength, drained me of my will to fight, and ate into my MP. Revival wasn’t helpful here, and so the stain of the darkness began to consume me.

“Which woulda been an issue, but...while these wounds usually would be slow to heal, I was using the qi circulation in my qi activation to build up MP and energy, and my stamina’s been getting a real healthy workout every night! Yup, with the power of my new chicken and the hydra, the patron creature of

Revival, every night is a close match, an all-out brawl, a magnificent holy war!”

Wobble wobble!

I mean, I couldn’t send out my Magic Hands or tentacles because the darkness was so dangerous, you know? That meant I had to pummel the boss physically. As it turned out, I was a pummeling pro.

I parried a blow that threatened to slice me in two and slashed downward in turn. I sidestepped sword strikes that attempted to shave my sides and swept them away with my shoulder pads. Even so, I still ended up injured and bleeding. Without Revival to fall back on, I needed to be conscious of my blood loss. It wasn’t as if I could stop circulating my blood altogether—if I could, that would present a whole other crisis for my status as a human being. Yup, for my teenage boyness and my status as a living human, it was imperative to keep the hot blood flowing in my veins!

The skeleton may have been fast, but I was no slowpoke. Its speed stat was double mine, but Teleport more than let me make up the difference. Even if I lost in pure physical speed, my ultrafast nerves were super sensitive thanks to all the body tempering I’d been doing. When I used Thought Acceleration to slow time, it was like everything moved in slow motion. I could compensate for my piss-poor stats, overtake the skeleton, and bonk its bony body to bits!

What the skeleton lacked in skill, it more than made up for in cheating. Its shapeshifting sword flickered and danced around the battlefield and was difficult to dodge. However, that blade moved in wide arcs. That meant that if I moved in super quickly and attacked at close range with Life or Death, I might get sliced in the follow-through.

Using all of my strength in Life or Death in exchange for that one moment of heightened power would still obliterate me even after all my training and breath control work. Most importantly, the skeleton would capitalize on my momentary loss of control and attack me, turning this into an endless cycle of attack-heal-attack. Yup, it’d be a totally surreal experience: fighting while

stuffing mushrooms in my mouth! Of course, I'd grilled them up with soy sauce all nice earlier, so I wouldn't have minded too much.

We parried each other's swords in slow motion. I lost sight of all else in the sparks of magic leaping off our crossed blades. Almost as if we'd choreographed it, we knocked each other's swords aside, rushed in for a stab, blocked another blow, and repeated the process, all at warp speed and perfect accuracy. Our feet never stopped moving as we switched places, each of us struggling for the advantage, searching for the moment to strike.

We halted one another in our tracks, ruining the other's advantage, and piled on the hits whenever our opponent presented the slightest opening. We intuited the other's hidden tricks and pulled out all the stops. Yeah, and those blow darts were so cheating! They kept forcing me into awful positions!

I had no issue with fighting a war of attrition, but the situation was starting to skew in the skeleton's favor. The lack of control I had over my own limbs made my moves ever so slightly off. Even the slightest mistake shifted my center of gravity, which made me move too slowly and my sword go awry.

I was prepared for my body to fly apart on itself, so I used Blockhead to control myself from the outside. That let me forcibly course correct myself even as I was breaking down. However, I couldn't afford for anything to go wrong at this stage of the battle. With speedy blow after blow raining on me, any mistake could cost me too much to make up the difference. The skeleton leaped on that opening and stabbed at me, and I just kept on taking more and more damage.

Every moment, I tracked that sword as it flicked here and there. I anticipated where it would go and made my seven-pronged sword dart up to meet it. In my Jupiter Eye, I had God's Eye, Future Vision, Spell Eye, Wisdom Eye, Eye Mastery, and Mimicry to scan, disable, and steal an opponent's technique. I couldn't possibly master the skeleton's sword skills, but if I could mimic them well enough to take it by surprise, then I could use that opportunity to heal myself.

How would a skeleton who'd fallen into the depths of the earth long, long ago

know anything about Mimicry, right? I'd mastered the art of misleading my foes, misdirecting their thought processes, and skewing their lines of sight with this integrated technique that controlled vision and the other senses. Suddenly, the skeleton faced its own techniques, and when I responded like I was reading its mind, it was seized with the specter of doubt. It moved more cautiously now, like it was trying to scope me out, and it kept feinting at me. That made it all the easier to read. It had the kind of heart that jumped at shadows, but since it was wreathed in shadow, that made it cowardly. *Turns out monsters are pretty easy to trick. Whodathunk?* I mean, it was just a magic trick, right?

It once had faith in its own swordplay and the style that had been honed over the many years, but now in the skeleton's confusion, that superb swordsmanship decayed to the point of ineptitude. Its worried mind marred its sword hand, and as it lost faith in its own abilities, the art that it had studied so diligently was defeated by a monster of the monster's own creation. The skeleton had tricked itself; it put too much faith into the doubts its own mind conjured. Yup, the darkness controlling the skeleton's mind fell to self-doubt.

Now Revival began to catch up, and the darkness surrounding the skeleton started bleeding away. *So what to do about my own blood loss?* Eh, I'd top off my constitution with some mushrooms. Plus I had potions, but trying to fight while downing a glass vial sounded pretty dangerous, you know? I might accidentally chomp down on the glass, and that woulda been a recipe for disaster. *I'd better warn the mean girls and Tiny Tanuki. They're our resident chompers, after all.*

"Oh hey, chickenatrice, don't you have an osteoporosis curse or something? That'd probably be killer on a skeleton. I mean, even though it's dead, it's a healthy, big-boned monster with a lot of backbone? And nothing else, really?"

Cock-a-doodle-doo?!

Welp, it turned out the chickenatrice didn't have one. Either way, a staff wasn't the right weapon to take on a skeleton with a honking sword. Staffs were for slicing flesh, but a skeleton had no flesh to speak of. When I stabbed it,

sometimes my staff ran right through it, which was dangerous in another way. That's why I'd transformed my staff into the handy-dandy seven-pronged sword. Its many protuberances were useful, and I could give each one of the prongs a different element. That was a recent innovation.

After hard thought and careful observation, I realized the second prong on the left side was especially effective against the skeleton. Oh! I'd completely forgotten I could use Holy magic! Holy magic would do the trick, right? Holy magic was so cliché that it didn't cross my mind while I was duking it out with the skeleton. If anything, I was too busy healing myself to even duke properly.

"I guess there's some validity in clichés after all."

Jiggle jiggle.

I switched all the prongs over to Holy magic and used Magic Entanglement to pump up my Holy magic and the Purification skill. Then I gave this battle another go while the skeleton's swordplay was all out of whack. I wanted to end the fight here and now, but I knew that if I got too worked up, I'd join the skeleton in the all-out-of-whack club. I didn't want to lose my advantage. Now was my chance to edge ahead while the skeleton was still on edge.

My sword fluttered about like a dancer, and I introduced the forty-two sword techniques of tai chi to further befuddle the boss. These techniques were said to be as fast and stabbing as a tiger, but for how closely they followed the slightest movements of my body, I felt like it was more similar to a classic, physical martial art. It was too showy for serious battle, but the skeleton was so thrown off by all the movements that its own sword was out of control.

"I mean, you were already dead to begin with, ya know?"

No matter how much skill it had in life, the darkness had now swallowed it up and killed its mind. That made it unable to cope with new, unfamiliar sword techniques, and it couldn't change up its strategies. *Only living things can grow and change, right?* Miss Armor Rep never lost her mind to the darkness, and that's why she was still out here living her best life, learning qi circulation, and

beating the stuffing out of me. *But you, bag of bones? You don't have a chance. I'd better set you free and put you to rest in eternal sleep.* And yup, the darkness was all gone now.



“Sweet dreams, snoozy skellie. Now you can lay your weary, uh, bones to rest.”

The darkness’s power dispersed, and the skeleton’s sword made a final foolish stab downwards. It traced a beautiful line of flame, and I knew then that this was the true skeleton coming out. I braced for its strongest attack. However, no false facsimile of life remained in the skeleton, no dark power, no dark magic. It was simply the last whisper of the swordplay that had been mastered in life. That ultimate slash had been released in the skeleton’s final moment. *You know what? Sure, why not. Lay it on me.*

“Yeah, I was kinda falling apart at the seams, but I thought, why not let the attack hit, ya know? I mean, I know I couldn’t afford to take a hit and that I had no more strength left to fight. But that was its final moment! A testimony to everything it’d accomplished in life. With the way it was crumbling away, I knew this was the last mark it’d leave on the world, you know? And yeah, it hit me, but at least I got to witness that moment. Sure hurts, though.”

Bobble bobble!

That final swing had no power behind it as the skeleton crumbled away to dust. It left nothing but a beautiful line traced through the air, then vanished without a trace. That’s why I took the hit. That worn-out skeleton’s final feeble attack left a gorgeous slash line and no more...but it still took a chunk out of me?

“Yeah, it didn’t have the power to kill me anymore.”

Jiggle jiggle.

As the darkness vanished, the bones aged on the spot and fall apart. The skeleton stood no chance of ever wielding its sword again. Now, liberated from the shadows, it let the sword fall from its bony hand. It made a point of showing me it was laying down its weapon. I knew this must have had some sort of meaning. I would probably never know what went on inside that skull at that moment...but I was also a softie, you know?

“All right, now let’s get home and block, hamper, and stymie whatever rom-com action the idiots are getting up to. If we don’t get a move on, they could very well be canoodling with their girlfriends as we speak! Yeah, it’s time to slay them where they stand. Then set ‘em on fire! Man, they really make me sick. I’m all murderous just thinking about them. I think I’d better heal first, because if they find me in this state, they’ll get mad at me!”

Wobble wobble.

I was enraged, but then I noticed that Slimey was now a nice level 50. That meant I was probably level 25 now, too. Yup, and Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl had no doubt made it over their level 50 walls as well. *See, what did I tell you about putting safety first? I mean... Never mind the fact that I’m sorta on death’s doorstep.*

DAY 103

EVENING

Who cares if I brainwash the meatheads? It's fine; they run on instinct anyway.

WHITE LOSER INN

AH, LECTURES. *How many times have I lectured Haruka-kun since we showed up here in this fantasy world? How many more lectures does our future hold?* Nigh on infinite, no doubt, and none of them did a bit of good...because he never took them to heart!

Jiggle jiggle jiggle!

Slimey was furious. Haruka-kun had claimed he was going to train in a shallow dungeon and not go any further than about halfway, but instead he went off to a deep dungeon, battled a dungeon king, and nearly got himself killed again.

And no matter how I lectured him, it all went in one ear and out another!

“Nah, that’s not accurate, though? I just kinda accidentally went into a deep dungeon, and then I found Spider Chow and rolled her and her buddies back to the Adventurers’ Guild. And then I just kinda accidentally went right back to that same dungeon, but we all make mistakes, you know? Don’t you feel sorry, blaming me for a harmless mistake? Feel sorry for the mistake, I mean. You’re out here playing with its feelings by playing ‘spot the difference,’ and then it gets angry when you mistakenly find the wrong mistake; next thing you know it’ll go off on a journey to find itself and will realize that it’s been mistaken all along and come back as a Miss Stake! I’d rather not make a mistake angry if I can help it. If someone’s gotta be angry, why can’t it be an angry miss with a stake? Yeah, because I’m not a vampire, I’ll be fine? (And also, is she single? I mean, is that miss taken?) So if anyone here’s going to be mad, let’s not miss the big picture or what’s at stake: that I could really go for a miss with a steak.

Speaking of girls with hunks of meat, you know that old cliché, ‘Don’t hate the mistakes, hate the hunky girls’ meathead boyfriends? Ooh, I’m so jealous!’ Yup, it’s a common phrase, and make no mistake, it’s one I agree with. So yeah, it’s not my fault; it’s the mistake’s fault, but since I’m jealous of the meatheads, maybe it’s all their fault? Anyway, I’m innocent?”

“You are literally the guiltiest man on the planet!”

“If it was an accident, then why did you keep going back to that same dungeon?”

“And why did you keep fighting past the point where Slimey was spitting mad? Kakizaki-kun’s group didn’t even do anything!”

Wiggle wiggle!

Haruka-kun’s clothes never tore, and he always healed himself with a mushroom or Revival after every injury, even the really nasty ones. That’s how he used to pull the wool over our eyes. But just because he healed himself didn’t mean he was completely okay. You couldn’t just break a person, put them back together, and say they were fine. No matter how many times he broke down, he put himself back together over and over and *over* again until the enemy finally broke. That wasn’t fine at all!

“I’ll heal you just this once,” Vice Rep B cooed. “But don’t think this means I’m letting you off the hook, mister.”

“Oh, I’ll help!” another one of my classmates volunteered.

“I am perfectly capable of healing him, should my services be required,” said the Book Club President. “Yet I’m not sure what to do about...this.”

Haruka-kun was spacing out. His face said, “Yup, this is totally NBD.” Any other time, he would be whining about how *exhausted* he was and how much *work* he had to do and how *sore* he felt. If he claimed that he was totally fine, no issues whatsoever, nothing to complain about...that meant he was not, in fact, fine. As he had destroyed the monsters underground, so too was his own

body destroyed. Haruka-kun was torn to shreds as he fought on and got beaten to a pulp. It just so happened that the dungeon king was the one who succumbed to the utter destruction first.

“Hey, what’d you do now?! None... None of my skills are working on you. Just how badly did you get messed up?”

“How come Revival isn’t helping? Seriously, what the heck happened to you?”

Haruka-kun had landed himself in hotter water than ever, and that explained why Slimey was so infuriated. Haruka-kun had gone through the wringer, and it wasn’t solely his own doing this time. That dungeon king really did a number on him, to say nothing of the monsters on the other floors. Haruka-kun always used to whine about how a mere scratch could kill him, but his body no longer let him dodge everything. That made him take serious damage in fights, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if his body was also breaking down along the way. Only the fact that his HP never quite hit zero kept him in the cycle of bashing, getting thrashed, using Revival, and then leaping back into the fray for round two.

“Was it...the darkness?” Angelica-san asked. “Your wounds are...infected with it. That is why you...went alone.”

“Darkness? Nah. It was more like a dimness. Or a haziness, maybe? Anyway, don’t get too close to me, okay? Don’t worry, it’ll heal in no time. I mean, training felt so good, I just got a little carried away, you know what I’m saying? Besides, I still ended up beating it.”

His battle wasn’t a one-sided monster massacre, but neither was it a brutal beatdown. It was a gradual weakening process wherein he had to duel the dungeon king while already in poor shape from the previous floors. Without the skills and self-control that had once been Haruka-kun’s lifeline, Haruka-kun was so fragile and easy to hurt... It’s just the killing him part that was difficult. You could beat him into a pulp, and he’d still refuse to die. It just turned out that the dungeon king turned into pulp faster.

“Was dungeon king, strong? Must have been, to do so much damage... Was it level 100?”

“Strong? Nah. More like obnoxious. Yeah, or frickin’ annoying? I mean, I thought a level 100 Skull Lord would have an orthodox swordplay style, but then it started shooting blow darts at me! I mean, it was fast and had some serious skills, but the darkness had taken over, so it was kind of a shady character? It seemed pretty intelligent, so I would have loved to swap it for the meatheads, but trading it for some idiots would’ve been a blow to its pride, so it just blew me off? With blow darts? And so I figured I’d beat it up? Well, I got rid of the darkness, at any rate. Yeah, I sure beat it. But it was tough, not gonna lie.”

He yawned so nonchalantly it was as if he’d never had a chalant to begin with. Here was the thing: all of us had our Presence Sensing maxed out. We all felt his haywire magic repairing his broken body against his will.

He’d kept me hoodwinked for so long, misled me over and over again, but now? I knew. I knew how horrible it must have been, what a horrific plight he had faced. We all knew, which was why we were so angry and why we all sobbed. Haruka-kun never cried, no matter how painful or difficult the circumstances. We had to cry for him!

“Dude, if that Skull Lord was that epic, you should have called us over!” protested the athletic guys. “We coulda teamed up. You should have let us at it!”

“Nah, dude. If it did a number on Haruka, we’d never stand a chance against it. Still wish we got to take a shot at it, though.”

“Oh, shut up, you big bunch of imbeciles!” I yelled at the boys.

“Yo, chill out!”

“Hey, she’s got a point. You guys’re so stupid I wouldn’t have had to worry about the darkness catching you. ’Cause you’ve got too little brain to get brainwashed. Hmm, I’ve never considered this approach before... Even if the

darkness possessed you, you'd be too stupid to notice. Sure, it could try controlling you, but you're already *Homo ignoramus ignoramus*, so it's A-okay. If anything, I think the darkness would hate that? Problem is, idiocy is catching, so the darkness might actually run away?"

"Bro, just how stupid do you think we are?"

The boys messed around with each other like nothing was wrong. They knew just as well as I did how badly Haruka-kun was hurt, but they said nothing about it. They didn't make Haruka-kun talk about it, either. All they did was joke around in the same way they always did. This time there was an air of mutual understanding. The boys never, ever showed when they were in pain or in distress. *Boys? More like mules!* They smiled in an attempt to mislead us, and their jokes ended up with them all laughing at each other.

I slightly envied their silent understanding. It made me sad. I mean, this was the kind of thing the boys would never do with us girls.

Haruka-kun's hydra was probably responsible for him surviving such a thrashing. It was a snake that presided over Revival, so that skill kept activating and forcibly regenerating to keep Haruka-kun alive. This meant he would keep facing fates worse than death, breaking down over and over in an endless loop until he was exhausted. But he still pulled through in the end.

Here, Haruka-kun went off to the baths while petting Slimey. I bet he would give Slimey a treat later on, too. *Mm-hmm, he's trying to butter up his slime!*

"Shouldn't we be mad at him?" one of the other girls asked.

"We have to let him rest."

"And besides, it's not like he'll listen even if we blow up at him."

"Yeah, and in spite of everything he went through...he leveled up, didn't he?"

"Mm-hmm. Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san suddenly jumped to level 50."

"Seriously? He had to get that hurt to gain a single level?"

Here our conversation was interrupted with masculine munching.

“Yummmmmmm!”

“Oh, be quiet and eat, will you?”

“O-okay, my bad...”

“By the way, how come you boys didn’t stop him?”

“Woulda been a waste of our time, bro. Haruka doesn’t listen to us.”

“Uh-huh. ‘Sides, he’s Haruka. We thought he’d be fine.”

“Yeah. You girls’re just a buncha worrywarts.”

“Seriously? You say that when he came back in that condition? You think people can survive that kind of thing with their sanity intact?”

“Yeah, but have you ever heard Haruka say it’s too much for him?”

“Well, no, but... But how come you let him take it on all by himself?”

“You have to ask? ‘Cause we’re hella weak.”

“I know, damn it! I’m just. Ugh! I’m just—How?! How come?”

“Telling him does, no good. He’s set in ways. So we follow. Always follow.”

“I think...he doesn’t care. About what happens to himself. So he doesn’t get it. When we tell him.”

“Still, it sounds like he came to some adventurers’ aid, right?”

“Yeah, and all four of them were women...”

“He still didn’t remember any of their names, though. He says it’s not his fault since he never asked.”

“I feel bad for the girls he rescued.”

“Especially the one he nicknamed Spider Chow.”

“That’s mean!”

Haruka-kun was already at the stage where he needed to risk his life in order to level up. He had to be near his limit. It was imminent; I could feel it.

If all it meant was that he would never be strong, I wouldn't have cared. Maybe his body would prevent him from fighting again, and I wouldn't have minded that either. Haruka-kun had long since passed the line demarcating losing control over his body and destroying himself.

So before Haruka-kun broke down past the point of no return, I needed to catch up with him. It was all just...so unfair! We all had the same horrible nightmares that made us bolt upright in the middle of the night: Haruka-kun dripping blood, motionless. Haruka-kun, cold. Haruka-kun, broken and ground down and shattered like shards of glass. In these nightmares, Haruka-kun was being stabbed and sliced to ribbons while protecting us. And so we'd wake up sobbing and trembling before we'd shake our heads and remind ourselves that it was just a dream. Just an awful, awful nightmare.

Everything felt so surreal and dreamlike right now that I couldn't tell what was real anymore. I mean, when someone came home smothered in blood, you naturally assumed they wouldn't make it. Things that were broken beyond repair didn't come back—that's just how the world worked. Haruka-kun kept on living through situations where he should have died, and his coming home anyway felt incredibly surreal. Every day felt like we were living in some happy, implausible dream, and so...I was scared.

"We should get stronger," I said. "In fact, that's the only thing we can do! If we can't be as good as Haruka-kun, then we don't deserve to worry about him!"

"That's right! Why should we expect Haruka-kun to listen to us if we can't beat him?"

I mean, we couldn't even defeat that dungeon king on the 96th floor. It was time for all of us to wolf down our food and get to training to make ourselves even the teensiest bit stronger!

"Haruka-kun made us this chicken and mushroom stir fry even when he had one foot in the grave, so don't you dare leave a crumb on your plates. If you don't eat every bite, you'll put every girl in our class to shame!"

“Aye, aye, Class Rep. *Itadakimasu!*”

Kakizaki-kun’s group didn’t usually join us in our group trainings, but today they seemed eager to have Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san put them through their paces. We were all frustrated with ourselves and our own weakness and took that frustration out by sniping at each other, but the boys were positively volcanic at themselves. They were so enflamed with rage it almost wreathed them in a horrifying mantle of fire.

Long gone were the smiles they’d worn during their horseplay with Haruka-kun. They left nothing in their wake save a cold fury in their eyes. Angelica-san quickly picked out all five of them to train with her, leaving Nefertiri-san to mop the floor with us. Both of them were hellish opponents, so we didn’t mind.

“Agh!”

“Whoa ther—gack!”

“Oh no, the dungeon emperors are in a rotten mood, too!”

“You’re telling me. And what’s worse, now they’re leveled up and stronger than ever!”

They stabbed at us, they rushed at us, they mowed us down. They were faster, they were stronger, and they pummeled us with everything they had until we ended up in a heap with x’s for eyes. Kakizaki-kun’s group did their best to hold their ground with all five of them, but they ended up wiping out before we did. Still, the boys had reached level 110 today, so they were all quite tough. All the same, I couldn’t afford to lose to them. I wouldn’t let this frustration get the better of me.

“Hey X-Eye gang, isn’t it about time you wipe that sweat off, get changed, and headed to the duke’s palace? I need to drop off some food with them, but I’ll leave you all behind if you keep dawdling. Not like I’d mind leaving the idiots behind. Yup, the way they keep flaunting their lovey-doveyness drives me through the roof, so I’m gonna treat the duke to roast meathead tonight! I bet those idiots’re gonna be all flirty, ooh, kissy-kissy, smoochy-woochy so why not

beat them to the punch and roast them first? And again later?"

"Quit talking about cooking us!"

"Bro, we don't even flirt in front of you! Seriously, what kinda character trope are you making us out to be?"

Oh, right! It was time for us to go welcome the First Division. That's why we'd rushed to finish up today's dungeon so quickly, but then we'd wasted all this time simmering down from our anger! The culprit responsible for that wasted time was totally unbothered. There he stood, refreshed from his bath, and acting like none of this had anything to do with him. My lecture was wasted on him!

"Let's hurry, bathe, and change clothes!"

"Oh my gosh! Do I need a ballgown?"

"No, no, no. Any sort of evening dress is fine, just hurry up!"

"Go, girls! Make for the grooming devices. Charge!"

"Roger that!"

We girls made ourselves very busy with getting ready. Kakizaki-kun and the other boys tried to act calm in the face of their jitters...before getting caught in the flames of Haruka-kun's burning envy. Yeah, he melted the training grounds all the way to the thick bedrock. The barest touch of that flame would no doubt char you to the bone. *We'd better get going fast, or else Haruka-kun's inferiority complex will make the inn go up in flames. Yeah, let's hurry!*

DAY 103

NIGHT

*I can't tell who's who when I'm buried under so many boobies,
but I'd recognize those teeth marks anywhere.*

THE DUKE'S PALACE

THE LOVERS locked eyes with one another. Never once taking their eyes off of their brides-to-be, the would-be grooms slowly stepped up to their lady loves and halted an arm's length away. The boys reached for their girlfriends' hands and...immediately somersaulted and threw up their shields! Grr, they got me!

"Hey, can you, like, move your shields? So I can burn you? I'm a forever alone! A girlfriendless high school boy! My burning envy, aka Inferno magic, is about to char your hunka hunka burning love to a crisp. So could you ditch the shields? Because otherwise I can't get at you. I like my meatheads well done, you know? The shield's in the way, you feel me?"

"No! No burning!"

"Aren't burning envy and Inferno magic two very different things?!"

"That's just a regular magic attack!"

The crimson red gave way to orange, and then before long, even the brilliant pale blue flame vanished as the fire strengthened to pure white light. *That's right. I'm talkin' flame bullets, baby.* I had enough to shoot all five of the meatheads, but if I shot bullet holes in those shields, I had to be the one to fix 'em, so I couldn't shoot when the meatheads were taking cover, right? Just when that thought crossed my mind, a girl came up behind me and pinned me in the valley between a pair of squishy mountains!

"Whoa, hold it—I know some people climb mountains because they're there, but climbing these mountains would get me a mountain of lawsuit—

ggrahagglIIkaflumpf!”

“Thanks, homie, and sorry for the bother!” I heard the meatheads say. “Keep him there!”

“Ooooh, now you can give your guuuuurlfriends a widdle woochum-smoochum.”

“Yup. Feel free to bust out the ‘I missed you so much, my darling!’”

“We’re not busting out anything! What the hell do you think we are?”

“Huh? You mean you’re not dumbride and groom?”

“Man, Haruka’s really rubbin’ off on you. You’re all starting to act like him. It’s messing with how we think and talk, too.”

“Take that back! You take that back now!”

“I’m still perfectly human, I’ll have you know!”

“Don’t even say that! You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Yeah! That’s slander you’re committing.”

“You shouldn’t spread nasty rumors about girls like that.”

“Wait, so like, have you guys not boned down yet or anything?”

“Yeah! You gotta be gentle at first, okay?”

“And then you slowly turn up the heat.”

“Eeeek!” the macho chicks squealed in delight.

“Hey!” yelled the meatheads.

Guys, I can’t burn the idiots unless you all get out of the way first, you know? I mean, I was on board with both boning down and burning down, so could someone please shoo this tiny tanuki chewing on my head? I was being squashed by so much squishy squooshiness I couldn’t tell whose squoosh was whose, but I would recognize those tooth marks anywhere. Those could only belong to one tanuki!

“Deep down, you guys’re just a buncha pervy old men,” the idiots accused the girls.

“Yeah, and what the heck is a ‘woochum-smoochum’ anyway?”

“Are you kidding us?!” the girls fired back.

“You know what? Let ’er rip, Haruka-kun. Burn them to the bone.”

“No! We’re sorry!”

“Our bad, broskis! Have mercy, please!”

“Yo, by the way, you guys remember that white flame he made a minute ago? That was killer, dude.”

“Literally!”

Red fire was about six hundred degrees Celsius, whereas orange started to show up around eight hundred degrees. All the Fire and Inferno magic I’d seen up to this point had stopped there, likely because no one in fantasy land knew fire could be anything but red and orange. I figured only blacksmiths or similar had ever seen the yellow-ish flames at just over one thousand degrees. Anything in the thirteen hundred to fifteen hundred range, where you got increasingly blinding white fire, had to be unheard of. It made sense, since coal and charcoal couldn’t get much hotter than one thousand degrees. In the modern world, gasoline tapped out at about seventeen hundred degrees, and matches could burn at about twenty-five hundred degrees for a moment or two. Yup, with my cheat skill of modern-day knowledge, I was already one step ahead of everyone else—thanks to my subconscious image of what fire looked like. Anyway, yeah, I wanted to get crisping, ya know?

“Greetings, Haruka. I apologize for making this request of you at such short notice. At any rate, I certainly couldn’t summon enough chefs in the frontier to make a delectable feast for a thousand. However, since these soldiers have come for our express benefit, I think it is the least I can do as duke to give them a warm welcome. I apologize for asking so much of you, but—say, are you

listening? I believe I summoned you, so why, pray tell, are you buried under a pile of bodies? Ah, Miss Class Rep, there you are. The minute you and your companions were kind enough to show up, I'm afraid the situation devolved into...that...but underneath that pile I hear Haruka mumbling about something or the other. Could you oblige me and interpret for him? Might I ask why my daughter and the princess are also smothering Haruka? That pile looks dreadfully heavy... Oh, no, forget I said a word! My sincerest apologies! Now, I know it isn't much, but please do join the festivities. Go on now, do!"

For a guy people called the King of the Frontier or the God of War, he was a pushover! Like a model husband, he stopped short the moment he mentioned weight. If he'd said one more word, he would have been dead meat. *That's pretty scary, ya know?* And this pile seriously weighed a ton—gyaarkmffhh!

"Ooh, it's a ring! He's giving her a ring!"

"Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod, congrats on your engagement!"

"Thanks!"

"Huh? An engage-whazzat now?"

"...Um. Those are engagement rings. Because they come in pairs, you know?"

"Yo, for real?"

"Uh, yeah. You're supposed to wear them on the ring finger of your left hand. See? They fit perfectly."

"Wait, wait, hollup. Haruka, my man! You said these were for their protection!"

Mff? Mgh mff ffmh mmphdiots.

"They've even got 'eternal love' engraved in them in an archaic script! What else could they be?"

"Ohemgeeeeeeee!"

"Yo, I didn't hear anything about that!"

Doot-doo-da-doo, doot-doo-doot-da-doo!

“Is that hydra playing a trumpet?!”

“Yeah, but don’t worry. Let it do its thing. Don’t judge; that’s bad for the heart.”

“Oh wow, even this suit of armor has archaic writing on it. It says, ‘I’ll always protect you,’ and it’s written all fancy and stuff.”

“Ooh! Yeah, and this one’s got, ‘Let’s be together for the rest of our days.’”

“This one says, ‘To my beloved’!”

“If you look closer, you can see that there’s English cursive in the design. I think it says, ‘I would give my life for you.’”

“Oh my gosh, that is so dreamy!”

“Uh-huh, they went all out! Check out this one. It says, ‘*La vie est rose avec toi*’ which is French for ‘With you, my future looks rosy.’”

“Dude, I can’t read *or* write French! I had no idea that’s what it said.”

“This shield reads, ‘*Marchons ensemble sur la route de la vie.*’ ‘Let us walk together down the road of life.’ How charming.”

“Ooh, this one’s in English. Simple and to the point. ‘I love you now and forever.’”

“Barbarella-san and all the other First Division girls can’t stop blushing. That’s so cute.”

“No duh. I’d blush too if someone told me ‘*ensemble pour toujours*’ or ‘together forever.’”

“Ooh, yeah, and ‘*Je le fais par amour*’ or ‘I do it all for your love’ is really nice too.”

“Oh yeah, for sure! Hey, this sword says, ‘My happiness is your happiness’ on it in English.”

“The ring’s got the English ‘my one and only’ on it. Short and punchy, I like it!”

“Gosh, Haruka-kun, you’re kind of a romantic!”

“The best one’s got to be this, though. ‘*Je t’aimerai toute ma vie.*’ ‘I will always love you.’”

“Ooooooooooooooh, someone’s got a *cruuuuuush*.”

“Why the heck did we ever think Haruka was doing us a favor?”

“Yeah...I’m wiped out.”

“Good luck!” the girls called to the macho chicks.

“Thanks!” the macho chicks called back.

“Well, it’s too late to go back now... We’re done for.”

I silently cooked and plated the meals in the chaotic turbulence of vast quantities of food overflowing the feast table. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the idiots having the nerve to make kissy faces at their girlfriends, and then they had the cheek—the cheek!—to demand food from me! I took these big, fat barbecue skewers and sharpened ‘em nice and poky. You could even take down a monster in one shot with one of these puppies. So, ya know, take that?

“Don’t ‘take that’ me! Why are you using that as a barbecue skewer, bro?”

“What the? Isn’t that just a javelin with ‘I’m made for skewering some kinda meat’ written on it?!”

“And don’t lob it at such close range! Wait, stop—I don’t mean stand back and lob it either! Just no lobbing in general! I’m scaaaared!”

I thought they would take the bait, but these wily critters just snatched the meat off the end of the skewer and dodged my attack! They were getting smarter! They’d be developing the memory of a goldfish any day now.

“No, you don’t get it. Normally when a poor teenage boy without a girlfriend straightens up and starts working hard, his sex appeal comes waltzing in, arm in

arm with a girlfriend. Don't blame me for my stance on the javelin controversy, ya know?"

The macho chicks normally looked like real tough customers, but now they wore delighted, beaming grins. They linked their arms with the meatheads and rested their heads on the meatheads' shoulders.

"This is all your fault, bro!"

"And we don't care what you think about javelins. Our problem's with you throwing them!"

I couldn't believe the gall of these nitwits, nitpicking and kicking up a fuss when they had girls on their arms fussing over them.

"Hey, watch what you say. Someone could take that the wrong way. Look, even if you lay the blame for your stupidity at someone else's feet, it won't make you any smarter. So yeah, I think I should light you on fire, ya know? I even asked you what kind of messages you wanted on the equipment, remember? You said, 'Do your worst,' so I didn't do anything wrong! I'm just a poor high school boy who's being bullied by all these coupled-up normies. So maybe I had a flare-up of Inferno magic (jealousy), but if you catch on fire, too, that's just an unfortunate accident? So yeah, let's get burning."

What cruel accusations. They looked over the equipment when I passed it off to them, and they didn't have any complaints then. I upheld my end of the deal, far as I saw it. Besides, I figured they could all speak English, considering how they kept jetting off to international sporting competitions back on Earth! They were the ones to blame, not me.

"No burning! Well, man, I guess my girl's pretty happy, and I prolly never woulda been able to say that kinda stuff to her out loud, so...thanks, homie. For the rings and the armor."

"Yeah, and you even went the extra mile on the sword scabbards... Ya know what? Whether it's the road of life or the battlefield, I'm happy so long as we're together!"

“Bro, I don’t even know where to start, but... The weapons and armor are hella good quality. We couldn’t have asked for better protection. Thanks, really. You’re doing us a solid.”

“Lord Haruka, we will take great care of all the equipment for as long as we live. You have our utmost gratitude. I pledge to have and to hold this equipment and my future spouse until death do us part.”

Oh, I knew what this was all right: bragging about their relationships! *If I can’t roast them for this, then how else can I get my burning fix?* I agonized as I turned the barbecue over the flames. Yup, the famished girls were forcing me to grill up another batch!

“I mean, if your armor breaks, I don’t care if you ditch for something better, ya know? The point is to make sure you guys live longer, so it doesn’t matter if it breaks while it’s saving your life. Yeah, choose the glaive, not the grave? And stuff?”

“Thanks,” said the boys.

“Thank you so much,” the macho chicks echoed.

Look at them, flirting right under my nose! I was indignant with injustice, engorged with envy, and replete with resentment! Yeah, I was kinda ticked off? As I furiously chopped and fried veggies for an udon stir fry, I also prepped ice cream for dessert. Yup, it’d been a long, uphill battle to get ice cream. Well, it’d been a long, uphill battle for the fresh cream and the freezer aspects. Even now that the economy was making its own cream, I still had nothing like vanilla. Just a milk-ish thing and some eggs-ish things and a sugar-ish thing and something that was sort of like fresh cream, so I guess I had most of the ingredients? Ish?

“He’s cooling the cream with Heat magic and whipping it with Vibration magic?”

“Huh?!”

“Then while that rests, he’s putting the egg yolks in a bowl and beating them with Vibration magic. He adds sugar and mixes it all together until it’s nice and blended. Then he puts the milk-like thing in a pan and lets it simmer over a low flame.”

“No way!”

“Oh, then he’s adding the sugar and egg yolk mixture to the milk and whisking it all together with magic!”

“The mixture is heating over the low flame until it gets to...about eighty-five degrees!”

“Then he’s lowering the heat, immediately transferring it to a bowl and chilling with magic while churning it, right?!”

“Ah, he’s churning fast until lots of tiny bubbles appear on the surface, and then he’s letting it cool slowly with Freezing magic.”

“It’s ice cream! No mistaking it!”

I figured that once I made it by hand a couple of times, Wisdom would figure out the process. I could let my Magic Hands handle it.

Just then, the nearby musicians began to play, and the idiots went off to do a waltz on the dance floor. Yeah, the same idiots who’d ducked out of the ball since they claimed it hadn’t been worth their time.

“They saw Dancer Girl do this one time, and that was all they needed to learn the ropes. They figured they’d fine-tune it later at the actual ball, but then they skipped out on both the practice rehearsal and the ball itself. Yet the minute they get girlfriends, here they are!”

At any rate, the music in this fantasy world wasn’t all that great. It lacked a sense of grandeur, try as it might to sound otherwise. The melodies were simplistic and repetitive, and each piece droned on for ages without anything exciting to shake it up. *So why not add my hydra’s trumpet and trombone to the mix? While we’re at it, let’s throw in a saxophone, a tuba, a flute, an oboe, and*

a clarinet. Yeah, the underlying melody was simple enough that you could easily add an improv accompaniment to spice it up. You know, there was actually a particular style that jazzed up the dull, repetitive tunes of amateur musicians by laying improv over it. However, the goal here was dancing. We swept up the dancers in our tunes without disrupting their rhythm while I simultaneously served up ice cream, fried food, and barbecue. *Yeah, talk about a lot of pressure!*

Then I gave the band the signal, and the music immediately switched. It was time for the dumbrides and dumbridegrooms to s(tupid)lowdance, so I thought ending things on a stately waltz would suck. The strings played an improvised but simple melody while my hydra busted out a complicated tango on the brass and wind instruments. The meatheads led their betrothed in the dance, and both meathead boy and meathead girl blushed as they became lost in each other's eyes. Bashful as they were, they danced passionately in one another's arms in this bold courtship ritual. All their training had turned them into real decent dancers. Oh yes, this was an intense tango driven by a love just as intense.

"Ooh, they're so into it!" my other classmates cooed.

"Yeah, they were totally born for this."

I mean, you couldn't expect idiots to whisper clever one-liners to charm the ladies. Because they were idiots, you know? It was best to let their bodies do the talking. But man...I was so darn aggravated, annoyed, envious, enraged, resentful, and rankled! Cranky and covetous! Amid the beautiful and energetic music lowed the sorrowful sound of an anguished teenage boy's saxophone. And a chicken. *Good point, chickenatrice. It's high time we got some rest.*

Now that I'd filled the close to ten thousand stomachs of close to ten thousand soldiers and rounded out the feast with ice cream, my work here was done. Once I was done messing around at the ball and went home for some free time, I knew there'd be a lot of messing around with a very different set of balls. *You know what? Let's make pudding. Yup, and why not bake a batch of*

cookies while I'm at it? 'Cause yeah, I can feel eyes on me?

DAY 103

LATE NIGHT

I liked seeing them in cute clothes too, so it was a win-win. You know how it is with cute clothes: hare today, stripped off tomorrow.

WHITE LOSER INN

HER SWEAT-SOAKED SKIN rose and fell with her ragged breath; her luscious curves trembled with the force of her labored respiration. Melons must have been in season, because I couldn't wait to get my mouth on hers. *Itadakimasu.*

"Ah! Ooh, ah ah ah, ah! Aaaah!"

Her skin was whiter and smoother than the ice cream we had earlier. That ice cream had been delicious enough, and it had gone down as a universal hit. I bet she would taste even better on my tongue. *Yum, yum.*

"Kyaaaaahh, ooh, ahh! Ahhn, oh...ohh!"

Now it was time to cook up a healing spell with Healing, Regeneration, and Stimulation. And a pinch of Sensitivity Boost and Lascivious, of course! The night was long, and morning was still far off. Thought Acceleration made time slow to a crawl, and this everlasting night had only just begun.

Healing and Regeneration weren't cutting it anymore. Miss Armor Rep was still twitching and convulsing in a lively fashion, but that was the only response she gave to my ministrations. *I guess a five-skill ensemble with Heightened Sensitivity was too much, huh?*

"Actually, the cockatrice was providing both Curse and Venom, so maybe that makes it a six-skill ensemble? Yeah, from the looks of it, she's a goner either way."

The runaway teenage-boy train completed its spiraling loop on the railway

line, and all hell broke loose in a great explosion of refined qi. That had spelled disaster for Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl. *Too bad, so sad.*

“Yup, I can see from the reflection in their eyes that they’ve both gone straight to heaven. And their pupils are gone? Not to mention their tongues are hanging out of their mouths... Here, I’m just gonna wipe up that drool. Yup, even with stimulated Lovemaking, Healing, and Regeneration, this was too much for them. They’re fine physically, but I think they’re unconscious now? Man, girls these days. What’s the world coming to when young ladies act this debauched? Wait, but I did this to them? Okay, that’s actually kinda hot. Wow, just look at ‘em drool... Let me wipe that up too.”

Someone had done a number on these poor girls. And the cause of all this? The idiots. After they rubbed my nose in their extraordinarily raunchy tango, they brought the macho chicks around to formally introduce them to me. The macho chicks each asked me to dance with them to thank me for their new equipment, so I ended up dancing with five girls. The minute I was done...I found about thirty others lined up behind them? Yeah, all the girls I knew were there, even Elf Girl, Miss Armor Rep, Dancer Girl, Royal Girl, Maid Girl, Merimeri-san, and Murimuri-san. Heck, Sister Girl and her crew burst in, too, and joined the huge line. I danced for what felt like ages.

In a ball with thousands of boys, I ended up taking on that laborious task. What made it even more difficult was the bit about my teenage boy bits being pressed up against a teenage girl!

After all, the girls weren’t wearing those same hoity-toity ball gowns they’d had back at the other ball. They wore ordinary, simple evening gowns. That simplicity emphasized their bodies in glossy, prismatic fabric. That was bad enough. But when the fabric was so thin it clung to their skin, too? This innocent teenage boy found himself with a girl squished up against him, only a thin layer of fabric separating him from the soft curves pressing down on him. He staggered about, half-dead, attempting to dance. Then that horrible ordeal repeated all over again with a different girl. Worst of all, there’d seemed to be

no end to the line of girls. It was like they were mocking poor teenaged me with an endless hell of dance numbers!

I don't know if it was the Lovemaking or my qi activation to blame, but before long my exhausted teenage boyness started feeling perkier and perkier every time a girl snuggled up to me. About midway through, I found myself almost too perky. It presented an issue, so I rushed back to the inn to let off all that stored-up perkiness in a huge release, a massive emancipation, an enormous battle of titanic brawling and great rebellion and grand uproar, and now the two dungeon emperors were knocked out. *Yeah, because we went hard hard, you feel me?*

"Yup, that took way more out of me than that dungeon earlier."

I wondered what caused this perkiness problem. Was it a side effect of Lovemaking? Or did it have to do with my dance partners blushing and tearing up, making such arousing faces you'd think they were melting from the inside out? Yeah, I thought it was the Lovemaking.

"Lovemaking's supposed to create a loop between the male and female partners as they exchange their yin and yang energy. I could see how that could make our energies mingle and liven each other up. Wow, that dance sure was good for my health, huh? Yup, I do radio calisthenics and tai chi every morning, so I must have a healthy teenage boy mind in a healthy teenage boy body."

At any rate, I had originally planned to catch up on rest tonight. Now I felt full of energy. My HP and MP were topped up too. I even felt like I was in better physical condition, but that could probably be attributed to leveling up. My body was thrumming with vim and vigor, although of course every teenage boy vims and vigs when it comes to certain things (yanno, sex)... Anyway, the girls didn't seem like they would wake up anytime soon. Yup, and they looked cold, so I figured I'd better get them some warmer sheets. *Sheet changing time!*

Since I'd leveled up, I needed to check my status again. I was sure my stats had barely budged. If anything, I figured the skill boost from clearing a 25-level

wall for the first time had a bigger effect on my stats. My skills were now stronger and faster. Again. ...*So how's this control thing supposed to work?*

Anywho, with the Merchant Kingdom out of the picture, I could march the nerdbrains on the Theocracy to act as a decoy while I turned my attention to other matters. I couldn't leave the Beast Nation or the, ya know, *kingdom* kingdom unattended. I just didn't have enough people for that. The dungeon emperor trio were overqualified for a protection job, but there were too few of them to protect every potential target. On the other hand, spreading my other forces too thin was idiotic, and I wanted to keep Sister Girl's group with my main army.

"Hmm. Okay, so I could sneak into the Theocracy on my own, right? If the girls run into trouble, I can cause a diversion and act as a decoy at the same time. Then if I can just... No, it'd be better if our decoy wasn't a person. I can probably catch a powerful monster and ditch it right in the thick of things to cause chaos."

Yup, I could feel my classmates getting mad at me already. *Baiting your enemy into lowering their guard and rushing in's a tried-and-true opening move. They know that Sister Girl and her buddies are our weakest link, so they'll try to attack us there.*

"Which is exactly why the girls're bound to run into trouble. They just don't seem to get that killing's another form of talking, and talking it out's another battle strategy."

If the Theocracy sent us a messenger, I knew the girls would hear them out. Even if it bought the enemy time or landed us in a trap, my classmates would still try to work things out through discussion. At heart, the girls weren't cut out for betrayal and deception. Words were free, and messengers could make whatever pretty promises they pleased, but unless they had some proof that they'd keep their word, there was no point in trying to negotiate with them. Yup, you needed a track record of making good on your promises if you wanted to sit down at the discussion table.

“I guess I had to bring the girls with me as a detached force, you know? I mean, my hands are tied, right? That means I’ll need to deploy the army to the frontier, but the kingdom is stable. I think they’ll be fine on their own.”

It never hurts to be prepared, I suppose. Having more cards in one’s hand always helps. I wanted to launch a swift attack on the Theocracy while they were still dealing with the chaotic fallout of using their army to crack down on the victims of their attempted authoritarian crackdown. If the Theocracy mobilized their forces division by division, I’d have no choice but to kill some of them. Like as not, they could strike my rear while I was still in the heart of enemy territory.

“Taking my carriage is off-limits for a stealth infiltration mission, I bet. Even though it’s my first trip in ages... How am I going to break the news to my horse?”

Once he turned those adorable puppy-dog eyes at me that asked, “Are you really going to leave me behind?” my guilty conscience would do me in. *I’d rather barrel in guns blazing on my armored carriage in order to save myself the heartache!* Couldn’t I hit-and-run the entire country and solve the problem that way? And as a perk, my horse would love that.

At any rate, I got a pretty impressive haul from the treasure chests in the hidden rooms today. If I put mithril in them and sold them at a bargain sale, I’d be Mr. Moneybags. Problem was, the skeleton’s drop item was kinda weird. Yup, it was the sword of that level 100 Skull Lord. The boss had followed orthodox sword fighting techniques until that sword started darting about all over the place. The switch from standard swordplay was impressive. You couldn’t predict where it’d come from next. Those blow darts had been a seriously obnoxious twist. Yeah, the skeleton dropped a blowgun too?

“That skeleton’s swordplay was pretty by the books, but there was nothing orthodox about its fighting style by the end.”

These combat blow darts were a menace at close range because of the

unpredictability factor. You never knew where the next one would come from. But they were tricky enough to use that nobody could fight with them. Breathing comes naturally, but even just holding a blowgun in your mouth makes it a lot harder to breathe without getting winded. Plus, you can only shoot one dart at a time, and you can't reload in the thick of battle. Expert blowgun fighters keep an extra stock of darts in their mouth and use their tongue to push the next one into place. Basically, blowguns are an absurdly difficult weapon to master. And yeah, the boss dropped one? It was obnoxious enough to use that I'm not sure I could find a customer for it. I couldn't think of anyone who could use it well enough to want to buy it.

"I guess it'd be handy if you're fighting against other people, though. I mean, it sure gave me one heck of a time."

Going up against that thing was super tricky. It was dangerous every time it pointed right at you, and I ended up getting slashed by the skellie sword whenever I leaped out of the way. I couldn't focus between a sword and a blowgun. Yeah, it was a good tactical weapon. "Magic Blowgun: All Status Ailments, Shadow Darts, Magic Darts, Projectile Attack Bonus, Projectile Speed Bonus, Invisible Projectiles." The blowgun was over three meters long and meant for combat, not hunting. Honestly, it was just a plain old tube. It looked like a really long cigarette. It would have been totally epic if it had live rounds. If I gave that thing magic bullets, you'd never find a more fearsome weapon to shoot at someone's eyes or gaps in their armor.

"Magic bows look pretty badass, but how do magic blowguns stack up? It's not even just kinda iffy, it's got major creep written all over it. Still, it's a good weapon."

I tried it out, but it didn't seem like anything I could use in battle. It was fun, sure, but I didn't want anything stopping up my breathing when I was running around in an intense fight.

"Yeah, and if I breathe heavily through my nose, people will think I'm creepy. I run the risk of getting the cops called on me. Yeah, I mean, I'd burn any creepy,

gross old dude who tried to come up to me—but they’re icky enough that I’d open fire before they ever got close, ya know?”

Yup, this weapon didn’t go well with my qi activation breathing exercises. When I let the hydra have a turn, it seemed to jive well with it. So I thought, hey, why not give it to my snaky pal? Just then, the cockatrice tried putting it in her beak; and wow, she was a born natural!

She shot live rounds and magic darts at incredible speeds, all of which whizzed out the window and vanished! *Uh-oh, I hope she didn’t hit anything.*

Well, she had power and aim in spades, but the freakiest part was that she swallowed it. She literally swallowed the tube, so you couldn’t see it until she opened her beak and blasted bullets at you. She also downed all the ammunition and stored it in her gizzard... *Still, have you ever heard of a teenage boy running around with a chicken cannon on his shoulder? No way.*

I could make the hydra and cockatrice pop out anywhere on my body to attack close-up or at great range. Better yet, they both attacked on their own without me having to say the word. My shoulder shields only had Automatic Defenses, so I relished having an opportunity to auto-counterattack. And when I let the hydra and cockatrice add Petrification, Deadly Poison, and Lethal Poison to the mix, those darts got even more powerful. But if we were going to go fight monsters, I guessed we wouldn’t need to add Heighten Senses, huh?

“All right, let me check my status now.”

NAME: Haruka RACE: Human

Lv: 25 JOB: —

HP: 610 MP: 678

VIT: 499 POW: 514

SPE: 670 DEX: 581

RES: 627INT: 696

LUK: Max (Above Limit)

SP: 3995

COMBAT SKILLS: Ultimate Cane Mastery Lv2, Avoid Lv9, Magic Entanglement LvMax, Life or Death LvMax, Rapid Movement LvMax, Bend Not Break Lv9, Eye Mastery Lv2, Diamond Fist Lv8, Random Fire Lv7, Limit Break Lv5

MAGIC: Demolish Lv3, Teleport Lv9, Gravity Lv9, Holding Lv9, Composite Sorcery Lv8, Alchemy Lv9, Void Lv7, Qi Wizardry Lv2

SKILLS: General Health LvMax, Sensitivity LvMax, Body Manipulation LvMax, Walking Mastery Lv9, Servitude Lv9, Sensing Lv8, Magic Control LvMax, Presence Concealment Lv9, Stealth Lv9, Hiding LvMax Insentience Lv9, Physical-Proof Lv7, MP Absorption Lv8, Revival LvMax Dash Lv8, Airwalk Lv8, Overclock Lv9, Jupiter Eye Lv7, Lascivious Lv8, Lovemaking Lv3

TITLES: Shut-In Lv8, NEET Lv8, Loner Lv8, Arch Sage Lv2, Master Fencer Lv8, Alchemist Lv8, Sword God Lv2, Sex God Lv7

UNKNOWN: Wisdom Lv6, Master of None Lv9, Blockhead LvMax

EQUIPMENT: Universe Staff, Clothes Set?, Leather Glove?, Leather Boots?, Cloak?, Jupiter Eye, Ring of the Destitute, Item Bag, Monster Bracelet Power+81% Speed+77%, Vitality+41%, Black Hat, Wisdom Crown, 100-

Poisons Anklet, Fortune Ear Cuff, Aegis Shoulder Shields, Sorcerer's Bracelet, Magic Blowgun

Since I'd only gained the one level, my stats barely moved. Still, most people—even those with cheat skills—only got about ten or so points per level. Mine each went up by twenty or thirty. Most importantly, my power and vitality had been stuck for a while, and they each increased by over twenty points.

"Every little bit helps. Besides, it'd be super inconvenient if all my numbers skyrocketed, ya know?"

My skills hadn't changed that much either in this short of a time. But Sword God Lv2 meant that Master Fencer had gone up past max and gained an additional level. Watching the skeleton fight and then beating it myself must have given me tons of EXP. At this rate, I could go toe-to-toe with Smug Girls 1 and 2 (not naming names) and they wouldn't run circles around me anymore! I couldn't wait to surprise them with some smugness of my own!

This was a far cry from being perfectly prepared. I really didn't feel like I was ready to take on the Theocracy. However, there was nothing else I could actually do. The frontier was telling the world, "You can't act like this isn't your problem any longer. We're gonna *make* it your problem." Now all that was left was to start killing people.

Still, it bothered me that I didn't know if the Theocracy had any more secret weapons up their sleeves. Like Miss Armor Rep's, Dancer Girl's memories of her past were dim. They'd both been trapped in the bowels of the earth with no light or sound to break the hush and shadows imprisoning them. They'd fought against that darkness for eons and eons, always trying to resist it. I think that's why they struggled to remember much. They did happen to recall little details here and there, so I doubted that the darkness had eaten their memories entirely. At any rate, it was more important to make new memories rather than try to recall info from the old ones. Yeah, and you know what? *Let me make*

another new memory for both those girls right now.

I could never bring back what they'd lost, but at least I could make something new for them. That was my duty, considering that I had used Servitude on them. And hey, they both seemed to like it. They were both gorgeous beyond belief, so I was just as happy as they were whenever they put on cute outfits. Talk about killing two birds with one stone, huh? Or killing two rabbits, maybe, since they were really, really hot in mesh bunny suits. *Yup, I love me some buns in tight fishnets.*

“Yeah, I know they’re asleep, but it wouldn’t hurt to try to put the bunny suits on them, right? Just for a bit.”

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

!!! “Oh, mama!”

“Kyaaah!”

Yup, I tried my hardest. Those mesh bunny suit girls were very good bunny babes indeed!

DAY 104

MORNING

Oh, buddy. We don't use that kind of language around here. You gotta read the room, even in fantasy worlds.

WHITE LOSER INN

PROMETHEUS—the Titan god of Greek mythology known for his belief in humanity. He who granted them fire in defiance of Zeus's orders. The myth says that he gifted infant mankind the Divine Flame, a forbidden ember that carried the powers of creation. This gave humanity the foundation for culture and technology. Yet, as Zeus had forewarned, it simultaneously brokered the creation of weaponry and the birth of war.

There's another famous myth about the aftermath of that tale. Prometheus faced cruel punishment for giving the flames of Mt. Olympus to humanity. He was chained to the summit of a mountain in the Caucasus Range and doomed to the eternal torture of an eagle flying down every day to eat his liver. Even now, the legends say, Prometheus is groaning in anguish.

What I'm trying to say is that when I woke up this morning, I found myself in Prometheus's shoes.

"Not physically in his shoes, I mean. Or reincarnated or whatever. I'm just bound up in the Prometheus God Chains again... Ouch?"

No eagle winged its way over, but I did get two goddesses of beauty flanking me, subjecting me to a cruel, cruel punishment. They didn't really attack my liver so much as peck at my...well. I didn't steal any fire at all, but this poor, innocent teenage boy found himself slapped in chains and subjected to torturous punishment every morning!

"Whoa there!"

Shlurp!

“Waaagh!”

This eternally Reviving high school boy could give the immortal Prometheus a run for his money for how he got himself all slobbered up and knocked out. I woke up a sticky mess only to be knocked out once more with a *shlippty-shplat*.

“Yeah, this must be the fault of my Revival LvMax, huh? I think it’s going to pass Max any minute, though?!”

Shlup, shlup!

As they simultaneously sapped the strength and the MP from me, the girls straddling me looked down and fixed me with two breathtakingly beautiful grins. Those smiles made it plain—I hadn’t seen nothin’ yet. *Hey, isn’t this bullying? Agggh!*

Tee-hee, it’s punishment time!

They sucked the HP and MP right outta me until even my teenage boyness started drooping after that one hell of a wake-up call.

“Yeah, I got gobbled right up before I could either wake up or pass out—I mean, pass on! They drained my juices! Look, if you’re hungry, we can just get you breakfast, okay?”

Nod nod. Rattle rattle.

The girls were quite pleased with themselves today. Yup, they were a regular pair of Miss Smiles. What the hell? Why did I feel gripped by a sense of defeat that gripped my poor teenage heart in a vice? *All right. Tonight, I’ll get my revenge!* I mean, I got my revenge every night, but ya know?

“I can’t believe they exhausted the Infinite Revival aspect of Lovemaking. Their oral offense was so powerful it completely undermined the point of that skill. They’re mastering silk reeling with their tongues. I know tai chi’s been around for centuries, but this has to be a historical first! And a hot one at that!”

Oopsies, tee-hee.

When I went down to the dining hall, I bumped into the girls who took care of the orphans along with Murimuri-san. They were all glaring at me! *Oh, right.* The First Division had brought along all the orphans from the kingdom, and I hadn't gotten breakfast ready for them all in time. Yeah, I'd asked the First Division to bring the kids, but I guess it slipped my mind? Oopsies!

"Hey, how come you're all ignoring my cute little 'oopsies?' I mean, can you avert your eyes? It kinda hurts. Anyway, if we've got an army of hungry orphans on our hands, then we gotta get those kids fed."

To give them a warm welcome to the frontier, I made them all a nice kids' meal using the orphans' famous ketchup.

"Itadakimasu!"

Geez, there were a lot of kids here! At any rate, the OG orphans efficiently set to work helping the new, dumbfounded-looking kiddos settle in. Now we had the new kids crying while wolfing down the food, the OG orphans looking on with tears in their eyes, the girls all taking care of the kids while sobbing away, and the idiots packing away the food and demanding more. Yup, it was a real ruckus here.

"Why didn't you give us any warning that we were about to get more orphans?!"

"I mean, it was just kinda one of those things where I was like, 'Yeah, if you see any orphans, send 'em my way.' Then a bunch just showed up on my doorstep out of the blue and startled the life out of me? Ya know?"

The room was glaring at me, and the day had barely begun. Nowadays the orphans had picked up the glaring habit too, and it was spreading to more and more of the orphanage helpers. *Good thing I like glares so much.*

"Haruka-kun, we'll need a ton of clothes for these kids."

"Good timing! I have just the thing. Yeah, I made a bunch extra?"

"Lord Haruka, I fear we have too few rooms for them."

“Good timing! I have just the thing. Yeah, I expanded the building just in case?”

“Hey, Haruka-kun, what’s the sitch with that giant pile of necessities over there?”

“That timing? Still good. Yeah, I created a stockpile?”

“You have everything squared away, don’t you? Then cut it out with the ‘startled the life out of me’ crap!”

It was only natural for a freelancer like me to stock up while I could. Gotta save up for a rainy day, ya know? You could never have too much. So long as there was conflict and poverty out there in the world, you could never have a truly endless supply surplus. Plus, with the way things stood right now, we could be at war at any minute, right? Wars always created poverty, refugees, and orphans, you feel me?

You could argue that war cut down on population numbers when there were too many mouths to feed. But even outside of the developing frontier with its subsequent labor shortage, there was plenty of open land available. More and more food was being produced by the day. War was nothing but a pestilence.

People were perfectly free to go butchering each other for greed, slighted honor, and other stupid reasons. They could endorse murder or assist with it all they wanted. Thing was, the world worked such that these truly stupid people were not the same ones who went to the frontlines; they were the ones who sat in safety and sang praises to sublime bloodshed. You had to cut through a whole herd of poor shmucks before you ever got to the instigator, and I was sick of that. Across global history, people have gone to war in god’s name, but how come the big guy never came down from heaven to fight his wars himself? *That pisses me off, for real.*

Incompetence was a crime. The supremely incompetent brother of the king had taken his criminally incompetent self and toddled all the way to the frontier with the worthless gift of his incompetently thick cranium. He was ridiculously,

endlessly incompetent, but as the local ruler, he stopped this foolish war in his foolish ways.

The Theocracy, on the other hand, was as obnoxiously shameless as it was incompetent, and the fact we had to go to the Beast Nation first made me even more ticked off. I didn't want to go unless I got to fluff a few fluffy beast girls, but it was a side trip we couldn't avoid. I mean, come on! Fluffy animal ears, right? Yeah, we planned to leave tomorrow, but I wished we could just skip the Beast Nation altogether.

"Today, let's split up and practice with the First Division and the Imperial Guard!"

"You got it."

"And they can start trying the monster forest and the dungeons on their own tomorrow."

"Boy, they're sure going to have their hands full."

The Adventurers' Guild was doing numbers these days. Turned out culling the monster hordes in the fringe of the forest also cut down on how fast the monsters respawned. The adventurers were destroying dungeons the moment they discovered them before the dungeons could get too deep. They were also slowing the growth on mid-size dungeons and deeper dungeons, the former with the goal to clear them and the latter by mowing down monsters on the top floors only. *Sounds like a lotta work to me.*

At any rate, that meant we could leave tomorrow, provided we didn't run into any problems along the way. We were about to go to the Beast Nation as an official delegation and then proceed to the Theocracy. We still didn't know how or have any concrete plans for taking down the Theocracy. Our basic game plan was to defeat the pope, bop anyone who tried to stop us, and—oh yeah—strike down anyone who struck me as obnoxious.

Eh, whatever. *I'll deal with that later. And as for right now...* Why did Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl insist on coming with me today? That was causing

issues with the whole formation. After some argument, we agreed they'd escort me to a pre-selected dungeon instead of accompanying me the whole way. Plus, Slimey and Stalker Girl were going to be with me the entire time? Yeah, but I didn't see what for?

My classmates marched me to a mid-sized dungeon under their strict surveillance before I could get my daily dose of glares. I saw a perfectly nice-looking dungeon along the way, but they chewed me out for even mentioning it and refused to let me at it. I mean, I completed another dungeon just as deep yesterday! Why couldn't I have a go at this one?

There turned out to be nothing for me to do on the upper floors of this dungeon, so I wandered around idly smashing stone bird statues. The bird monsters had leaped out at me and flapped away before I could get a hit in. It seemed like such a hassle to chase them down, so when my thoughtful chickenatrice pointed out that she could help, I let her handle them. She used her blow darts to turn all the birds to stone! They fell out of the air and turned straight into spellstones.

"I'm not using that much MP, and it looks like this method's pretty effective against weak little guys... If you keep crowing over how you're helping, does that mean you've given up on being queen of the serpents?"

Cock-a-doodle-doo?!

The chickenatrice still seemed quite traumatized, and thus mongooses were still a big no-no for her. I guessed she was fine being a chicken or a snake, but ix-nay on the oongoose-may. Turned out, discrimination was a huge problem even in the animal monster kingdom.

Anyway, my stats had gone up recently, but it was only a piddly increase since I'd gained just the one level. My stats still sucked. I didn't care about this miniscule improvement. Besides, the only thing I had to do was shatter stone statues, you know?

After I got Lovemaking, my Magic Absorption went up another notch. Even

though I got sucked dry of MP (among other things) this morning, my MP meter was full again by the time I got to work clearing this dungeon (read: wandering around aimlessly in it). My MP supply was usually high on inexhaustible thanks to the MP batteries in my bag, but the dungeon emperors kept snatching my bag away from me in our late night and early morning battles. I woke up all hopeful every morning, and then I was subjected to a punishment worse than poor Prometheus.

“Well, between Slimey, the hydra, the chickenatrice, and the tentacles, I’ve instakilled my way through the first forty floors. That means it’s my turn now, right? I want to adjust to my new stats before we get into any real battles. Let’s knock this bad boy out and hit up a couple other dungeons, sound good?”

Jiggle jiggle.

At the very least, I needed a mid-sized dungeon tour or an accidental straying into a deep dungeon in order to make any real progress. Tomorrow, we were to embark on an expedition to stock up on miso and soy sauce in addition to, if rumor could be believed, kombu kelp and dried bonito flakes. We’d even received unconfirmed reports of citrus fruit, including yuzu lemons and mikan oranges.

“Hey, Stalker Girl. It’s weird enough that you’re tailing me, but how come you keep joining in the battles? Dungeons are dangerous. If you mess up and get too close to a monster, you could get a chunk taken out of you, ya know? I mean, when it comes to chunk-takers, I can attest that the inn’s Tiny Tanuki is far more dangerous than any dungeon monster. I have a hunch she’s actually a monster to begin with. Anyway, you can keep shooting your projectiles, but don’t wander off. Stick with Slimey, got it?”

“I’m sorry,” Stalker Girl said. “My clan does not have much in the way of battle skills. I want to defend Poster Girl and all my other friends. I want to fight to protect my loved ones like the rest of you. I thought that, if nothing else, I could hold my own with long-range weapons... But here on these mid-floors, my attacks just aren’t doing any damage.”

Stalker's Girl's clan had struggled for generations to gain combat skills. Instead, either through nature or nurture, they'd developed specialized secret intelligence skills with low combat ability. That's why I gave them defensive equipment and other tools to help them escape fights, but I made a point to not give them strong weapons. If they had the weaponry, they'd want to fight, and if they thought they could hold their own in battle, then they'd want to protect other people. This meant they wouldn't run from danger any longer.

"If you want to protect someone, aren't you better off running away together? Leave the fighting to the warriors. If the people you want to protect can't run away, you need to find a hiding spot with no enemies. Then you can keep an eye out to make sure you don't get surrounded. And you know how to spot traps, right? So why not take your loved ones by the hand and guide them out of the bad situation? Leave the killing to the idiots, the morons, and the muttonheads. They're all so stupid they'd be more than happy to take on that task for you. Gotta have the right person for the right job, you know what I'm saying? Think the idiots are cut out for recon? Try sending them on a scouting mission. They'd go in, guns blazing, and turn it into a bloodbath. You're better off letting them attack like they always do rather than forcing 'em to do spy work. Yeah, they're idiots?"

"But aren't you sneaking into the Theocracy, Haruka?"

"Yeah, but that's because I'm the right person for the job of sneaking. See?"

I snuck into the royal palace to stock up the souvenir shop a million times, so it was basically my area of expertise. *No worries when Haruka's on the job.*

"...Are you serious?"

"What're you surprised about? I've basically mastered all my stealth skills, and I'm a pro at keeping my head down and blending in, right?"

"Now that you mention it... Well, I can't comment on the last part, but you sure have a lot of stealth skills!"

Yup, my skill set made me a high-speed, stealth, close-combat magic user. I

still wasn't exactly sure how that was supposed to work, but I had sneaking down pat. Like I said, I used to sneak into the palace in the royal capital every day. Back when I was living in the monster forest, I excelled at sneaking up behind enemies before clobbering them to death. How come everyone looked shocked when I told them I was a stealth master? Just who did they think I was? Surely I was an espionage-suited scout sort of character, you know? Kind of? Although I had no experience with any of that? Yeah, not in the slightest?

"Scouts're supposed to lead people, not do the dirty work of fighting. You can leave that to the fighters. You know, all those people who look like numbskulls. All you need to do is drop some land mines and hightail it out of there."

"But Haruka, aren't you good at fighting too? You never hide yourself. You always stand out yelling, 'Hi-yah!' and 'Ka-pow!'"

"Yeah, but that's me searching for the enemy and sneaking up *until* I'm super close and can go 'Hi-yah' and 'Ka-pow.' I'm a close-range assassin magic super-destructive close-quarters combat specialist stealth fighter scout? And stuff?"

"You tacking on the words 'sneaking' and 'stealth' doesn't make it any less of a barbarian brawl. If a scout is singlehandedly taking on an enemy force out in the open and killing all of them without any attempt to hide, then I don't think it qualifies as stealth in the slightest."

"Yes, but I'm *stealthily* killing them all. It's just that they never read the room. I wish they would and just let me kill them in a secret, but they always have to make a big deal about it. It totally ruins the stealth factor, every time."

Poster Girl and Stalker Girl had been giving me a run of real good glares lately. They were still roughly middle school age, but they were already learning so much. While we talked, my wire-operated shoulder funnels sluiced through the air, crushing the level 44 Rock Birds in a twenty-four pad-strong dogfight. Since they were rock birds, want to guess what they dropped when they died? Yup, (spell) stones.

Actually, they were even more of a pain for me once they were dead. After

all, they didn't need to be petrified to turn to stones. You had to hand it to this fantasy world: flying stone birds were pretty cool.

"If there were rock birds back where I came from, all the physics nerds online would crawl out of the woodwork to flame 'em to the point of extinction, ya know?"

Wiggle wiggle.

"People can crawl out of *woodwork*?! Where in the world do you come from?"

On the 45th floor, the last floor of the dungeon, we shot the dungeon king through the heart with ferociously strong magic bullets. Then we popped it with Petrification until it crumbled into itty-bitty pieces. The dungeon king was a level 45 Saber Mongoose, and that rustled my cockatrice's jimmies. In her rage, she unleashed an explosive cannonade of Magic Blowgun fire.

"Yeah, I mean, it's a sensitive, young cockatrice with trauma. You should have read the room, buddy."

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

With its long fangs, the mongoose should have been a natural predator of both chickens and snakes, but the chickenatrice shot it dead before it could do a thing. Turned out you gotta read the room even in a fantasy world. *Like I said, mongooses don't fly around here. There's some things we just don't talk about, ya know?* So for a real one to show up? That just spelled trouble.

DAY 104

MIDDAY

The church dudes will probably misjudge the girls and try to kidnap them. I almost feel bad for the church dudes.

DUNGEON

IT DEPENDED on when the First Division and the Imperial Guard finished up, but if everything went according to plan, we would all set out tomorrow. Today marked my last chance to do tune-ups on my skills, and now that I had finally made it to level 25 just in time, I had to struggle to master my new powers.

“H-Haruka, this is already our third dungeon of the day! How many dungeons are you trying to clear?! The other girls told me to stay out of the deep dungeons. I already ate the bribe—the candy they gave me, so I can’t go back on my word now!”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. We’re definitely not going somewhere we were specifically told to stay out of, trust me. We just happened to wander into the wrong dungeon. We’re innocent!”

Wiggle wiggle!

Mistakes were technically a kind of wrongdoing. But negligence was only classified as such because it’s careless and unplanned. My mistakes were perfectly planned, rigorously researched, scrupulously scheduled, and carefully calculated, so surely there wasn’t anything wrong about what I was doing?

Yeah, this is a pretty innovative approach to mistakes, isn’t it?

Thin, almost invisible Magic Threads soundlessly rent the air and sliced through hordes of monsters. This technique worked great when it was just me against a large number of enemies. *So yeah, let’s fine-tune it?* Of course, my tune got a thorough fining even at night, but I still had to keep trying my hardest! As I walked slowly, hundreds of Magic Threads whizzed across the

room and minced nearby monsters. The number of threads I could control drastically dropped off as I increased the range, and they quickly became more unwieldy and a lot less powerful. When I activated High-Speed Movement, I entangled it with Teleport for good measure. All of a sudden, the load on Wisdom's calculations became too much, and the system crashed. That's why I could only control a couple dozen threads at close range and about ten at longer ranges. Far enough away, a couple of threads were the best I could pull off. Any more complex maneuver was hopeless.

This was a useful skill, but it demanded control. Still, it was great for crowd control and could make bloody slices through large numbers of foes. I lightly bounded through the air and let my Magic Threads fly. I used Gravity magic to make myself lighter and activated Airwalk to charge through the monsters, beheading them as I went.

The monsters perished as I cut them to ribbons and left a rain of carnage in my wake. Moments later, the monster blood bath turned into spellstones... *Okay, this is kinda edgy.* Anyway, I had been concerned that it'd be even harder to control myself now that I had leveled up, but this put that needless worry to rest.

I lost my footing a good few times in the air, bumped into a monster or three, but hey! I only ran into a wall once. I was getting the hang of this 'controlling myself' thing. In fact, if I hadn't been controlling my Magic Threads at the same time, I would have had no trouble using Airwalk and catching myself before I fell. Probably.

"Taking a battle into the air sure does raise the difficulty level. That's a bummer, ya know? Juggling Magic Threads and Gravity magic is hard enough as it is, and when I entangle Teleport into the mix, the whole system freezes and crashes. I was hoping to have a move I could whip out if I got trapped or stuck fighting wave after wave of people. I just don't have enough time, do I?"

Jiggle jiggle.

I couldn't forget those suicide bomber old dudes. I still had nowhere near enough ways to deal with snipers and other long-range attackers. Unlike monsters, people actually strategized in battle. They could always scope out the weaknesses in your skillset and take you down. People's skills were also way different than monster skills. The people I was about to face were no doubt strategizing the best skills, equipment, and magical artifacts to destroy me. If I couldn't find a way to deal with all that, I'd be as good as dead with my stats. Sure, I'd gotten stronger, but fat load of good that did when I was still so weak.

Everyone from Sister Girl's nuns to my female classmates was hellbent on accompanying me. I wasn't happy with it, and believe me, I would've stopped them if I could. With such a huge group of glamorous girls, the Theocracy would no doubt try to kidnap them. Still, I could use that to set a trap. If they wanted to capture Sister Girl, they wouldn't try any long-range instakill attacks. They also wouldn't try to disguise assassins in a larger group to take a shot at us. Nope, utter scumbags like the church officials would capture Sister Girl and try to drag her back with them.

"I mean, if they kidnap the girls, they're just gonna get bit for their efforts. If all you did was look at 'em, you'd think my classmates were nothing but a bunch of pretty girls. You'd probably think they'd be easy to kidnap, huh? I dunno. I doubt the Theocracy could afford to feed them all."

Wobble wobble.

Back home, these seemingly innocent beauties went by a name that struck awe and fear into the hearts of anyone who heard it. How was the Theocracy supposed to know that? They didn't have the slightest clue that a high school girl or a JK was a synonym for the scariest, wickedest, most horrifying, most arrogant, most tyrannical, most militant, man-eating monster the world had ever seen. I had no doubt the church guys would be fooled by their appearances and try to kidnap them. I almost felt bad for the church.

"The girls all have veils with Hiding, and they've also got status ailment protection from head to toe. My only concern now is the physical traps. Hey,

Stalker Girl, are you really going with them? I mean, I appreciate it, 'cause I'm concerned about traps and stuff. This is dangerous, ya know? I can whip up a set of equipment for you in a hot sec, but...ah ha, now I get it. You're level grinding so you can scout for them. That's why you keep practicing with those throwing weapons."

"Exactly. I would hate to sit in safety while the people who've helped me so much brave the heart of enemy territory all alone! My clan has already begun gathering intelligence and building bases of operation within the Theocracy, and I promise we will all be an enormous help. I won't just get in the way, I swear!"

I appreciated it. After all, information was king. I just didn't want to send in Stalker Girl's clan with their lack of fighting skills, because it was just too dangerous for them. If they got caught trying to pull some spy moves, they would be stranded all alone in enemy territory. That was so risky, it was basically suicide. To be on the safe side, I'd given everyone in her clan an improved version of the orphans' backpacks—which were already good enough to incinerate a town or thereabouts, letting the orphans run away in the aftermath. They boasted multiple cluster-bomb warheads and jetpacks, not to mention sticky grenades with Paralysis, Confusion, and Poison effects designed for physical combat. I was still worried. So worried, in fact, I equipped them with anti-mind-control contact lenses, massive amounts of hallucination-and-paralysis-inducing chaff, and a big gift box of powders made from various monster forest poisonous mushrooms just to be on the safe side. Even so, her clan had no combat ability at all. Sure, they had self-defense *spetsnaz* knives with Piercing, and Physical and Magical Defense Immunity (1 Hit Only), and lightweight versions of my classmates' armor to buff their defenses as much as physically possible. I still couldn't rule out the possibility that they could get hurt. Believe it or not, weapons of mass destruction could be considered defensive equipment, too.

"I don't know what you're muttering about over there, but even if we have

little use in battle, we're packed with enough firepower to level a city! Honestly, we're all scared stiff just carrying them! My biggest worry now is that I'll be too frightened to use any of it. You remember the other day when I was trying to stop that horde of monsters flooding out of the dungeon? Well, I certainly stopped them in their tracks—never moved again! But I don't think that's what people usually mean when they talk about stopping something in its tracks!"

Yeah, but she still couldn't take down a dungeon king. She could overwhelm monsters with a barrage of grenade fire if they were no higher than level 20. If they were level 30 or above, she couldn't actually kill them. She'd just rough them up. The flood she was talking about had come from a shallow dungeon outside of the frontier, and she was just barely squeaking by until I showed up. When I came to bail her and her old-dude dad out, I found them both on death's doorstep. They needed better gear.

We made it to the 40th floor in no time, but I was just walking around and letting the Automatic Defenses of my hydra and chickenatrice spit automatic blow darts at the monsters. I wasn't concerned about Stalker Girl. She had an unparalleled bodyguard in the form of Slimey riding on her head. A pack of leopards sprang at us, but those died under the fangs of my mass of hydra heads. Then we got swarmed by a mob of moths before they quickly turned to stone, fell out of the air, and shattered into a million pieces.

The monsters on these upper floors were no match for my hydra and chickenatrice. They were all goners before I could land a finishing blow. My shoulder shields had Automatic Defenses too, but they didn't get to join in the fun as I made my way to the 50th floor.

I took my stockpile of warheads and fired them all at once in a barrage of live ammunition. This bullet hell made quick work of these floors, and I shot straight through the 49th floor into the 50th floor.

With that same burst of speed from that charging dash, I swung my Universe Staff in a horizontal slash—accelerated courtesy of my qi and magic, I shot an instantaneous burst of high-speed bullet-hell Magic Threads. The bear on the

50th floor stood its ground and tried to guard against my attack, only to be cut clean in two.

Now everything would have been perfect if I could have stopped and gone, “Good, that’s a done deal!” but I was going so fast at the end there that I couldn’t control my footing. I tripped over my own feet and somersaulted headlong into the wall. Still, I dragged the bisected boss with me, and so it kind of ended up cushioning my fall? I was going ridiculously fast there, but that momentary Magic Entanglement was what provided all the momentum. *So it’s more than just a numbers game after all.*

And then...the jig was up. Stalker Girl discovered my secret. She was furious at me, so I slipped past her and surged on deeper into the dungeon. Yup, I’d “accidentally” mistaken this deep dungeon for a mid-size dungeon and wandered in. If she stopped me now, then she’d expose the secret of my “mistake,” and that would ruin my chances of passing this off as a slip-up to my classmates! Stalker Girl was screaming her lungs out at me, so I plugged my ears and went, “La, la, la, not listening!” while laying waste to monsters. I must not have heard anything because of the noise of all this monster slaying, clearly. Yup, I still hadn’t noticed my mistake, so I was golden. I cleared the 60th floor. It was only when I got to the 70th floor that it started getting tricky to instakill the monsters with my hydra, chickenatrice, and 24-funnel shoulder shields.

I figured the Theocracy had upwards of ten thousand old dudes for me to fight. *Uh, could I pass?* Alas, I feared I’d have to plunge into battle reeking with the smell of old dudes, bat aside both their swords and their stench, and beat the hell out of them. Therefore, I wanted to devise an attack that could speed things up and destroy as many of them at once. But if Stalker Girl caught up with me, I couldn’t keep pretending this dungeon dive was an innocent error. So off I went!

Starting in the 70s, I flew about at high speeds with no concern for how much MP I was expending. I attacked first, flattened the full frontline of monsters in one go, and slashed through the rest as I ran by. I lopped off their heads and

limbs in passing and broke through walls of foes by kicking off the ground and slamming into them with shoulder blows. Stalker Girl was fine, since Slimey was still with her. I knew we could have an unlucky accident here, but this was my last chance to test run my new skills and get any practical training. We'd be on the march tomorrow, and then once we met the enemy, the real battle would begin.

The boars on the 87th floor were a bigger bore than I would have liked, and then I got slowed down with pest control on the 88th floor. Then I just barely overwhelmed a magical monster on the 89th floor by killing it with even more magic. *Yeesh, I don't have much magic left.* My MP batteries were close to empty, and I was down to less than 10 percent of my own MP meter. There was one floor left in this set of ten, and I wasn't about to turn back here.

Then, on the 90th floor, I found a full-on dungeon king. That meant that I'd "accidentally" gone all the way to the lowest floor of the dungeon. I told Stalker Girl to stay back since it was dangerous and left Slimey with her to keep her safe. My fingers were still jammed in my ears the whole time, so I couldn't hear a thing. Thus, it was all still just an "accident" and not my fault.

"I mean, I don't want to waste any time, and I don't have so much time to begin with. Plus, I only have one new move I want to try, so I'm sure it'll be fine?"

I took a step forward and swung my staff. This had been my staple move for ages now, but it was more difficult than it looked. At the same moment as my step, I entangled my qi and my magic and began circulating it through my body in a refining spiral.

I amassed all of my energy together until it threatened to burst out of my body and focused that driving force into my waist. I then used my breathing to gather the contracted and refined qi at a point near my navel. I then let it enter the spiral to make the mix even stronger. Finally, I released all this pent-up energy in a limber, willow-like, lightning-fast, precision strike via the tip of my staff's blade.

All I had to do was keep telling myself the same thing: *If I swing it like a sword, it'll strike like a sword. If something touches my blade, it'll get slashed.* Anything that stopped my sword would meet a swift end, and the flash of my blade would be followed by many more soon after.

I wanted to slice through even Miss Armor Rep's armor with its Perfect Reflection and Physical Immunity, slash through Total Defense and Perfect Immunity, dice up space, dimensions, and anything else in my path. The sword slash I performed now was a mere fraction of my intended power, riddled with errors and shoddy workmanship. Still, the dungeon king died instantly.

I couldn't focus such an immense amount of power into a single point, so my sword stroke carried less than a tenth of the power I'd amassed for it. The other sizeable fraction of my strength had nowhere to go and just about blew me to smithereens in a recoil gone wild.

"Haruka. Haruka! How? How could this happen? *Sniff sniff... Sob...* It's too cruel! Why did you think you could ever channel such brutal power? Look at you! You're a bloody mess. They all *told* me you were fragile, even though you're so strong. They all *told* me! But this... This is too much! This is too cruel... Haruka-saaan... Huh?!"

"Whoa, would you look at that? By a complete 'coincidence,' that worked out great! Man, I almost thought I overdid it for a second there, but that didn't turn out half bad. Yeah, I pulled it off, right? Kinda shocking, don't you think? Yeah, I guess sometimes, you just gotta turn your brain off and get the job done instead of worrying about it. Although turning your brain off sounds kinda dangerous? 'Cause you'd die?"

Wobble wobble!

Stalker Girl's face was a mess of snot and tears, and she dared to call me a mess? Why? I didn't even get my arms torn off? To be fair, it had been a while since I'd self-destructed at this scale. All my muscles were torn to shreds, my bones were shattered, and I was gushing blood everywhere. *Maybe* I looked a

bit macabre, but hey, it wasn't so bad. I was managing to control myself with Blockhead. Yeah, plenty of fight left in me! No matter how strong a move was, if it left you too wiped to follow up with another attack, you're good as dead. But since I hadn't pulled the attack off, logically speaking, I was totally fine. *Yup, sure is a paradox, huh?*

As I controlled my breathing and tempered my qi to boost Revival and put my body back to rights, I rinsed myself with Water magic, dried off, and then went on my merry way. If a teenage boy like yours truly tried changing clothes in the depths of a dungeon with a pre-teen girl like Stalker Girl around, he would wind up in court. It could even end up as a full-blown scandal!

"I-i-i-in what universe is this considered a success? You were bleeding eeeverywhere, *snuffle*, blood was spurting out of you in huge gushes, and I kept hearing your muscles snapping and bones cracking. *Sob!* How is that okay?! How is that considered a job well done? You looked like you were dead! You were literally beaten to a pulp!"

"Uh, excuse me? I'll have you know my face escaped perfectly unscathed. I totally didn't look like I was dead, and there was barely anything pulpy about me. I mean, I always end up like this? You're so mean, you'll make me start crying!"

Honestly, though, that move had produced way more power than I'd expected it to. Stalker Girl was a tattle-tale fiend, so I used Blockhead to control myself and make a show of stubbornly staying upright. If no one had been watching, I would have been crying and screaming and rolling around in pain. I was actually really shocked the move was this powerful.

This was, in fact, a major accomplishment. While over 90 percent of this ridiculous power went haywire, the fact that I managed to channel the rest into a spiral and neutralize it was straight-up miraculous. Even if this was a lucky accident, it had still worked. Now all I needed to do was analyze what happened. *Yeah, I was majorly lucky here...but it still hurts like nobody's business.*

I guessed entangling qi activation and Alchemy led to super awesome results. I'd been curious about this and itching to give it a shot for a while now. As it turned out, I had been right on the money.

Honestly speaking, though, I was one lucky duck that my arms hadn't gotten torn off. Normally my arms went flying and everyone got super pissed at me for it later. I made a point to pick them back up every time I lost 'em, but my classmates still ganged up on me and freaked out. I guessed the five-second rule still applied, even to dropped arms. *Although five seconds seems awfully short, right?*

"I mean, I'm better now? Ish? So it's okay, ya know? I mean, I never know what 'it' is referring to when I say 'it's okay' but whatever it is, it's definitely the fifteenth and eleventh letters of the alphabet, so it's chill? Man, what *does* 'it' refer to?"

Jiggle jiggle?

I brushed all the dirt off, too, and then patted Stalker Girl on the head to comfort her. On my descent, I had breezed through all the battles too quickly to check out the hidden rooms, so I wanted to hit them up and collect the treasure chests on the way back.

Okay, so I'd gotten as much dungeon equipment as I could get my hands on. I'd also level ground as much as was possible. I'd reviewed all the techniques suitable for the upcoming battles and got a good idea of the risk of me self-destructing. I was happy with the results, I felt fully prepared, and I'd wiped out every dungeon with ninety or more floors in the frontier. Stalker Girl and Slimey were still upset with me! *Ya know what, let me give her another pat on the head. Yeah, and maybe a snack.* She must have been tuckered out from all this running around.

In the end, everything turned out great. That's because I'd picked up the skeleton's sword techniques and mastered them yesterday. I'd taken with me the sword techniques it'd trained in over the course of its full life, its memories

of fighting to the bitter end in the dungeon, and...its blowgun. *What was I gonna do with that?*

DAY 104

EVENING

*This poor, delicate teenage boy's heart is about to die of stress—
call that an agile heart.*

WHITE LOSER INN

TODAY, an innocent teenage boy accidentally went to the wrong dungeon (but he clearly didn't have any ulterior motive, of course), coincidentally failed to notice that he was in the wrong place the entire time (which didn't stop him from blasting his way through it, naturally), and wound up killing the dungeon king after grinding himself into a bloody paste. Yup, same story as yesterday. Yet another crime on the rap sheet of this entirely remorseless criminal!

"Nah, I mean, there was just this giant, badass-looking turtle that was squooshing a ton of magic into its shell, so I had to kill it fast. And it died, ya know? Yeah, I hurt my hand because the shell was so hard, so then Stalker Girl got worried, so then I gave her some candy, so then Slimey had some of it too, so that proves I didn't do anything wrong. Right? And hey, Stalker Girl's tired after accidentally clearing three dungeons, so give her a break, would you?"

"Oh, don't worry. I don't think for a minute that Stalker Girl's to blame for this mess. I also have no doubt that you're the culprit, and you're not getting any breaks on my watch!"

"Yes, maybe you did have to kill the dungeon king quickly since it was so dangerous, and maybe that is why you ended up in such a sorry state. I'll give you that. I'll give you a lot of things. Why on Earth did you go to another deep dungeon in the first place? How do you get lost and go to the wrong dungeon every single day?!"

Nod nod, rattle rattle!

I had thought leveling up might influence his maturity. *Who am I kidding?* The

moment he reached level 25, he went off to go experiment with his newfound powers. Even though he'd been put through the wringer yesterday, there he went again today getting lost!

"How, you ask? I mean, I accidentally got lost and ended up in two mid-size dungeons at first. When I got lost the third time, I accidentally found myself in a deep dungeon, so I did pretty well, right? Two out of three ain't bad! That's a small enough error that we can ignore it, right? And I didn't notice that I was lost, so what was I to do about it? Can't a guy catch a break, ya know?"

"Even if you did actually accidentally end up in the wrong dungeon, you definitely should have noticed how deep it was once you saw it had more than fifty floors!"

"Right? If this dungeon of yours had ninety freaking floors, that's not you failing to notice. That's you being willfully ignorant!"

"Stalker Girl says she tried yelling at you to stop, but you put your hands over your ears and said, 'La, la, la, not listening!' At that point, you hadn't *made* a mistake. You were actively perpetuating the mistake!"

We were going to mobilize tomorrow. Hence, we finished up our dungeon runs today. That's also why I made the extra effort and asked Stalker Girl to tail Haruka-kun, but so much for that attempt at reining him in. *Two mid-size dungeons and one deep dungeon in one day, huh?* With those taken care of, every big dungeon in the frontier was gone. Plus, we'd knocked out almost all the mid-sized dungeons that were located close to where people actually lived.

"I mean, it's not like dungeons tell you how many floors they have, ya know?" Haruka-kun went on. "I would have noticed if they'd put up a sign that was like 'This is floor 70,' but the monsters weren't exactly rolling out the welcome wagon with signs and stuff. And the dungeon concierge was slacking off on the job! I didn't know what floor I was on, which caused this unfortunate mistake. At that point, I had to speak to the manager, aka the dungeon king, and give 'em some constructive criticism and the blade of my sword. I guess they'll think

twice next time before forgetting to put up a sign? Although they kinda died, so I'm not sure how that'll work."

"'Kinda died' is not the word for it! You killed them!"

The dungeon king, apparently, was some sort of nasty turtle.

"Who on earth would blame the dungeon king for lack of signage?"

"Speaking to the manager is not the same thing as facing a dungeon king! And it's not up to the monsters to put up signage either!"

"Oh my god. We're not talking about an apartment building, Haruka-kun. It's a dungeon! Dungeons don't have signs to begin with! Besides, you shouldn't have to stop a monster and ask for directions when you have the Map skill!"

Jiggle jiggle!

To Haruka-kun's credit, I knew that adventurer parties typically recorded floor numbers and monster data for information sharing purposes. But those were for dungeon expeditions that took days or weeks to complete, not Haruka-kun's solo dungeon speedruns. *I'd ask who's supposed to write down the info then, but I'm afraid Haruka-kun would try to strongarm a monster into doing it for him.*

"Why can't you guys acknowledge that this is just a basic mistake? Everyone makes mistakes," Haruka-kun insisted. "I even cleared two mid-size dungeons before accidentally winding up at a deep dungeon. It feels like you guys don't even trust me. Should I have cleared another dungeon before coincidentally trying to get lost, or what? I mean, that would have just made me get back to the inn late, ya know?"

"You don't know what the word 'coincidentally' means! You don't 'coincidentally' try to get lost!"

Haruka-kun didn't just make mistakes; he made them on purpose. Making a mistake with full intent to mess up didn't qualify as an accident!

"Coincidences happen, but purposefully making a coincidence isn't a thing."

“If you knowingly do something on accident, then it’s no longer accidental. You’re just doing something wrong!”

Haruka-kun was a willful and repeat offender. But he insisted that his hands were tied. That it was all a mistake. *A likely story. I don’t think he’s going to turn over a new leaf anytime soon.*

The dungeon king on the 90th floor, a level 100 Kim Quy, was a huge tortoise with slow, ponderous movements. It was named after a Southern Vietnamese turtle deity. Apparently, the Kim Quy hadn’t been possessed by the darkness, but it was still a hard fight. After all, it was a level 100 dungeon king with impenetrable defense skills like Perfect Reflection, Physical Immunity, Total Defense, and Perfect Immunity. Sure, it moved super slowly, but Haruka-kun claimed it stored massive amounts of magic power within its shell. If someone had slapped a gun on this indestructible beast, it would have made a monstrous headache. This was the kind of 90th-floor dungeon king the other girls and I were forbidden to fight, hence why Haruka-kun had to use all of his power to kill it immediately.

I wanted to be furious. But I knew Haruka-kun had to resort to such drastic measures because I’d asked Stalker Girl to tag along with him. He must have gone above and beyond—and way overboard—to kill that nigh invincible boss in one shot. That was all just to make sure she wouldn’t be caught in the fight.

In return, that attack wrecked him from head to toe. The pain was so sharp it fried his nerves. As a torrent of magic ravaged his body, he just had to stand there, endlessly reviving and falling apart again as the blood gushed out of him. I’d foolishly thought, “Oh yeah, if I have Stalker Girl come with him, maybe she’ll gain a few levels too.” Problem was, I thought the dungeon Haruka-kun got wrecked in only had eighty floors, and I never expected him to go there in the first place!

I couldn’t make up my mind: did I want to rant at him? Or sob and beg him never, ever to do something so reckless again? These wild emotions...vanished the moment I smelled béchamel sauce and cheese from the doria Haruka-kun

set before us. It smelled so good we all forgot ourselves. Agonized over which to eat first, I completely forgot to slap Haruka-kun with a lecture.

This had always been his plan. This dinner was just his latest weapon in the war against lectures, and we maidens awaited the overkill attack with bated breath and agonized expressions of “patience”. After all, the orphans got to be served first. *Yup, be patient, girls. I’m crying too.*

“*Waaaaaah*. I know the orphans have to come first, but *waaaaah*.”

“Watching doria go past without getting a serving is just too cruel!”

“Physical torture has nothing on this!”

“If he tells us he’s run out of food, I’m legit going to riot.”

Kakizaki-kun and the other boys couldn’t even manage patience, so Nefertiri-san had to hold them back with her chains. Tears welled in their eyes as they watched the food. They looked utterly pathetic. *I guess we get to see a side of them they can never share with their fiancées.*

“It drives me up the wall how he always puts together new dishes whenever we’re about to get well and truly pissed at him.”

“Haruka, we’re hungry! We’re starving to death over here, bro!” the boys yelled.

“Down, boy! Sit!”

“Bad dog!”

“Stay!”

“We’re not dogs, dude!”

“Oh god, this smell is killing me... I’m faaamished!”

“I’ve never seen a meal like this before,” said Arianna-san. “But it looks just scrumptious. Oh no, I fear it’ll make me foreswear my vows of poverty.”

“It’s delish, just so you know,” Vice Rep B told her. “And when Haruka-kun makes it, the delish factor gets taken to a new level.”

“Ahhh! Don’t even talk about it! I can’t wait any longer!”

Haruka-kun *finally* finished serving the orphans. At this point, even the caretakers were drooling as they carried our masters, the gratin and doria, over to us. We were in agony as we tried to be patient. *Just a little longer now...* The dishes streamed in and filled the table like they were on a conveyor belt. When I looked closely, I realized the so-called conveyor belt wasn’t Holding magic like I’d figured. Instead, it was a system of ultra-fine Magic Threads. *Yeah, I’m trying to distract myself in an effort to stay patient. But hey, only a few more moments before we get to chow town!*

“It’s *hoo, hoo, hah, hah* hot, so make sure not to burn yourselves. I mean, I put healing mushrooms in it, so the burns’ll heal immediately. But it really is hot, ya know? Yup, it’s molten bubbly gratin and doria. I’ve even got lasagna for anyone who wants seconds. Yeah, and it’s all hot and high calorie and melty cheesy béchamel sauce goodness...”

“Hurry up!!!” *Sob.*

“Uh, I’m hurrying as fast as I can. Yeah, because you’re all rushing me? Well, whatever. Bon appétit? And stuff?”

“Ahhhhh! *Itadakimasu!*”

“Oh, it’s so good!”

“It’s so *hot*! But sooo good!”

We all flailed in pain from the heat with the biggest grins on our faces. The deliciousness manifested physically with us rolling about in agony. Because, yes, it was very hot. The denizens of this world lacked the same background knowledge we did, and they couldn’t resist the delectable smell coming off the food. Thus, they each started off with an enormous bite, which made their faces morph comically from the shocking heat and delightful taste. Only Poster Girl and Stalker Girl were given water beforehand; apparently, you were on your own with this meal if you were fifteen or over.

“Hah, hah, hoo, hoo, hah!”

“Hoo, hoo, hah, hah, hah!”

“What’s so funny?”

“No, they’re not laughing. Here, let me translate: It’s hot! But really, really good.”

“Duuude, this slaps.”

“You went hard with this one, homie.”

“Bravo! Bravo!”

Hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo. Hah, hah, hah, hah.

“If we don’t hurry up, we’ll miss out on the lasagna! But god, this is burning my mouth to a crisp.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine with my Heat Resistance skill. Nope, no, never mind!”

“Haruka-kun, how many plates of lasagna can we each get?”

“Oh, the lasagna? It’s a pain to dish up, so I just made one giant pan of it. It’s a race to see who can get to it first while it’s still nice and hot? And yeah, did I mention that it’s hot?”

“Seriously?!”

I found myself reflexively buying a bowl of cold bean soup that he was selling for extra. I used it to cool down my mouth in between bites of gratin and doria. Then I threw myself back into the fray to fight for the lasagna. My mouth was on fire! But the cold soup went perfectly with the gratin, and Haruka-kun sold bowl after bowl. Once we downed all the soup, we squabbled over the huge dish of bubbling, molten lasagna, the inferno-like gratin, and the volcanic doria. Through all of it, we groaned in agony from the heavenly flavor and the hellish heat. I think all of our Heat Tolerance skills leveled up. While we fought, Haruka-kun sneaked small plates of lasagna to everyone who was born here in the fantasy world. That let it cool to a more manageable temperature before

they tucked in. *That sounds like discrimination to me!*

“Ooh, I couldn’t eat another bite.”

“My stomach is on fire, but at least I’m all warm and fuzzy inside.”

“Oh my god, that was so good.”

The room was now full of the burnt-out wrecks of maidens writhing about in delighted agony. *Come on, guys. Could you not collapse on the dining hall floor?*

Mm-hmm, this was our last supper before we left the frontier. I remembered the similar feast we had back in the monster forest cave. Back then, we had nothing but fish and mushrooms to eat, but Haruka-kun grilled them up with herbs for us before we set off for town. He was silent, but we felt his encouragement loud and clear anyway. It was a silent request for us to come home safe and enjoy another tasty meal together someday. Once again, he used his wordless kindness to avoid our wordy lectures. He may not have been able to control his body, but he could still play us!

“Urgh. This hurts so bad, but I’m in heaven.”

“Mm-hmm. I’m so happy and full.”

I was plenty worn out today from clearing two dungeons, so after a quick sweat and x-for-eyes sesh, I went to take a bath. Once we were marching to war, we probably wouldn’t get to have baths like this.

“Yesss, this is incredible.”

“I feel like I’m melting.”

We dribbled gloppy, white liquid over ourselves, which seeped into our pores to give us silky smooth and oh-so clear skin. The moisturizer slicked its way down our fronts and backs.

“Oh my god, I’m in love with this body cream. When is he going to put it up for sale?”

We all lost our minds with delighted joy over the amazing efficacy of Haruka-

kun's new body cream samples. This was next in the lineup of products he made for us maidens, joining the silky-smooth body lotion, bubbly body soap, and shampoo and conditioner set. *Look out, world, here comes glossy body cream!*

The latest Haruka-kun wonder protected our skin with moisturizing and heat retention. Its key skill was Revival (small), but it also had protection against and recovery from status effects. Here at its debut in this girls' meeting, we took turns rubbing it on each other while we sat around naked after our bath. Our amazing skin glowed with a glossy luster any girl would be proud of.

There was also that fantasy hair removal treatment that promised to do wonders for your skin and eliminate the need for maintenance. I'd been pretty hesitant to try it, but it zapped all my body hair, right down to the little fuzzy hairs and shrunk my pores to the point they were practically invisible. According to Haruka-kun, this potion acted on the hormones. It was harmless, but it changed the chemicals in our bodies. I took another dose of it today to last me the duration of the trip. With how much I'd taken it in the past, I thought I might very well be hairless for life, even if I never touched the potion again.

The various physical enhancements I gained by leveling up made me stronger and more gorgeous by the day. Daily exercise also functioned as a great workout, and it was doing wonders for my waistline. Even Oda-kun and his friends, who'd all once been kinda chubby or else total twigs, were now complete beefcakes. Then Haruka-kun gave them a makeover with their wardrobes and haircuts. They looked like respectable members of society. *They're actually super pretty.* The moment he was done, Haruka-kun cried, "They've lost their nerdiness!" He sounded legitimately upset.

"Oooh, I feel soooooo silky smooth!"

"This moisturization is literally out of this world."

"Yeah, my skin is like so *moist*?!"

This body cream was incredible. It made our skin just as soft as it had once

been when we were little kids. We were blown away at the miracle of once again being as smooth as a baby's bottom. I finally understood what they meant by translucent skin; that's how miraculous it was. Oh god, I couldn't imagine living without skin this good. It wasn't at all the shock I'd felt when he first put the body lotion on sale. That had made me so transcendently gorgeous I almost felt like I would pass out. I looked like a doll! At that point, I no longer felt like I wanted to go home. Now it was looking like we might never go home, but... well, Haruka-kun was about to start selling body cream, so who cared?

"I could never give this up. I could never go back home, you know?"

"Mm-hmm. It's literally impossible."

Our aging was slowing down to begin with, but it slowed to a snail's pace altogether once we passed level 100. It seemed like we would be forever young, in some sense of the phrase. And we were also likely to live longer. Even so, that didn't change the fact that we lived in the poverty of a medieval world. Anyone in our shoes would miss home and modernity.

But then Haruka-kun filled our days with the tastiest, knock-your-socks-off-est treats we'd ever eaten. *Don't even get me started on the custom-made undies and dresses.* My wardrobe was exploding with fantastic, luxurious clothing. Now that we were so happy, how could we ever possibly go back?

For some reason, though, Haruka-kun was still trying to send us off. God said it was impossible, but he didn't believe god for a minute. Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san told us that he was still searching for a way to send us home. I was pleased to hear that, but all the same...none of us wanted to go home if it meant Haruka-kun had to stay behind. After he'd made us so happy, we weren't going anywhere without him!

"He's really sweet, but kinda...on the wrong track?"

"Uh-huh. We're about to go to war, but he's concerned about skin care products. Which, like...okay?"

"Yes, but I imagine his goal was to provide us all with protection against status

ailments, no?”

“Wait, really?”

At long last, we were leaving tomorrow. The body cream, no doubt, was a way to cheer up Arianna-san and her fellow nuns, as they were getting more anxious and withdrawn as time went on. The church had seized authority from the Theocracy’s royal family. We heard that Arianna-san’s family was safe, but the palace was under siege. The knights sworn to protect the royalty were in a constant standoff against the church’s forces, and with the palace sealed off, the Theocracy was, in essence, calling the shots via the pope.

“Haruka-kun’s such a worrywart, isn’t he?”

“No kidding. And he’s an awful perfectionist.”

“Doesn’t the Theocracy still have its hands full with internal power struggles and infighting?”

“Sure, but once they get that straightened out, they’ll come marching on us.”

To safeguard the source of the church’s wealth, the church had no choice but to oust the royal family from power and urge the Theocracy to conquer the frontier. The church’s massive interests couldn’t be maintained without their monopoly over spellstones.

Therefore, the church denounced Haruka-kun, the so-called “black-haired commander,” as a heretic and an affront to god. This allowed them to claim legitimacy for invading the frontier. They insisted the frontier should be subjugated for daring to harbor this enemy of god. Now they plotted to form an alliance with other kingdoms and issue proclamations that the frontier and Diorelle must be destroyed in the name of god. The scales of public opinion did not tilt in Diorelle’s favor—not when they had granted asylum to the enemy of god. They didn’t dare to send their armies out, tempting obliteration by the full sum of their neighbors’ military might.

And then the black-haired commander, this most wicked enemy of god,

decided to perform the most diabolical act of all: covertly invading enemy territory. Using their own excuses against them, Haruka-kun said, “If it’s your divine duty to attack the kingdom that’s given me shelter, what’ll you do if I take shelter in the Theocracy, hmm? You have to capture me, or else everyone’s gonna think you’re harboring an affront to god. At the same time, you can’t invade your own lands with foreign soldiers, can you? Well, you’re the authority on religion in this continent. You issued the proclamation that I’m the enemy of god. So I guess you have no choice but to wage a holy war on your own homeland, huh?” He was quite eager to use this ‘enemy of god’ bit to take the Theocracy down from the inside out.

If the church tried to target the kingdom of Diorelle, Haruka-kun planned to make his undercover presence known and shatter their justification for this crusade. He would use his new title as an affront to god as his excuse to lead the church around by the nose. As dangerous as it was for him to split up from the dungeon emperors, he directed Angelica-san to stay with us, Nefertiri-san to guard the frontier, and Slimey to protect those who lived in the forests of the Beast Nation.

“All right, girls,” I said. “No matter what happened before, *this time* we’re going to protect Haruka-kun. Starting tomorrow, we’ll need to give this our all!”

“You got it!”

“I’ll do my best!”

“We’ll keep him safe for sure. That’s what we’ve been training for all along!”

“Arianna-san, here’s our two-pronged strategy to make sure Haruka-kun doesn’t end up on his own. This is why we’ve been training to mobilize when Haruka-kun does.”

“I’d be more than happy to help,” said Arianna-san. “We will allow you to hand us over to the Church, for I trust the kingdom and the frontier will keep us safe. You’ve been so kind as to teach us fighting methods and provide us with a guard on top of that. And on top of it all, Lord Haruka is planning on infiltrating

the Theocracy single-handedly on our behalf... Yes, we're ready. I swear we'll follow your orders to the bitter end, even if they should kill our families in front of us. We are yours to command."

The church's hostages were my biggest concern. That's why we were sending in such a small infiltration force. My only remaining worry was about Haruka-kun trying to sneak in and being...well, Haruka-kun.

"Thank you, Arianna-san. We're all going to do our very best to ensure it never reaches that point."

"She's right. You shouldn't give up hope. We'll make it work somehow, so let's be optimistic and find a way through this together. Okay?"

"Let's not worry about what could go wrong. Instead, we should actively try to make things go wrong for the church. We won't stop giving them grief until they reach rock bottom. And *then* we'll pour salt in their wounds. Got it?"

"Uh-huh. Just focus on keeping your loved ones safe. Pretty soon, the church will wish they never tried to pick a fight with us. Rock bottom's a pretty miserable place, after all."

"And I mean, with this 'enemy of god' thing... They're trying to pick a fight with the man who bullied god. They're really just getting what they asked for, right?"

Yeah, the pope and his cronies were as good as done the minute they made Haruka-kun their enemy. In exchange, they were going to get a pretty explosive bang for their buck.

"Yeah, remember when the ambassador from the Theocracy asked us to hand over Haruka-kun? ...If we had, he might've blown the church to bits by now."

"Oh yeah, whatever happened to him?"

Once you made Haruka-kun mad, it was checkmate. Haruka-kun wasn't a fighter—he was an annihilator. He didn't care about battle tactics, because all he wanted was the enemy's destruction. The Theocracy's strength was founded

on their political power based on the people's faith and their economic power supported by monopolizing the market on magic item tech and beastfolk slaves. In turn, their military power was sustained through faith and their vested interests. If you were then to seize the economic pillar of that trifecta, their military might would be devastated as well. Haruka-kun no doubt wished to rob the church of everything but their faith, leaving them with no recourse save praying to their god. *I feel like that'd turn into a headache for god, if his religion has nothing left but prayers to fall back on...*

"Let's make sure all our stuff is packed up tonight. All right, girls, you're all dismissed."

"Nighty-night!"

Sorry, Arianna-san. We wanted to protect them and their families, so, in turn, we wanted to protect everything they and their families cherished. If at all possible, we wanted to rescue everyone from their suffering.

Our primary goal was to protect Haruka-kun—Haruka-kun, the one person we couldn't bear to lose. Haruka-kun, the one person we longed to save. And this was the one thing we would not budge on. Even if we were castigated as monsters and suffered hatred and scorn, we would still put Haruka-kun's life over any number of people's. We would do anything to keep Haruka-kun safe, even if it required deserting everything else in the world.

Haruka-kun never felt guilty for what he'd done. His excuse was, "My heart is (fr)agile, ya know? So if something drives me up the wall, trying to grin and bear it, it'll stress me out so bad I'll die. Yup, I'm weak. You know how bunny rabbits die of loneliness? Yeah, teenage boys are like that, but worse. Basically, trying to grin and bear it is bad for my health, you get me? Yeah, you don't want me to become one of those people who comes down with stress-induced sudden genocide syndrome. I'd better start slaughtering to release the pressure. I have my health to think of, you know?" It was an absurd excuse, and now I suspected he didn't know the difference between fragile and agile. But either way, he seemed set on performing a massacre.

He was royally pissed lately. Angelica-san suffering in the bowels of the earth, the orphans starving to death in their rags, the townsfolk being eaten alive as the sea of monsters threatened to swallow their city whole—each was enough to earn his rage. He unleashed his fury until every single one of these tragic—or, as he put it, sorta obnoxious—situations came to an end. He didn’t even care how this affected his body.

“So we have to protect Haruka-kun.”

“Right. Or else he’s going to work himself to death while he complains about how much this annoys him.”

“All right, everyone. Let’s do this!”

“Yeah! Now, good night.”

Right. We had to because we knew he’d go overboard. Haruka-kun claimed that when a teenage boy got annoyed, things like “what’s right” and “good intentions” weren’t necessary. After all, you could do what’s right and have all the good intentions in the world, and you could still hurt people. If anything, good intentions just got in the way. It was fine, according to him, to act just out of mild anger. *Consider it like this: you’re removing the thing that’s stopping everyone from living in peace and happiness. It doesn’t really matter if what you’re doing is evil or a crime... You know, I don’t remember the teenage boys back home being so straight-up villainous.*

Haruka-kun, villain, was truly a man of the people. He never bothered with fancy speeches or hoity-toity, boastful explanations about what he’d done. He would only say, “Hey, I did it because I was kinda annoyed. I didn’t do anything wrong.” That was that. He would keep on being annoyed until we could all smile again. I was convinced of it. Even if it almost killed him, even if it blew him to bits, he would still let himself be driven up the wall if it could make us happy.

Haruka-kun never thought about his own happiness. He worked to keep a smile on the face of everyone he saw, but he was the one person he never looked to. That’s why our class, if no one else, had to keep him in our sights. We

had to surround him and make sure he couldn't break free from the ring of happiness.

That's why we were setting out to kill. Who else would protect the boy who protected the world?

DAY 104

NIGHT

Education-wise, I'm a high school boy. A schoolboy I may be, but I don't remember taking any substances. So yeah, I didn't do anything wrong?

WHITE LOSER INN

TODAY'S EFFORTS had produced a result I was quite happy with. Even in vulnerable situations, I could solo tons of enemies thanks to my hydra and chickenatrice. I left all the defense to them and their powerful automatic counterattacks. Between the hydra's hundred snakes and the chickenatrice's Poison and rain of status-ailment-inflicting shots, I carved out a safe zone for myself as I waded through swaths of enemies. Add my twenty-four Wisdom-controlled shoulder funnels and my infinite number of tentacles, and I could wipe out all my foes through counterattacks alone.

I now stood far fewer chances of being overwhelmed by human wave tactics. Forget the high-level knights with powerful equipment; I used to be concerned about getting overrun by low-level religious zealots. That risk had vanished. Miraculously, I now could use tactics that required high-speed maneuvering. I still wasn't perfect at it, but speed itself made a great weapon. I could take a few more risks than before. My hard work had also paid off in other ways: I could now use Life or Death with a 70 percent chance of survival. That was fine with me, because 70 percent was enough to get the job done. My miscalculation was a lucky accident. Thing was, it was also a painful miscalculation. *Because yeah, the recoil is killer?*

"So cheer up, Slimey. I was only doing that so I'll be okay even in situations that aren't okay. That's why I jumped into a situation that wasn't okay and came out the other end okay. Which turned out okay, so I proved that it's okay

to do that. I think? Maybe. I was probably okay?”

Wiggle wiggle!

Yeah, he seemed kinda grumpy?

Anyway, if Miss Armor Rep, Dancer Girl, or Slimey unleashed their full might, they each would've been powerful enough to curb stomp the Theocracy's army all by themselves. Which was exactly why I couldn't let the church see them. I had to keep them out of the spotlight. If the church could capture all of them the same way they captured Dancer Girl, it could end the world. Therefore, I couldn't let them attract any attention during the war. I had to keep them off the front lines.

“The real threats are in the frontier's dungeons, you feel me? We don't need to throw our best and brightest into war. I mean, it's just a war, ya know? And considering how many dungeons you three have cleared, you haven't just made a major contribution. You guys are the real MVPs. You've already got the MVP award, so why don't you guys take a break and do guard duty for the duration of the war? That's already a big help, I swear. Besides, people—not monsters or bosses—need to sort this out, or else it'll devolve into a bigger mess. Anyway, if that old god dude shows up, you guys can whoop his butt for me. Let me handle the church, okay? I'm gonna give them a beating they'll never forget.”

So much for Servitude. The three dungeon emperors made terrible servants. *And Slimey leaves a lot to be desired as a butler. Part of a servant's job is to protect people, right?* Yeah, and so that's why I thought they should let me take on the church myself. Besides, they'd labeled me an enemy of god right from the start. It was a good matchup!

Wriggle wriggle.

If it meant I had to kill anyone who saw the dungeon emperors in action, so be it. If I didn't and word got out about them, we were in major trouble. It was probably best for me to keep the news about my hydra and chickenatrice on the down-low too. Since I was already marked as an affront to god, who cared if

I got blood on my hands? If anything, it was better than people thinking I was on great terms with that old god dude. However, I didn't want total strangers hating and scared of Slimey, Miss Armor Rep, and Dancer Girl. I refused to let people treat them with hostility and prejudice for no good reason.

"Oh hey, have you noticed how we're getting a ton more non-frontier adventurers these days? They're all super weak, so I keep ripping 'em off with the Adventurers' Guild rookie loan program. The money keeps rolling in, so how come I'm always broke?"

Bobble bobble?

Selling food to everyone made me major cash, and yet it always vanished? Problem was, for every bit of money I made, my classmates kept turning right back around and eating up my supplies. I couldn't get enough food to feed them without investing in new products. It was bottlenecking my moneymaking schemes. Even so, I was still selling tons of eggs and sauce and raking in the dough that way.

"I don't even have enough to pay my rent? How come?" *It's a mystery.*

Wiggle wiggle!

I put in major hours on my side hustles. I bought up every bit of raw material I could get my hands on, and all I had to do after that was make and assemble the final products. As a master of the side hustle, it was inexcusable for me to procrastinate and not produce enough stock. Any true freelancer knew you needed to do your work before the client even knew they needed it. That's so when the job finally fell into your lap, you could go, "Good timing! I have just the thing." If you didn't have it ready beforehand, your clients were liable to yell "What are you even doing over there?!" at you.

"Okay, now I've made as many sticky grenade launchers as I can. Ah ha, what if I make more pepper + status ailment spray?"

Between the church's monopoly on spellstone technology, their production of magical items, and the tithes of dungeon gear they received from other

countries, I had no clue what sort of weapons the church might pull on us. People in this fantasy world put way too much stock in magic. This made them weak against physical weaponry. While their magic defense skills might block magic attacks like Inferno and Explosion, surprisingly enough, they did nothing to stop physical things like heat waves or shock waves.

“Yeah, so if I had to guess, the best way to fight a magic-proof army is...with a bunch of pitfalls, right?”

Jiggle jiggle?!

Sure, enough physical strength could help soften the blow of a fall, but Physical Attack Nullification wouldn't do a thing. That was what saved my hide in the Ultimate Dungeon. This was also why my female classmates, who were all well over level 100, got burnt to a crisp by that hot, hot gratin and doria earlier.

“So I think a slimy lube grenade would be pretty effective, but I don't really want to chuck a lube bomb at an old man, ya know? Yeah, 'cause then I'd have to see a lubed-up old dude, and that's a nightmare scenario. It'd whittle my teenage boy HP down to nothing.”

Wiggle wiggle.

Yeah, but who knows? If I had them, then I could always whip out the trusty phrase, “Good timing! I have just the thing,” right? Nothing's better than being prepared, and if there turned out to be a squad of lady knights, then a lube grenade would be essential! Yup, if there were any lady knights, then I'd be equipped to pell-mell lob lube grenades at them, leap in myself, and have a grand old time pelling and melling with them! If there were any old dudes, I could just lube 'em up with oil and light 'em on fire. Like I always did?

After devouring a mountain of dessert, Slimey was rapidly returning to the cheerful slime we all knew and loved. My suspicions were right: he had a soft spot for pudding. I mean, less of a soft spot and more soft all over. And not only when pudding was involved. *Yeah, that's how slimes are?*

Anyway, I now had a move for taking on a dungeon-emperor-class monster.

All that remained was to make a move that let me actually use this move. *Well, I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.* I'd die in an instant if I tried to dodge or defend against a hit, but so long as I could attack, I could instakill a dungeon emperor first. Therefore, I had no choice but to figure it out in the heat of the moment while tricking the enemy and pulling off a super, super lucky and half-assed move. The only drawback was the teensy-weensy chance of pushing myself too hard and maybe, just maybe, accidentally dying. So it was fine, right?

"Yeah, so we have more orphans now, right? They're all working hard, learning as much as they can. I think some are even taking on jobs in town doing financial or scribe work, right? If I don't pull my weight and the church invades the frontier, that'd be like a slap in the face to all the orphans and their hard work. It's the job of us adults to watch out for the orphans until they're old enough to choose their own futures, and I'm a teenage boy who gets up to more adult activity than most adults, so I gotta do my part, right? Yup, I'm not to blame for any of this. I mean, I'm just a teen, aren't I?"

Wobble wobble.

Back in that awful run-down orphanage in the capital, some of the older kids took care of the little ones even though they were barely middle-school age or, worse, upper elementary-school age. If we high schoolers didn't pitch in and pull our weight, what kind of example were we setting for our underclassmen?

Just then, two undeniably teenage problems dressed in leopard print popped in. Then the leopardesses swiftly divested me of my armor and dragged me off to bed.

"I mean, I remember making leopard suits and selling them at the bargain sale, but... I didn't realize you were the ones who bought them!"

I had only made two limited-edition leopard suits (ft. leopard ears): a normal kind and a black panther version. Now here they were again, worn on the girls in front of me. They could have warned me there were dangerous wild animals on the loose before they loosed themselves upon me!

Their leopard-print bodysuits were like a thin second skin clinging to their curves. Those long, sexy, animalistic legs swayed seductively in time with their swishing tails as they pinned me down and crawled up my body to devour me. What carnivores! The black panther flaunted her tail right in front of my nose, and her round, luscious, black leopard-printed buttocks swayed like something obscene. Both backsides wriggled seductively all the while, Ms. Leopard and Ms. Black Panther joined forces to gang up on this poor teenage boy and tear into him.

I couldn't move! That skin-like black cloth stretched across that glorious rump hovered mere centimeters above my face, which placed the danger zone of those big cat thighs directly in front of my eyeballs! While my eyes were glued to the spot, those predators began predating. With one above and one below, they tore into me in a ferocious feast, moving in tandem as those twenty leopard-print-covered fingers rubbed and stroked and tugged. Oh, now I knew why they were called meat eaters, all right. I struggled against two tongues licking their way up my length.

"Hey, watch it, whoa! What about my turn? It's my turn! Mghh, hoo. Mwgah?!"

My face was pinioned between two amazing ass cheeks. They covered my mouth, and I couldn't breathe...until this tantalizing position tempted me to try to tickle her taint. Oh yes, it was in striking range!

"Eeeek!"

"PWAAH, I can finally...I can finally breathe again... All right, now it's my turn!"

It shocked me that, in their efforts to stymie my qi activation, they would try and distract my mouth with such fantastic flesh that no self-respecting teenage boy could ever resist. All I needed was to breathe. Then I could bust out Lovemaking and turn the tables. Yeah, even if this was a major turn-on, I *needed* to turn the tables and unstop my mouth. Or else I'd suffocate!

"Ahhh! Ahnn. Nnnh...ahh!"

I took painstaking care and put my whole evil heart and soul into lavishing love upon every nook and cranny. I sent vibrations rippling through the pussycat in front of me. Yeah, 'cause even my tongue stopped. She kept twitching and jerking?

A wild animal was most fierce when it's injured. The black panther had been the first to collapse in a twitching heap. Her eyes rolled back into her skull, but then a spark of life returned to them! The other leopard was down for the count and spasming in the throes of ecstasy, leaving me with a sole opponent: the black leopard.

"Eeek, ahh...hyaah?!"

With one swift strike, I knocked her out the minute she recovered. She was still extra vulnerable to my attacks while still recovering from the aftertaste! The two leopardesses now lay unconscious in front of me. Their body suits glued to their skin so amazingly close there weren't even the tiniest of wrinkles. The only things still moving were their long, swishing tails. Only because their ears and tails were actually magical items, ya know?

"All right, now let's see... How the heck do I get those body suits off from the outside?"

Had I made them for Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl in the first place, I would have designed the suits with vulnerabilities, but I'd done no such thing for these bargain sale items. They were such fine craftsmanship that I'd hate to tear them off!

"Maybe if I finagle this and get my hands up in here? Rustle my way down over here? Grope a little while I'm at it? I mean, this is all very fun, but...I think the only way these are coming off is if the dungeon emperors unequip these costumes themselves."

Yeah, I was at a loss. Problem was, I had made all the clothes and armor for the girls so that third parties couldn't take them off with magic. Since they were so skintight, so ass-adhering, I couldn't even get their clothes off the normal

way.

As we waged a fierce war of recoveries and knockouts followed by more recoveries and knockouts, Wisdom tried to work out a way to unleopard these girls. The On/Off function of the Suction skill was to blame for this. If I couldn't activate it from the outside...then I'd have to get inside the suit and give it a shot!

I shimmied my ultra-thin Magic Threads into those skintight body suits to unlock the mechanism from the inside, but the way the girls writhed made it difficult to guide the threads. The main issue was that the sensation of being inside their body suits was so heavenly I kept losing my focus. My caresses under their clothes were also partially to blame for their movement. *Yup, this sure is a diverting way to pass the time.* But it didn't do much to get the body suits off. It was only after cycles of calculating and miscalculating and naughty times and moaning and twitching and passing out and losing their minds that their beautiful pale and amber skin saw the light. I gently peeled them out of the rest of those shiny suit skins.

“Hyaah, ah...nh!”

Oh wow, Sex God was leveling up again.

“Kyaaaah! Ah, ah, ah, ah, ahh!”

Huh, and there went Lovemaking too.

“Ahhhhh!”

Well, what could I say? I tried my hardest.

DAY 105

MORNING

Mama Kitty and her clowder of kittens waved us goodbye, but wait a sec...are the kittens coming along for the ride?

WHITE LOSER INN

IT'S MORNING! Time to go. Before I could tie up any final loose ends and get out the door, I found myself tied up in yet another Prometheus morning. To put it in simpler terms, I was once again copying my buddy Prometheus, bound in chains. A Promethean predicament.

“At this point, I think the Prometheus God Chains are getting more use on me than on monsters.”

Being tied up wasn't the issue. The issue was that these Prometheus God Chains stopped me from using any of my abilities, and that left me in a really embarrassing state. Sex God and Lovemaking were still looping around inside of me, but I couldn't channel that energy anywhere. Same went for Lasciviousness. Without any of my equipment, I was helpless. Yeah, I was screwed?

“‘In revenge and in love woman is more barbarous than man,’ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. Yeesh, that name's a mouthful!”

So it turned out that being an animal in bed last night had spawned a tangled web of a love-hate relationship between the leopard, the black panther, and the teenage boy. The teenage boy was just too irresistible, ya know? So they were going to return the favor with a one-million-bolt blitzkrieg of hatred?! Even worse, I'd tried so hard last night I was still out of MP... Gwaagh!

SEX GOD fainted!

Yup, today was the day of our departure, and I was raring to go, all dull-eyed

and scraggly-tailed. Yesterday, the idiots tagged along with the First Division and the Imperial Guard, ostensibly to “show them the way.” First thing this morning, they and the macho chicks were canoodling and fondling each other. *Bombs away, am I right?*

“Well, well, well, my little idiots. What were you up to last night? Having fun with your fulfilling relationships like a bunch of normie scum, *hmm?* Blow up! It’s too early for all this flirting!”

“Bruh, we’ve told you a hundred times to give it a res—yo, man, you okay? You look dead on your feet.”

“Eyyy, great job, dungeon emperors!”

“Wait, stop! Put the bombs away!”

Anywho, almost everyone in the First Division had gained a level or two in a single day. They would have their bearings in the frontier in no time. If they trained in the shallow dungeons while the frontier army pruned the deeper dungeons, the sitch here would stay nice and stable.

“Here, give these to the macho chicks just for safety’s sake. They’re sticky grenades. They’ll come in handy if you need to make a retreat,” I told the meatheads. “They’re still struggling to clear dungeons in a single day? How about I sell you some simple tents so they can stay in the dungeons overnight?”

“Hell yeah, thanks bro—wait, hold on. I want a tent too!”

“They’ve been working hard, but man, I just dunno... I’m kinda wigged out at the thought of them trying mid-size dungeons on their own.”

“Yeah, same. And they’ve got ages to go before they can try deep dungeons.”

Now that the demon scythes were no longer in the field, I had to weed out some monsters in the monster forest. Sure, that may have been the frontier guardians’ job too, but they weren’t exactly in the field either.

“They can handle serious full-frontal attacks, but they don’t know how to handle the unexpected. They still aren’t that great at figuring out what the

enemy's gonna do next."

"Uh-huh. And now they've got hecka good equipment. I'm kinda worried they'll get cocky."

"Yeah, they haven't mastered fighting yet... But hey, your armor's always awesome, so I'm sure they'll be safe. Thanks, bro."

To make up for the shortage of soldiers, we were getting a growing glut of adventurers. Baby adventurers from other parts of the world kept showing up on the frontier's doorstep, and to my horror, housewives here in town were joining the Adventurers' Guild to clobber goblins and kobolds for cash. *Yeah, the frontier'll be fine*. If anything, the only thing I had to worry about was an adventurer mistaking a housewife for an orc. That wouldn't end well for the adventurer!

"Hey there, morning, everybody," I said. "So I turned my carriage into an eight-car drag race train. It's pretty roomy, so throw your stuff in the back, ya know? Once we're finished packing, let's get some breakfast and then roll out. Make sure not to leave anything behind, you hear me? Although I'm planning on leaving the idiots behind. Yeah, so then we can say they're no longer with us?"

"We're coming with you, dude!"

"Yeah, the First Division'll be fine without us. We're sticking with you."

"We're packed and everything!"

"Yeah, these new loot trunks you made are great."

Yeah, so the girls wanted to bring their huge wardrobes and toiletries stashes with them. To make that happen, I used a mess of high-quality spellstones on high-capacity inventory trunks. Still, surely they didn't need cheongsams, school swimsuits, short shorts, sailor suits, *and* mini-skirted police officer/nurse uniforms on the battlefield, right? But yup, those were all coming along with us.

"I mean, I would have been down to carry them all myself, but if a teenage

boy put a bunch of used girl undies in inventory, his sex appeal would be killed so many times over it'd get straight-up eliminated. So I made these huge trunks instead, ya know?"

Jiggle jiggle.

I gave them security features as a matter of course—they were designed to hold valuables, after all—and then armored them with mithril and iron until they were super sturdy, hecka hard. Indestructible. I also put multiple compartments in the interior for convenient item organization. Still, I never expected my classmates to stuff an entire bureau into each one!

Even though we'd specifically rented out a whole wing of the inn for a long-term stay, it was so busy last night you'd think we were moving out. Reportedly, the girls had come to a unanimous agreement at their girls' meeting: "If we have too much stuff to fit into a bag, then let's get trunks." Since when was Marie Antoinette at the girls' meeting?

"Itadakimasu!"

"I mean, I don't care if you guys aren't in your full armor today, but what's with the animal pajamas? Are you really going to go out dressed like that?"

We were going to give Mr. Meridad a lift and swing by the capital. First things first: right now, there was a flying squirrel girl and a koala girl duking it out over pancakes while a sheep girl grazed a plate of steak and a wolf girl sunk her fangs into a bowl of salad. It was a dog-eat-dog world out here, but as to which one was a dog, I couldn't tell you. Although that jiggling lion could only be Vice Rep B! Yup, that was definitely the queen of the jungle, and her majestitti—nothing! I said nothing! Why was I being glared at by a herd of animals of all shapes and sizes? Even the giraffe and the frog were glaring at me!

"It's not like that!" I said. "I was just looking at her and wondering if I needed to do any tailoring on her pajamas. I mean, if they weren't too tight around the chest region, you know? I was just giving her the critical eye of a salesman scrutinizing a product under warranty. I was just thinking, if jigglion over there

fell into a deep ravine, would her ginormous jiggle-jugs have enough *ba-yoiing* shock absorbency to cushion the impact? I clearly wasn't watching the queen of the jungle's royal assets go on a jungle jumping jamboree."

"My animal intuition is telling me you're guilty! I sentence you to making us more pancakes!"

Gah. There she went again, slapping me with another false accusation. Fox Class Rep found me guilty of these false charges, but I objected to being treated like one of those anarchists who called any successful popular vote a forced referendum. *What is this, a kangaroo court?* Right, so long as our democracy was decided by majority vote, the girls' sheer numbers made it a matter of might made right. We teenage boys were a persecuted minority. *Come on, she really did make a ba-yoiing sound!* That was undeniable proof of my innocence, right?

A tiny monkey girl nommed away on a second helping of pancakes, but she looked an awful lot like a tiny tanuki... This was too confusing! For some reason, the mean girls were all herbivores—a mouse, a cow, a raccoon, Bambi—which I figured must be an attempt to make me lower my guard so they could give me a chomp. Yeah, and the Queen Bee, of all people, was a chicken... *Or I guess she could be a cockatrice?*

"The teenage girl energy in this room's so out of control it's going feral!"

Once we finished eating and getting ready to leave, we climbed aboard our respective carriage train cars while kangaroo-clad Poster Girl and ragdoll kitty-dressed Murimuri-san saw us off. A bunch of orphans stood around Mama Kitty dressed up like kittens, and the whole feline family waved us goodbye. The orphans' caretakers seemed kind of self-conscious about their cat outfits. They tried to be nonchalant about it. *Which is a pretty normal reaction, if you ask me.*

"We'll be back later," we called.

"Be safe!"

"Come back to us soon, you hear?"

“You be good out there and come home safe now. Promise?”

“Take care out there!”

Sister Girl and the rest of the nuns sobbed openly and waved back. *C’mon, you guys’re going home. You ought to be smiling, ya know?* Everyone called out to each other, promising to meet again, with plenty of waving on both sides... *Hey, wait a minute.* Weren’t we going to pass right by the inn again once we swung by the palace to pick up Mr. Meridad? Yeah, the war was the other way!

“Greetings, Haruka. My apologies. I wasn’t aware you would go out of your way to pick me up. Had I been informed, I would have made my preparations and met you at the inn—beg pardon, but why are you all dressed like animals? Do my eyes deceive me, or is my daughter a crocodile? And that owl shares a striking resemblance to our princess.”

“Seriously? I thought you were allies with the Beast Nation. You’re telling me you don’t have animal PJs?! Well, good timing, ’cause I have just the thing. Try this limited-edition elephant pajama set for a special rip-off—ahem, great price, a mere ten thousand ele, and any sucker—ahem, gentleman of fine taste who buys within the next thirty seconds will win himself a free elephant hat!”

“Sold! You’re quite right. This’ll prove our alliance with the Beast Nation. You know, it never once occurred to me, but I do suppose taking a friendly attitude to the beastfolk is a fine idea. That is, after all the discrimination they’ve suffered at the hands of mankind, you know. You’ve outdone yourself yet again, Haruka. Now, tell me, how come you’re the only one dressed in normal clothes? Is elephant my only option?”

Mrs. Murimuri and Merimeri-san haggled with me until I agreed to sell them three sets of PJs for ten thousand ele. His lordship lacked the economic acumen of the streets. I’d tip off Mrs. Murimuri about that later. *I mean, yeah. Most teenage boys are old enough to know better not to wear this kind of crap. Ya know?*

As we trundled off to the city gates, the large clowder of kitties made up of

Mrs. Murimuri and her passel of orphans waved us off a second time. All through town, stray dogs, stray cats, and stray orphans chased our carriages. I was kinda worried they'd get hungry from all that running, so I tossed candy in our wake. Did that ever create a crowd! The number of people diving for candy kept growing and growing... Soon enough, a number of my classmates joined the throng. *Wait, when'd they leave the carriage?!*

Once we passed the gates, my horse grew vastly bigger and bustled off at a ferocious clip. With no orphan passengers this time around, I figured it'd be fine to put the pedal to the horsey metal. I used my Jupiter Eye's Clairvoyance skill to check for obstacles on the road ahead and then give my horse directions. If I saw a merchant, I swerved around them. If I saw a monster or a bandit? Then it was hit-and-run time, baby.

My teenage passengers were stunned into silence at how fast the scenery flashed before their eyes. Clearly, they'd finally come around to the majesty of my horse. Yeah, he was fast! Even lugging a full eight carriage cars behind him, this one-horse bullet train flew. There was a lot of trade on the road these days, and we kept having to slow down to sidestep them. Otherwise, the road was flat, and it was a straight shot to the royal capital. While I gave my horse directions, I gave him a behind-the-scenes look about how difficult it'd been to build a road this straight. I wouldn't have him hearing it from anyone but me, of course. He deserved to hear it straight from the horse's mouth.

"Haruka-kun, I think we're going too fast. Are we seriously in that much of a hurry?"

"Oh, no, the horse is still just warming up. Basically idling. Here, let's hit the gas, and then we'll go see what's on the other side of speed. Take it away, horsey guy."

Neeigh!

"Huh? AHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Yup, he was one speedy boy.

DAY 105

MIDDAY

This meeting was attended by all levels of the food chain, but yeah, no one started nomming on each other?

THE ROAD

THE CARRIAGE'S hardworking teenage coach driver urged the horse forward as we sped along. To be honest, the horse was so smart it didn't really need a driver, so I kind of just sat there and petted it. *You're a good boy, aren't you, horsey? So let's keep this our little secret and not tell the others, ya know?*

"I mean, a driverless carriage on the loose would be a real problem, so I might as well sit in the driver's seat. We whizz by the passing merchants so fast they don't even have time to process what they're seeing, so maybe there's no point to this charade after all."

Neigh!

Jiggle jiggle.

Along the way, we had a tearful reunion with our old pals the green wolves. Before we could celebrate seeing our old friends again, we kind of ran them over and trampled them to death.

"What can I say? You shouldn't jump out in front of a horse. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure if this counts as a reunion. We never actually met in the first place, you know?"

Whinny?

Wobble wobble.

Since we were toting Mr. Meridad, I slapped the ducal crest up on the side of the carriage. Guess Mr. Meridad had to take responsibility for anything that happened along the way. I was innocent! Meaning I was in the clear to give my

horse his head and let him do his thang while I went back into the carriage itself. In car one, I found merry dad and daughter Mr. Meridad and Merimeri-san, along with Royal Girl and Maid Girl, busy with a briefing sesh. Class Rep and Vice Rep A were also there to represent our class. The topic of discussion? Sister Girl. Yup, and she was there, too. Once my slime guard and I joined, that made for eight people plus one slime.

“We’re making great progress, right on schedule,” I reported. “Or more like even if there were problems, I decided they weren’t interesting enough to remember, ya know?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Anyway, the girls had all changed out of their inn-suitable animal PJs into their going-out animal PJs. I mean, I guess it was better than going out in the pajamas they slept in. I still couldn’t shake the feeling that something about this didn’t add up.

Right now, Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl, dressed as a chick and an otter respectively, were hobnobbing with the other teen girls in the final train car in a pajama-edition girls’ meeting. After years spent alone in the darkness, I thought it was high time they got to have some fun. I asked them to join my classmates on the pretext of serving as their guard. *Yeah, I’m sure they’re having a great time.*

“I made sure they were equipped with good swords and all, but...at the rate we’re going, I doubt any bandits or monsters will ever be able to catch up to us. You feel me?”

Wiggle wiggle.

I’m not sure how I feel about Mr. Meridad wearing elephant pajamas during a meeting. Or conference? What would you even call this?

“Well, whatever you want to call it, procuring miso and soy sauce is one of my top goals. I still don’t know how feasible it’ll be to get kelp or dried bonito flakes, and we may have a ways to go before we can put miso on our menu; it’s

pending, it's TBD, it's a work in progress. That means I have my work-in-progress cut out for me... Hmm, I think I might want to get tofu too."

"Since when was this a conference about miso soup ingredients?! (And don't forget about green onions!)"

"We're here today to discuss the Theocracy. Presently, the nation is governed by a papal dictatorship, but that does not mean we seek to wage war with the country itself," Vice Rep A said with a serious expression.

"The Church and the Theocracy have different goals," Mr. Meridad agreed, "and I fear it would be a poor idea for us to challenge the country."

Vice Rep A was beautiful in a majestic, dignified sorta way. She was the kind of girl her younger schoolmates would address as onesama and send cute little girl-crush letters to. But right now, the princess-esque supermodel onesama was dressed like a completely undignified capybara. *Well, I should cut her some slack.* The supposedly dignified Royal Girl had morphed into Flying Squirrel Girl sitting there deep in thought with a hand on her chin. Maid Girl was right next to her, looking calm and cool and very much like a hippo. Any hope of taking this meeting seriously was done for. *I mean, the look isn't dignified.*

"So then, is our goal to avoid a war?"

"Nah. I mean, you're always free to sit out, you know? But then you're not gonna be able to do anything about the enemy. The point of politics is to stop wars before they happen, but if you remove the option of war from your negotiations, then it becomes impossible to negotiate effectively."

"Does this count as an incursion, then? I know you say this is espionage, but... Isn't non-sneaky espionage the same thing as incursion? Oh, and if we're talking miso soup, then I'm a big fan of putting wheat gluten in mine."

Class Rep looked serious as she pondered the issue...but look up slightly, and you'd catch sight of her swaying bunny ears! Yup, and the fluffy gloves she was wearing were also majorly cute. She'd changed out of the fox pajamas she was wearing this morning, but she was still as much of a sly fox as ever. *Yeah, and*

foxy? Wheat gluten in miso soup sure did sound intriguing!

“You know what keeps the peace? It’s not love. It’s not dreams, and it’s not hope either. Nope, it’s fear. Diplomacy is all about using your military power to make other countries afraid of you. You have to make them afraid of what they’ll lose if they oppose you. Why’re we wasting time trying to negotiate with the church? The church’ll do anything to save face and hold onto power, even at the cost of bloodshed and destruction on both sides. We gotta go straight to force. I mean, just look at the guy in charge right now. He doesn’t care if he ruins his own country to further his own ends, right?”

This was a power struggle with the church, not the Theocracy as a country. Religion crossed borders, so the church felt they could simply use their country and abandon it later once it had served its purpose. They planned to go to war, no matter what it did to the land, to hold onto power and sequester it all within the church itself. You couldn’t try to have peace talks with a group like that. We’d be fools for trying.

Either way, even if we weren’t handing over Sister Girl and the rest of the people the church demanded, it looked like we were all going to the Theocracy anyway. If we couldn’t find a way to avert this tragedy—then it would be fastest to strike first, consequences be damned. There’s an old saying, “Before whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him and knock his lights out. Bam, bam, bam!” and that meant that before you got hit, you gotta get ‘em good with three left jabs. Like they said, someone with a good left jab could control the world. So we could control this fantasy world and then we wouldn’t need any intercountry war. And definitely not a world war. Right?

“In that case,” said Royal Girl, “the Kingdom will go to war with you. It would be unthinkable for us to foist this responsibility upon you, Lord Haruka, when you are not a native of these lands. I will speak with Father...with the king at once. Thus I beg you, Lord Haruka. Cease this talk of espionage.”

There was a serious look in Royal Girl’s eye, but that only drew even more attention to her flying squirrel costume.

Anyway, if the kingdom went to war, they'd be playing right into the church's hands. *I bet the pope's cackling with glee.* The kingdom's royal family couldn't abandon me even after I was labeled an enemy of god, and therefore they chose to go to war instead. This would get them branded as a land of evil who dared attack the church, which would give the church all the more reason to form a bloc of allied nations and subjugate the kingdom.

"I speak for all citizens of the Theocracy when I deeply apologize," said Sister Girl. "Even if those in the highest echelons of the church wish to go to war, many of our common citizens do not. We will return to the Theocracy for peace, to put an end to this war. I understand that we have but little power of our own, but we wish to shelter the civilians from the horrors of warfare. Please, I beg you, stay your incursion. Let us negotiate with the papal faction alone. Especially as you've been labeled a heretic and affront to God, Lord Haruka...it is much too dangerous for you."

It was true enough that the church bigwigs wanted to suck up to Sister Girl, but they had no intention whatsoever to have serious negotiations with her. They just wanted to kidnap her because she was both an archbishop and the princess of the Theocracy. Her fellow nuns were similarly ladies of high standing. They were also beautiful, you know? Yeah, they were dressed as sheep and bleating amongst themselves, and it was clear as day that their negotiations were doomed to fail.

"Arianna-san, you and your companions are in the most danger of all!"

"The only person who can oppose the pope now is the princess of the Theocracy. And that's you, Arianna. You're a fool if you think they don't have designs on you!" Bat Girl yelled at her.

Bat Girl's dad was an elephant, and her mom was a cat, so I guessed that made their daughter—Merimeri-san—a bat? Yeah, sounded like a real sticky bit of family drama to me!

"Guys, we don't need to take things so seriously. If it comes down to a

defensive battle, we won't have any room to make mistakes. But once we infiltrate the Theocracy, we can do whatever we want. If the wind blows in the wrong direction, we can always just hightail it out of there, ya know? Then you guys don't have to fight or give in to any unreasonable demands they try to force on your peace talks. It'd be one thing if I was a believer, but I'm an affront to god, and whoever heard of an affront to god sitting down for serious negotiations?"

"Well, true!"

"But you still shouldn't attack them unprovoked."

The rabbit soothed the sheep, the flying squirrel tried to cheer them up too, the capybara and hippo weighed pros and cons, and the bat tried to convince the sheep not to turn themselves in. The elephant... I mean, he was just an old dude, so who cared what he was doing? It was impossible to have a serious meeting with everyone wearing these silly clothes. The heartwarming, power-of-friendship vibe we had going in this conference of war felt like blasphemy to the serious business of butchery.

See, Class Rep started out as a fox and then changed to a rabbit. *Both textbook furry costumes, ya know?* But Vice Rep A had been an armadillo before being a capybara, and Merimeri-san was an iguana before she became a bat. *Where were they going with this?* Sexy places, I hoped, but that seemed unlikely. *Which is a shame.*

"Yeah, I made a lot of sales in the name of friendship with the beastfolk, but I dunno if there's bat tribes or iguana tribes out there. I mean, I've heard of lizardfolk before, but I think that's something else entirely!"

And someone had apparently even bought the lion dancing costume I'd made as a joke? It looked like it could take a chomp out of you, but it also looked like it could bring good luck.

The capital city appeared as a tiny speck on the horizon and rapidly grew larger and larger until the entire city was visible before us. I saw a bunch of old

dudes at the gate hustling over. *Why, what's going on?*

“There’s a bunch of old dudes with shields blocking the road. Anyone mind if I run them over? Wait, that’d get a bunch of old dude funk in my horse’s hooves. I’d better burn ’em first to disinfect them. Because, yeah, they’re in the way?”

“Wh-who are they? Bandits?”

“Nah, I think that’s the Third Division. But hey, the Third Division could be bandits for all I know.”

Way back when, the Third Division and the first prince got up to a bit of banditry business together. Word was, the prince got disinherited, and the division reshuffled. Considering that they were back to their bandit ways at the very gates of the royal capital, it was clear they hadn’t learned their lesson. *Time to run ’em over!*

“I thought they were supposed to be guarding the capital and the border. What are they doing here in the middle of the road? Is this actually the Third Division?” one of my classmates asked.

Good point. We were being held up by bandits disguised as division soldiers. And now that she pointed it out...they were old dudes, which meant they were up to nothing good. *Okay, why don't I blow them to kingdom come?*

“You have a lot of nerve to impersonate a whole division and rob someone in broad daylight. Especially smack dab in front of the capital! Hey, there’s even some on the gates. Let’s burn this place to the ground, especially because the pimpin’ king’s here.”

“Wait, Haruka-kun! That’s the real division! What do you mean, the king’s here? Isn’t he in the capital? Aren’t we still half a day awa—oh, no, I guess we’re here. Never mind. Still, please don’t run over the pimping king! His queens are with him too!”

“Stop, stop, stop! Slow down! These guys are on our side! We can’t run over our own allies!”

With so much merchant traffic between here and the frontier, the road was packed with carriages. That meant we never got up to max speed, and the horse hadn't gotten enough exercise. Yet my classmates said I couldn't run people over?

Yup, there off in the distance stood the pimpin' king, waving at us. And he had three queens with him! *That show-off! Right, where'd I put that cavalry lance?* Time for a little lance charge to hoist him with his own petard—or my lance, whichever came first—and trample him under eight horsey legs. *Kys, go explode, be the Adhemar to my William in A Knight's Tale!*

DAY 105

AFTERNOON

I like to be a man with a plan and a fan—you know how it is with old dudes—but even though it came in handy, my classmates got mad at me. I guess they weren't fans?

THE ROAD

OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL

A CLOUD OF DUST flew up along the new road freshly christened the Frontier Highway. *Dun-da-dun-da-dun-da-dun!* An enormous horse whinnied, its eight legs pounding the ground furiously. *Dun-da-dun-da-dun-da-dun!* Every hoof beat struck the earth and produced such a tremulous rumble as if the land itself was screaming. *Dun-da-dun-da-dun-da-dun!* And who else would ride that mighty steed but Haruka? He hefted his lance in a chivalrous pose and uttered a manly cry—*dun-da-dun-da-dun-da-dun*—in time with the drumbeat of the pounding hooves and shrieking ground: “Kys, go explode, be the Adhemar to my William in *A Knight’s Tale*!”

Whereupon he was caught and told off. I wouldn’t have expected anything less from Lady Class Rep! My daughter, Merielle, and our Princess Shalliceres performed admirably as well. Beautifully, really.

“He may be the king, but it was still far too foolish of him to show up here with his queens.”

I suppose he had wished to greet Haruka personally. I might have been a better ruler in my domain, but I, too, understood the horrible, unbearable, stabbing pain of being in Haruka’s debt. *Yet, sire, I beg you, do not stand there and wave like you are perfectly safe. You’re about to be gored with a lance.*

But thanks to the quick action of Lady Class Rep and her companions, the boy was detained in a flash and his act of violence quashed. Indeed, Merielle and

Princess Shalliceres looked like they were becoming quite accustomed to this maneuver. Or perhaps I might say they were becoming proficient in the art of Haruka-quelling? The smiles they wore indicated it gave them great pleasure to do so.

“I can’t *begin* to think what you’re doing, trying to run down the king with a lance! What is going on inside that head of yours?”

“Long story short, there’s a bunch of bandits dressed up like the Third, and they’re working for the pimpin’, and I was going to lance charge him, but then you caught me and pinned me down, so now I can’t kill him? And the pimpin’ king’s making a pimpin’ point by showing off three of his wives, you know? As a girlfriendless teenage boy, that’s just going too far, right? So I’m just gonna kill ‘im? Give him the ole Count Adhemar treatment? And stuff?”

Even protection as solid as these great gates was as fragile as a thin sheet of paper before this mammoth horse. The beast could all but trample the entire world beneath its hooves. Fortunately, my daughter and her friends stopped the horse’s rider before anything could happen. I found this a rather curious development—I always thought my daughter the anxious sort. Perhaps she was warming up to Haruka—or merely being corrupted by him. Either way, the smile on her face told me she was enjoying herself. No doubt the king shared similar thoughts as he watched his royal daughter. Our hardworking princess had once worked for naught save the tip of her sword. She wore the gravest of expressions as she pledged to be the kingdom’s sword and shield. Now she shrieked and laughed like the young woman she was. I could barely believe my eyes.

Our generation—the generation of these girls’ fathers—comprised such pitiful fools that our girls were never permitted to act their age. From early childhood, our daughters’ shoulders buckled under the weight of heavy responsibilities and duties. They grappled with fear of the future. Yet these same girls now gamboled and made merry together. They had discovered happiness, gained a belief in joy, and developed the capacity to dream of brighter tomorrows. We

taught them nothing but to prepare for disaster, but this young man granted them the ability to smile and showed them how to hope for a better future. We were fortunate beyond words, and I say that speaking as both a ruler and a father.

“But why the heck did you charge the king with a lance when he came out to greet us? Why would there be bandits in the capital? The literal army’s stationed here, remember?”

“Huh? C’mon, he’s totally boasting that he’s got those three wives, ya know? Besides, even if two of ’em ran away—I mean, if the king kicked two wives to the curb—he’d still have another three to go! I think charging him with a lance is letting him off easy. I should let my horse trample him and then hit him with the carriage. Yup, I wish I had more than eight cars, but I suppose they’ll just have to do. Especially if I go back and forth over him, say, three times?”

“Run, Your Majesty! Run for your life!”

Haruka earned new monikers and epithets by the day, and I had yet to fully understand the context of many. But the title “the calamity of happiness” was well earned. Woe betide me should I try to stop or defy him.

“Don’t let him get away! Pin him down, girls!”

“Aye aye, ma’am!”

The girls successfully captured that young lad. *Truly a marvelous undertaking, every time.* Lady Class Rep was so adept at directing her army of girls, it was as if they were extensions of her own body. This skill extended even to the knights of the frontier like Merielle or the Princess Shalliceres, whom she’d met scant weeks ago. The girls moved like a single organism under her brilliant, yet never ostentatious, command in an enlightening display of military leadership.

Then the king and his party, clearly unable to wait any longer, approached the carriage train. It was not the done thing for a monarch to approach a commoner. None could fault him for it. Everyone assembled grinned, and I could have sworn that we were back on the frontier; for I had seen the very

same thing happen there. Everyone met the calamity of happiness with a smile.

And, in the case of His Majesty, a “Welcome! What’s cracka-lackin’?”

“Oh my god, he’s a total player!”

Ah. I see. So His Majesty still thought that was a common greeting in foreign lands... Our ruler speaking a foreign tongue was issue enough, but the words he spoke appeared to be causing an issue of another sort. Perhaps it would prove necessary for someone to have a firm word—what Haruka called “beating the stuffing out of”—him.

“I always knew he had a ton of wives and had kind of a sleazeball vibe, but oh my god. A player.”

“Yikes, he’s, like, way too into it. He’s making the princess cringe.”

“Ew. He’s so gross Wife A’s pinching him for it.”

“Yeah! And Wife B’s elbowing him.”

“Oh, Wife C just kicked him!”

“Yup, and the princess joined in the king-bashing fest when we weren’t looking.”

“Mr. Meridad is slapping him with a fan for the comedy points, too. This guy’s a real weirdo for a king, ya know? I kinda want to try killing him, too.”

“No regicide on my watch! Even if he *is* pretty laid-back for a king.”

The abuse on His Royal Majesty’s person continued as we were escorted into the palace and shown to a room where only the most eminent dignitaries from other lands were received. This was neither a show of power nor an attempt to intimidate us. It was merely a sincere reflection of the king’s desire to be a splendid host. I understood such a feeling quite well and its intensity. I, too, often wished to pay back these fine folks. I felt my heart would burst if I could not. As such, I pitied the king. The royal palace’s reception room paled in comparison to the glory of the frontier’s Omui Castle and Fort Murimuri. The daunting artistry and craftsmanship of these two castles was unparalleled.

Indeed, I was so intimidated by the splendor of my own home that my family and I had elected to live in a tiny cupboard in a corner of one room.

“No, no, you misunderstand,” said the king. “I merely wished to give Haruka a taste of the principles Diorelle was founded on. Thus, I decided to greet him in person. I won’t stand to be treated like this! I am the king, I’ll have you know!”

Ah yes, guiding principles. A kingdom’s future was shaped by the will of its monarch. The royal family set the course for a kingdom to follow, and thus it was the duty of every ruler to follow the guiding principles set out by their ancestors.

“Look, this isn’t my place to comment, and I don’t want you to ask for my opinion, either. Ya know? I get that it’s not easy being king, but all the same, the king’s the one who calls the shots. Those shots get passed down to their heir, but what happens if that heir grows up to be a player? I mean, I just kinda wonder if the kingdom’s in good hands. Because it seems like he’s doing more calling for shots than calling the shots!”

If one carried the burden of ruling too heavily, that indicated a lack of leadership. Simultaneously, treating this position as a luxury showed a lack of proper ambition. A king’s duty was to serve as a signpost pointing the way to an unfulfilled dream. It was the duty of his noble vassals to provide a firm foundation for their suzerain to stand on. This was as our forefathers ordained, but as time passed, the kingdom’s former ambitions weathered away. Many members of the aristocracy forgot their purpose. Then, one day, a boy from a foreign land appeared to guide us back to our unfulfilled dream, erasing every obstacle from our path as he went. It took wanderers from distant lands to remind us of the ambitions of our eternally respected founding fathers. Thus we bowed in reverence to our benefactor.

Momentarily ignoring the matter of our trip as envoys to the Beast Nation, we were concerned about how to react to the Theocracy...but we had no right to ask Haruka to handle it for us. A calamity was defined by its unstoppable and uncontrollable nature. To us, the calamity was one of happiness, but to the

corrupt nobles and the Church's army, Haruka was a harbinger of disaster. This group of young men and women brought calamities of fortune and doom alike. What was a king or duke compared to these forces of nature?

"I hope you will hear out my plea," I said. "The king, myself, and all the rest of the aristocracy of Diorelle have long been prepared to go to war with the Theocracy. This is a battle we are choosing to fight as a kingdom. You do not have to involve yourselves in any way. None of us want to engage in such foolishness as war, and we would much rather expend our combat resources on fighting the monsters. Yet, with that being said...we would always, without a second thought, choose to fight any war—no matter how foolish!—over sacrificing you fine young people. We will never hand you over to the Church. If that means we must go to war, then so be it. Then fight we shall. However...you are going straight into the lion's den, are you not? We cannot stress enough how much influence the Church has across this continent. Still, should you be named an enemy of god, then we shall join you in your fight against the Church and be branded god's enemies as well. None of us want peace if it means we must sacrifice our savior and watch him die. That is not what the people of Diorelle call peace."

Perhaps Haruka knew all this without me saying it. Perhaps he understood without me having to elaborate. Or perhaps he simply wasn't listening to me. *Hey, Haruka!*

"Okay, but if you guys go to war, you're just gonna lose, ya know? You're going to get crushed if you fight defensively, and if you invade them yourself, that's just gonna give the church an excuse to gang up on you with every other nation around. So forget it, will you? I'm not saying don't go to war, but I'm saying that if you can prevent a war, then that's the way to go. So yeah, just leave the church alone. It'll collapse on its own, ya know?"

The boy labeled an affront to God, the very boy the Church demanded we relinquish, fully intended to go to the Theocracy himself. He talked about war like it didn't affect him. Yet he and Princess Arianna faced a graver danger than

all the rest of us combined... Although I had to admit that perhaps he was the gravest danger of all.

There was no precedent in all the history of diplomacy for a nation to refuse to extradite a criminal simply for the criminal to sneak across the border himself. Every one of us wanted to stop him but, as Haruka knew full well, we lacked the means to do so. Furthermore, after Haruka and his companions devastated the deepest dungeons in the realm, those hells on earth, I thought it foolish to warn him of how dangerous enemy lands would be.

“Surely,” the princess suggested, “my attendants and I could go to the Theocracy as envoys. We could serve as representatives of Diorelle while protecting Princess Arianna and Lord Haruka. And if we go as an official delegation, I should think it unlikely that the Church would dare capture us.”

“But Shalliceres,” said her father, “we are speaking of an enemy country. I understand you have the resolve to cross enemy lines without your troops behind you. My child, who will keep you safe?”

If the princess went to the Theocracy as an ambassador, diplomacy dictated the Church should grant her the same protections it gave to all ambassadors. But this was dangerous to the point of folly.

“I may lack an army, but I have a fighting force of dungeon slayers,” the princess insisted. “I cannot deny that I will stand at a disadvantage in the heart of enemy territory, but I have no plans of surrendering or letting them brazenly take me captive. If they should turn a sword on an envoy claiming to represent Diorelle, then they will soon learn that I, too, know how to use a sword. They will understand why men call me dungeon conqueror.”

Yet fighting monsters was a far cry from fighting soldiers. *Strength is strength.* Whosoever could strike down their foe without being likewise slain was ultimately the strongest. Levels, the number of troops available at one’s disposal—none of that mattered in the face of this fact. The princess had led frontier soldiers into dungeons and the monster forest, armed with robust

equipment and a healthy stock of potions. The more she fought, the more she grew to understand the abnormality of our dungeons. *Dungeons: dens of nightmarishly strong and perilously fast monsters.* Day by day, she had the fear of these ferocious beasts lying in wait around each corner drilled into her being.

So, too, did she awaken to her own might: the destructive power of her sword and spear that could slice through the armor of the staunchest fiends. Her shield and armor that could withstand behemoth raging currents of magic. The many medicines that could heal her of every wound, illness, or status ailment in the twinkling of an eye. Her power defied sense. It was fantastic beyond our dreams for her. *Our own soldiers striking down monsters like the heroes of legend, growing more powerful by the day...* Such a fantasy should have been an impossibility, and yet here she was. It was so stunning as to be flabbergasting.

To best monsters with legions of heroes at her back like the war goddess of legend, like the heroes of yore who fought for the ambitions of their forefathers and led the saints of myth into dangerous battle high and low across the continent, to fight and win instead of dying in defiance...was a miracle, a dream-like miracle, and yet this awe-inspiring miracle *was our daily life.*

“I mean, we’re not going to *war* war with the Theocracy, ya know? I don’t wanna fight or negotiate with them, so yeah? I’m just gonna pick up any lost valuables and end it right there, you know?”

However, countless legends and chronicles of miraculous wonders ended in betrayal and treachery. Heroes did not always fall to vile beasts, and traitors were always, always human.

“There’s no point in trying to deter ‘em from war if they’re not scared of us, right? The church only cares about money and honor anyway, so what’s the point in going way out there and waging war on them?”

As such, Haruka and his companions were going—going to the Church that wielded war as carelessly as a toy. They would illustrate to the Church that war was no game, not when those dying were on your doorstep and not in some

far-off land. They were going to drive home the point of what it meant to use war as your plaything. Oh, the naive Church had played with fire, and now the harbinger of calamity would deliver them to the fires of hell.

Surely even these fools would perceive Haruka's ferocious might if all around him threw themselves to the ground at his passing. But he left smiles in his wake wherever he walked. Even children clung to him out of affection. I doubted he would strike much fear in the heart of the Church. Any mad despot, no matter how great and terrible, would eventually burn out. But a kinder evil could light itself ablaze and never, ever be extinguished. His was a fire that would burn for perpetuity and spread.

I was frightened of this boy. The true horror of the world was that which we could not understand—and in truth, there was nothing so obscure, so monstrously puzzling as Haruka. *I'd best ask Lady Class Rep to interpret for me!*

DAY 105

EVENING

I proposed a bill to ban releasing dangerous girlfriends back into the environment, but they just crumpled up my proposal and burnt it.

DIORELLE CAPITAL

ROYAL PALACE

COMPARED TO ALL the other races, the beastfolk didn't have a lot of magic. In return, they had better strength stats and unique racial abilities that made them the strongest of all the demi-humans. They were a proud folk who respected power itself and always put their friends and kin first. Beastfolk were well-known all across the continent for their prowess as mercenaries and adventurers thanks to their impressive speed, mighty strength, and keen senses. These were the citizens of the Beast Nation. Well, I called it that. Its official name was...uh... What was it again? Wherzawhatzit? Anyway, yeah, the Beast Nation.

Class Rep made a point of asking me, "So, Haruka-kun, what's the first thing we're going to do once we get to the Beast Nation?"

"Uh, stock up on groceries and stuff, I guess. Ya know?"

That was the point of our visit, wasn't it? Yeah, shopping? And then at the tail end of the trip, I'd get me a girl with fluffy ears and—nope, never mind, I didn't say anything!

"What, pray tell, happened to the discussions we planned? Were we not planning on forming a pact of mutual cooperation?" Royal Girl said, leering her eyes at me.

What was the point of asking me?

“You mean, like, haggling the price of the food goods? Can’t we have the general store lady handle that?”

Managing all that distribution stuff was a real pain. All I cared about was actually getting my hands on the physical products.

“Ah, no, Haruka,” said Mr. Meridad, coming to bail out a baffled Royal Girl. “I believe our good princess is referring to the defense plans and who should handle what aspect of the fighting.”

“That’s the country’s business, isn’t it? I don’t have anything to do with that. Look, I don’t want to get all wrapped up in the Beast Nation’s business, okay?”

Yeah, not one bit. But if I got wrapped up in a deep, deep, *deep* relationship with all those animal babes... No, I meant that strictly in the platonic sense! *I promise. Perfectly platonic.*

“...What, are you saying you won’t help the Beast Nation out? Even though Oda-kun and his group are still offering them our protection?” Class Rep asked me with a glare.

Ugh. I was sick and tired of meetings. Something about the language they used in this fantasy world sucked. People kept talking and never got to the point. *Yeah, this language is fundamentally flawed.*

“Look, we’ll help them, okay? I mean, they’re our trade partners. Not to mention they have beast ears, you know? Anyway, the nerds are choosing to fight for them. Me, I’m just an envoy for the kingdom. A message runner. A glorified errand boy.”

An errand boy in the Beast Nation—call that a gofer.

“For an errand boy, you sure do a lot of handing out torpedoes so they can sink navies!”

Well, yeah. I had a ton of extra torpedoes on hand. A boatload, you might say? And there weren’t enough to sink the nerds, so I just passed them off to the nerds instead.

“Okay, but here’s the thing. The kingdom can close its borders for short periods of time like it’s doing right now, and it’ll be totally fine. But that can make or break the Merchant Kingdom and the Theocracy, ya know? That’s why we should ignore ’em and let ’em self-destruct. The Beast Nation can handle their own issues, you feel me?”

These discussions were pointless. How were we supposed to agree on a plan of action when we had different goals?

“As king of Diorelle, I beseech you to tell me this, if nothing more: you do not wish any harm to the Republic of Gamehlein, do you? What you refer to as the Beast Nation.”

“Gamehlein? I don’t know about that, but if they try to Gamehplay me, I’ll rip them off right back! They think they can catch me Gamehlayin’ down, but I’m the Gamehbrain behind the frontier’s recent economic upswing and the other developments in a similar Gamehvein. Yeah, I make it Gamehrain? It’s a major Gamehpain to Gameh-entertain the possibility of taking my Gameh-eight-car-train to the Beast Nation to Gameh-ascertain if we can Gameh-obtain miso and soy sauce for the supply Gamehchain back in Mr. Meridad’s Gamehdomain, but we can’t afford to Gameh-abstain. Yeah, because without it, our food is really Gamehplain?”

Anyway, ignoring the politics for the moment, the Beast Nation promised girls with fluffy beast ears and, possibly, Japanese food. That made it a tempting destination—but, tragically, one with no future. Yeah, the whole country kinda ticked me off?

“Your Majesty,” said Mr. Meridad, “Haruka’s unexplained peevishness aside, Gamehlein’s concerns are ones Diorelle shares. We cannot force Haruka and his companions to handle them for us. This is a matter that the government should take responsibility for, I should think.”

Yeah. The Beast Nation’s issues had nothing to do with me, and I didn’t have the right to go commenting on their affairs. This was a fantasy world story, and I

was nothing but an NPC from another world.

“Very well,” said the king. “Haruka, I might ask you to do us a small favor, but please know that I will not force you to agree. Nor do I have the right or power to do so, really. My brothers and I are a pack of fools. We can do nothing but beg for help and pray that we might receive assistance. Shalliceres, I have a mission for you as well: keep your eyes and ears open, my child, and think well on what you see. What you believe to be right and just will serve as the marker for the kingdom’s entire future.”

“Father... Very well. I shall serve you as envoy of King Dialleces of Diorelle!”

Huh, so I guess Royal Girl was in charge of deciding the kingdom’s future now? In that case, she needed something to make her look the part. Maybe a sword? She had that sword queen vibe going on. But there was no need for her to change her sexy dress or sexy armor. Yup, those were essential for anyone with such a rocking b(lo)od(line), and the same went for her sexy maid!

Once that long and pointless discussion finished, my classmates and I got shown to our rooms for a rest. I shared a four-person room with Miss Armor Rep, Slimey, and Dancer Girl. The dungeon emperors were—nominally—my guards, but two of them kept attacking me! They menaced me mercilessly with their mouths all morning... Yup, having one girl going at me from above and another from below was incredible!

Clang, clang, clang, and stuff? I mean, I could have thrown together a sword for Royal Girl without actually forging it, but the craftsmanship always turned out better when I hammered a sword by hand. This also made it easier to fine-tune the weapon. I used a rusting old piece of scrap iron called “The Royal Blade of Diorelle: [Protection for Those of Royal Blood] ? ? ?” that I found in the treasury as the base for her blade.

Working off of the older sword, I crafted a new one, strengthened it, and added mithril to it. Then I added ridges to the iron blade and hammered everything together. I pictured the best possible sword with Jupiter Eye as I

worked and inched closer and closer to its perfection. *Okay, let me do a little more and then I'll stop. Okay, but now for real, just a bit more and then stop. You know?*

“All right, now can you give this to Royal Girl? Make sure to tell her that it'll work best if whoever uses it comes from the pimpin' bloodline.”

Nod nod. Rattle rattle.

Yeah, it was rusting away in the treasury, so it must have been a legendary sword of some kind. It was called a royal blade, and even in such a sorry state, it boasted protection and four additional unknown skills. The blade had been so rust-eaten it looked like it'd crumble to pieces if I touched it, and its grip wasn't in much better condition. Even so, I guessed that it was a relic that had been passed down for generations. Since it had clearly been abandoned, I figured no one would care if I reforged it and gave it back, right? Yeah, and just the other day I found that Eternal Trap and put it in the frontier. Maid Girl hadn't liked that one, though. She hadn't forgotten about it either. That girl could sure hold a grudge, huh?

So yeah, time to take this ole busted blade, make like Himura Kenshin, and fool our foes. It certainly came out looking like a work of art. Plus, it'd ended up with better skills than I'd expected: “The Royal Blade of Diorelle: [Protection for Those of Royal Blood, May Only Be Wielded by Those of Royal Blood] All Stats +40%, Physical and Magic Defense Immunity, Swordplay Bonus (large), Status Ailment Resistance (large), Automatic Magic Shield [Automatic Regeneration, +Attack, +Defense].” Honestly, it was so well done I wanted to swipe it for myself. Too bad it only worked on royalty, which was clear job discrimination. Yeah, I was a Sword King and a Sex God, but no fancy magic sword for me?

“I mean, I guess not having a job means I'm not tied down to anything. So why do I keep waking up every morning tied down to the bed?”

Jiggle jiggle.

Before I had my bath, I went to the training grounds and engaged in a fierce

battle (Operation: Search and Destroy the Girlfriend-Having Normies) with the idiots. It quickly progressed from a sword fight to a shoot-out with my magic bullets. As I sowed caltrops and land mines from the sky, those darn morons had the nerve to dodge my attacks! And not die, either! They even parried a hail of surprise blow darts completely out of instinct.

“Quit dodging me! I can’t kill you unless I actually hit you, you know? You’re all a bunch of inconsiderate idiots. Here I am, going out of my way to train with you and stab you with my fire sword, so sit still and get incinerated. Learn to pick up what I’m putting down...especially if I’m putting down bombs!”

The meatheads nimbly leaped over the land mines and invisible Magic Threads with animalistic grace. They countered by chucking their boomerangs at me. Well, “chucking” was not the most accurate way to describe it. They were still using them like clubs!

“Bro, you’ve got a million weapons to fight us with. Why do you always have to choose bombs?!”

“And we don’t wanna get evaporated either!”

The idiots had the reflexes and movement of animals, but without the brainpower. Yet their reflexes were sharper than any wild critter’s, and their minds transcended the realm of mere mortals in pure idiocy. The magical essence of the frontier produced monsters that would charge at me. I could counterattack them, so no issues there. But I heard that monsters that were born the normal way from other monsters in other parts of the world fled when they sensed danger. The idiots, though... Come to think of it, the idiots weren’t born on the frontier, either.

“You were born the normal way when a dummy dad and moron mom loved each other very much. Now you’re having so much fun fighting you never plan on going home. That’s not very nice to your parents, now is it?”

“You’re the one calling them names, bro!”

I continued to hunt this pack of brutes as they loped along with beastly smiles

on their faces. I tried to slash and slice and slay, but...none of my attacks landed.

“What’re you mad at us for? You’re the one who danced with our girlfriends last night, dude! I should whoop your ass for that!”

A meathead swung his boomerang at me, and as he pivoted, he tried to jab me with a hidden short spear. I was ready for him. I tried to set him ablaze, but that nervy numbskull ran from me! When I chased him, the others came up and flanked me. What a pain!

“*They* asked *me* to dance, you know! And it’s all your fault. Do you have any idea how many girls I got stuck dancing with? You’re the ones dating them, so this is your responsibility, so blow up!”

The meatheads tried to jump me from both sides, stabbing at me from above and below...but I was just getting started. I let my hydra’s auto-attacks keep the guys on either side of me in check while the chickenatrice’s wings fanned out from the back of my cloak to stop attacks. Then I turned and swung my seven-pronged sword, and...flipped, somersaulted in midair, and plummeted to the ground. *Darn it.* They’d planned for that and attacked me from below.

“You were dancing too close, bro! That’s my girlfriend we’re talking about, so you gotta back off. Leave some space! Don’t be so touchy-feely! And stop being such a good dancer, for crying out loud!”

The moment I landed, I pushed off of the ground and used that stomping motion to circulate qi through my body. Then I parried an incoming sword stroke... It thrust them back, but did they really have to land on their feet? Worse, they repelled the follow-up round of Magic Bullets.

“If it makes you that upset, then stop ditching these balls and learn to dance! The only reason I had to dance with so many girls is because you guys bailed on me. Even the nerds fled and left me there! If I didn’t get good at dancing, those girls were going to break my arms. If they stepped on one of my feet, I’d get broken toesies. I’m only level 25! I’m just a little guy barely holding it together

with Magic Entanglement!”

Their intuition allowed them to see through Illusion, so they didn’t fall for any of my tricks even when I leaped out of their own shadows. I tried feinting a downward strike while actually kicking up from below. I thrust through their shield wall to pepper them with a barrage of Fire magic bullets. But they had me outnumbered five to one, so they kept right on attacking back. And when they were so spread out like that, I struggled to hit them all at once and turn the tables in my favor.

“Problem is, that Magic Entanglement’s too hot and mysterious! The girls were all blushing, dude!”

A sword jabbed at me, but I slashed it away and stabbed back, giving as good as I got—until I had to stop the jab of another incoming spear.

“Uh-huh, and they were breathing hella hard, bro. And what the heck were you doing that made ’em tear up like that?”

Another spear pinwheeled toward me. I tried to taunt the spearman into getting closer so I could lop him to bits. He dipped away from my sword and circled around to try to stab me in the back.

“Besides, you shoulda known that dancing a tango’s off the table! Stop at a folk dance like Mayim Mayim!”

The moment I turned away one sword, here came another one from a different angle. When I tried to dodge, I dodged right into the path of another weapon.

“Yeah, and after you were done dancing, my girl just sat there looking up at the ceiling! You friggin’ melted her brain, bro!”

“We get it, okay? We know you’re a Sex God! You don’t have to keep rubbing it in!”

I thwacked the flat of one of their swords to spin it a different direction and then leaped through the resulting gap to close in on the meathead. I stomped

down hard, then surged forward with an elbow strike. If they pulled their legs back, it would make them pitch forward and give me clear access to their chin. And if they didn't get their legs out of harm's way, then I was going to take out their knees!

"If you guys have that big of a problem with me, then tell your girlfriends to go easy on me! You're all dating a bunch of big, beefcake macho chicks who can dance like nobody's business! Without Magic Entanglement and Qi Wizardry, they'd snap me like a twig. I thought they would break my fingers, sweep my legs and send my crotch to the hospital. Yeah, what else was I gonna do but use magic? Dancing with them is like brawling in close combat. Wait a sec, how do you guys keep up with them all the time? I mean, those girls were terrifying."

The moment I stomped...someone grabbed my victim by the collar of his armor and yanked him out of the danger zone in a coordinated evasive maneuver. Darn it! I almost had one of them!

"Oh, we just take mushrooms the whole time, bruh."

"Yeah, our girlfriends have legs that don't quit."

"Then make them quit! It's illegal to turn your wild girlfriend loose on the environment! Keep a better eye on them! Lives are at stake here!"

Dancing was partially a matter of following the rules and dance steps, but there's also an element of improvisation. So even though I had taken each girl's hand and "led" her in the dance, I was still terrified they were going to crush my poor hands. Whenever I slipped an arm around their gyrating waists or changed positions, I always needed to leap out of my dance partner's way—all that kicking and stomping scared me shitless!

"Yeah, my bad, br—wait, I don't remember our girlfriends asking to dance with anyone else but you."

"I mean, we only barely survive that ordeal ourselves, so maybe it's for the best."

“Yeah, but the idea of our girls never getting to dance with anyone but...well, us...is kinda sad, ya know?”

“...So, what? We let them dance with Haruka?”

“Hey now!” I protested.

“I mean, bro, you at least can get out of the way of those kicks.”

“Yeah, you were dodging ’em left and right!”

“That’s no cause for getting jealous of me! The only reason I can get out of the way is because I dance with Dancer Girl all the time. I knew to take the lead role to avoid getting the stuffing kicked out of me, but if not for her, that full-throttle beat down—I mean, dancing—would have left me black and blue! You could have at least given me a warning first!”

At this point, the yelling was wearing me out more than the fighting. I mean, that probably had to do more with my choice of dancing—I mean, beat down—partners than anything, but whatever. *Oh, come off it! Quit sulking! You’re all pieces of work.*

As I lectured the meatheads with the help of Meteor and Inferno, the girls popped in for a training sesh of their own. Royal Girl thanked me half a million times for the sword; apparently, it was some super important and valuable thing. *Good thing I chose not to nab it for myself after all.*

Then I suggested a move to Class Rep—I wasn’t giving her training per se; this was more like a word to the wise. Just a slash. Just a stab. Just those, and that was all. I wasn’t sure if I executed the techniques as well as I could, but I still made sure it got passed down to the next generation of swordfighters. It was the swordplay the skeleton had mastered...and the unbearably heavy melancholy of a creature fighting the darkness as the shadows took it prisoner in the depths of the dungeon.

“So...your spirit’s laid to rest now, I hope.”

When Class Rep picked up the technique, I found myself so moved I had to

wipe away tears. The skeleton had lost the greater part of its memories, but I knew the soul of every one of its brothers-in-arms must have been contained within its sword art. That art had passed on to me, and now I was passing it on to the next person. It was a truly priceless moment. (That was, she'd pay the courier fee later this evening.)

"Yup, that skeleton boss was strong, but death still came for him in the end, huh? Oh yeah, that reminds me."

I shot a flurry of blow darts...whereupon Class Rep leaped out of the way and laid into me. Just as I suspected, that wasn't part of an orthodox school of swordplay after all. What a shame.

Well, bath time for me. If I stayed here much longer, the others would drag me into a training session, aka beat-up Haruka time. The girls were training to fight in their nun habits, and those thigh slits were dangerously tempting. Off to the bath I toddled! *They say it takes sixty days to break a habit, but if I took a crack at it, I could bust them outta their habits in two seconds tops. Yeah, 'cause I wanna see what's underneath?*

DAY 105

NIGHT

Once you hit the absolute zero of NEETness, all movement ceases...including movement on finding a job.

DIORELLE CAPITAL

ROYAL PALACE

THE IDIOTS kept on flopping and rolling all over the training ground, but the earth looked pretty dirty. I decided to leave them to it and get on with my bath. Maybe the idiots wanted to join the Roly-Poly Club. It must have been the hip thing to do these days.

Yesterday, I made tents for the First Division girls to use during dungeon crawls and forced the idiots to buy them. I put a Simple Forcefield on the outside of the tents to ward off monsters, along with Regeneration (small) and Healing (small). The idiots then gifted them to their girlfriends with smug grins. Once they learned I stuck messages on all their gear that said mushy crap like, “I want to keep you safe, even when we’re apart” and “I pray my love for you, my dearest, will soothe your weary heart” the meatheads fell to the ground in agony and started roly-roly-roly-pollying all over the place. You’d think they’d have given the equipment at least a once-over before passing it on to their girlfriends.

Anyway, we were setting off for the Beast Nation tomorrow. The question was, where would we find the nerds? Out on the water, or in the jungle? Right now, the seven swords of the Merchant Kingdom posed the biggest threat to the nerds. If there were six more old dudes as tough as ole Lolly-Licker, the nerds might be in trouble. On the flipside, there were only six of them to begin with. Lolly-Licker no longer counted after he’d gotten licked, and I’d been told that another had died in the jungles of the Beast Nation. The nerds hadn’t fessed up, so I figured Slimey must have been responsible.

That leaves four. However, it was only of a matter of time before the Merchant Kingdom's leadership lost all power and split apart into smaller organizations. Its chancellor and the other heads of government were still clinging to power, but the way they clung to power alienated the smaller merchants, who were breaking off one by one. I wasn't sure how many of the remaining four swords still pledged their loyalty to the Merchant Kingdom. Some of them might have switched sides to ally with individual merchants at this point.

"The nerds could still lose, though. But as long as one of them breaks and runs, the rest should follow suit, right? Yeah, 'cause where one nerd goes, the nerd herd follows?"

Eh, they had the demon scythes with them. They would be safe enough, I figured. The trinity of scythes' spiral attack was so badass even Miss Armor Rep took her hat off to them. She even gave kudos to my horse. For some reason, I was the only one who didn't make the grade! She beat me up! *Yup, looks like revenge is back on the menu tonight!*

"Haruka, what did you think about all that?" Mr. Meridad asked. "We would be happy to compromise on any of our decisions should you find fault with them. At present, Princess Shalliceres is to take charge of our mission and determine our next plan of action once we reach the Beast Nation...yet considering your status, we would like you to attend as a member of her entourage. Once our job is finished there, what say you return to Diorelle for a spell? You'd have no other way of keeping abreast of this constantly evolving situation, you know."

Apparently, the pimpin' king and an envoy from the Theocracy were having a shouting match with one another. They'd been at it every day for a while now. *Shoot, even Mr. Meridad's gotta be sick of it.*

"Based on what I've heard, there's still tons of time. I mean, the pimpin' king and the Theocracy ambassador are still having themselves an odious old dude contention convention. It's not like they're making any headway. So we have

time, ya know? And the more time we have, the more time we can get up to no good behind the scenes, so it's a waste of time to wait, you feel me? It's way, way better to go before they use their war funds, because yeah, we can appropriate it all for ourselves? Time and someone else's stuff are worth their weight in gold, so someone else's gold is prime picking material, you know? I want money."

If you wanted to destroy a country, nothing did the trick like throttling their economy. You couldn't wipe a country off a map, but you could go after their government to tank their currency. That would force their economy into a nosedive. At that point, the country could only recover if the government forced their way through the standstill with military power, but soldiers ate up a lot of food and resources. Therefore, if you swiped all the money *and* all the food, the country would fall without you ever having to lift a finger.

States had no buying power without money. The powerless citizenry would then starve, which was why it was the cruelest method to destroy a kingdom. However, the only other way to bring a country to its knees was to label them the enemy and massacre their people without mercy. No matter how you went about it, country-killing required cruelty. Nation building and improving was difficult work. To jumpstart an industrial revolution? Now, that required ambitious plans; nigh-on miraculous schemes. It was absurd, fantastical, a dream. You couldn't build Rome in a day...but razing it was the work of a moment.

"I know you suggested sneaking into the Theocracy, but their entire country is under government surveillance. Our spies have never made inroads there, you know. Don't you think this is much too dangerous?"

"Nah, trying to make inroads or blend in with the rest of the populace will never work. The key is to sneak in and snatch up what you need, got it? Yeah, I used to stock my stores right from this very palace, and I never ran into any issues. I was coming and going outta here constantly. I sure made a tidy profit from that."

It wasn't a smart move to get involved in a country without having a good idea of what kind of chaos we were getting into. Being in enemy territory and not knowing if the person next to you was friend or foe was a heck of a lot harder than situations where you knew everyone was the enemy. Still, Sister Girl and the rest of her crew must have been at the end of their rope, mentally speaking. All their friends and family were still in the Theocracy. You could only feign calm so much when your entire homeland was effectively under a military coup led by the pope and his faction.

According to our current reports, the papal faction had the royal palace of the Theocracy under siege. The royalty were in a stage of near house arrest. They'd been largely ignored for now, given the faction infighting within the church itself and all the Theocracy's other problems, but it was only a matter of time and effort before the palace would be overrun. Should anyone in the palace betray the royal family, the military would seize the castle. The church was excellent at gaining informants and misleading people with their honeyed words.

Speaking of honey, I was a total sucker for honeypots, and yet no sexy ladies had showed up to honeypot me! I even put up a sign in the inn saying, "Honeypots Wanted," but I hadn't heard a peep from that darn church. And yeah, Class Rep was furious at me when she found the sign.

"If anything, the nuns are the ones in danger here. They're basically being our decoys. Are you sure you want to let Merimeri-san and Royal Girl go? It'd be safer if I went in undercover on my own, you know?"

It was the very reason the church wanted to kidnap Sister Girl. As the Archbishop, the leader of the church's fundamentalist sect, and the princess of the Theocracy, she made for a super valuable hostage. If anyone forced her to marry them, they'd have a credible claim to rule over the entire Theocracy. Not to mention, she was pretty hot. She had curves where it counted. And lately she'd been toning up, so those curves were evolving from curves to *currrves*. Anyway, there were a million reasons to target her, so going to the Theocracy

was too dangerous! And kind of sexy!

“Go in undercover, you say? What, do you have a plan?” Mr. Meridad asked.

“Yeah, and it’s foolproof. I’m going to sneak in on my undercover horse all the way to the cathedral, stealthily kick to death or give the ole Count Adhemar treatment to anyone who tries to stop me, furtively rob them of their valuables, and leave no trace behind after I blow up the cathedral ’til every shred of evidence and every shred of the pope are burned to nice little charred bits. Then ta-da, all done. That’s the plan for my stealth mission. But for some reason, everyone seems to hate it? I just can’t figure out why.”

Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays. So, rather than waste time crafting tactics, win with swift action...if somewhat difficult action. Plus, my horse was plenty swift and cute, and my plan was perfect. But no. My classmates would not let me execute it. They claimed it was dangerous, but it offered the most tactical advantage bang for our danger buck. They still got mad at me!

Had I been able to put my plan into action, I could and should have sneaked in right after the pope’s coup. Now I’d lost my chance... Yeah, in all the turmoil, I could have swiped treasure from the cathedral and palace without anyone ever noticing. Everyone would have blamed it on the pope for raising a coup in the first place, meaning I would be innocent (and filthy rich!), which was what made it such a glorious plan...

Why was Mr. Meridad frozen in place? Was this one of those things where you dry out and get stiff with age? Well, at any rate, he wasn’t going anywhere. I decided to just leave him there. *Rub-a-dub-dub, let’s get in that tub.*

“Man, the royal baths kinda suck, huh, Slimey? They need someone to come and do some serious remodeling, because I sure can’t relax in here. Whoever heard of a guest remodeling a bath, though? Where’s their spirit of hospitality? Where’s their ability to make a functional layout? You want a Jacuzzi in here too, don’t you?”

Slimey *wiggle wiggled* with joy. I knew he agreed. Yeah, I could put in communal showerheads powered by magic. Those would get the job done while saving space, and powering your showers with magic? Well, that was green energy right there.

Anyway, the original reason I'd wanted to go to the Theocracy was to find a way to send the girls in my class home. That's why I needed to check out their treasury, especially if I could find any nice valuables or forgotten treasure along the way. Of all the possible locations that I could think of, the Theocracy seemed like the most likely place. In stories, people always found these kinds of treasures in temples, so I figured I could find clues in their historic relics. Hence why I wanted to go, and hence how my classmates found out about my plans. I bet the nerds tattled on me.

The church was all levels of messed up. I wanted to burn it to the ground and be done with it. But the Theocracy had a lot of adults who simply followed their kingdom and church through blind faith—to say nothing of the kids who for sure hadn't done anything wrong. If I razed the entire country, that would have saved me and my friends. I just couldn't punish kids for something they didn't do.

Then there's the poison thing. Pretty much every sinister organization (and by that, I meant religious organization) knew everything there was to know about poison. From the dawn of time, religions around the world have been big fans of drugs, poisons, and the slave trade. Not to mention policing people's thoughts. *That's the dangerous one. You don't just lose supporters with mind control. That's the kinda thing that makes enemies of people.* In fact, this church had a track record for that Obedience Necklace thing they used on Dancer Girl. *Assholes.* Those two things—the thought police and the Obedience Necklace—were a threat, hence why the church was such a nasty foe. But I had good resistance to poison, and my thoughts were pretty much ungovernable. Heck, versus those threats, I was nigh invincible. Those would do nothing to me.

"I mean, that one big dungeon had Poison and Spirit Pollution monsters up

the wazoo, among other super strong monsters. That was about as bad as you could get in terms of poison. But I didn't even notice until I was done. Yeah, most people in my shoes would have died, right? It sure was great to have General Health."

And then I had a whole other concern. You couldn't spin murder into something okay, and even if I saved just the innocent kids, that would still wind up orphaning them. I could give them shelter, good food, and kindness, but it wouldn't bring their parents back. They'd have to live with that tragedy for the rest of their lives. I bet that even those old dudes I'd killed had kids, ya know? Even the most cutthroat bandit in the world probably went home to his kids and treated them like he was the best dad ever. And who was to blame for all these fallen fathers? Me. Only me.

"Man, this not having a job thing really sucks. It's nice that I don't get tied down to a single class, and I do like being able to raise my skills all across the playing field. But being a jack-of-all-trades means I really am a master of none... That's being an NPC for you, huh, Slimey?"

Wobble wobble.

I could do anything, but I wasn't a pro at anything in particular. With NEET and Master of None, I tried to combine my various skills to trick my way into success. Even then, I couldn't master any of the crafting skills. I guess that wasn't possible without the right job. None of my classmates had any of those skills either, since none of them were smiths, apothecaries, or any of the assorted support classes either. The only ones we had all died back in the forest. Crafting skills were our weakness, and I was the only one who could craft at all without facing a job-related penalty. But just as I didn't get job-related penalties, I also didn't get bonuses. I had to mix and match skills from various jobs and then act like I knew what I was doing. Still, I couldn't get past the fundamental skill stage, so I had to waste a huge amount of time on trial and error before I found an effective solution. Even then, what I made was nowhere near perfect. That's why we had such bad equipment.

This world offered cursed and legendary equipment, apparently. The girl at the Adventurers' Guild, she of the terrible judgment, once told me about a cursed necklace. According to legend, she claimed, it was called the Snakecharmer's Necklace. It would turn whoever wore it into a snake charmer, stripping them of all the bonuses of their original job.

"Wait a minute, I have that necklace! It's on me this moment! But even if I'm cursed to be a snake charmer, I'm still jobless. Are you telling me not even a curse can get me a job?! I know job hunting moves at a glacial pace, but this is hitting absolute zero of NEETness!"

Jiggle jiggle.

Once you hit rock bottom like that, there's no point in digging any further, so I figured trying to dig up a job at this point would be fruitless. I had no choice but to keep on crafting the same way I'd always done. I had to keep pushing myself to try again and again, getting better at it little by little. Even if I didn't reach my desired goal, maybe I'd get close to it someday.

I went back to my room as I ruminated and opened the door to find a scene that put me in mind of the Japanese kids' song about mountain climbing, "Ten Thousand Feet in the Alps," which I'd recite for you here if not for the fact that it's twenty-nine verses long. That's a bit much, so let's skip it.

"Who the heck came up with twenty-nine verses, anyway?"

The melody itself was from the American folk song "Yankee Doodle," originally a patriotic tune from the American Revolutionary War that, for some inexplicable reason, became a favorite with a Japanese mountaineer who kept adding verses to it until he looked up and realized he had twenty-nine of them. At that point, why not go for a round thirty? What an awful number to leave off on, ya know? And the ninth verse—you know, the one that goes, "Even the butterflies have a partner up here, so how come I'm all alone?"—kinda hits a nerve, so I think we should all take that one out. *And what the heck is a mountaineering song?*

Anyway, yeah. The Alps. I was reminded of them because there were four pointy peaks here in my very bedroom! Uh-huh, the dirndl was a dress best known as the German Oktoberfest costume, but they did actually wear regional variations of it all over the alps, almost all of which had square necklines plunging deep into the valleys between *these* Alps. Call Edward Whymper because my Matterhorn was ascending. Yes indeed, what a lovely traditional outfit!

“Welcome, back!” the girls sing-songed at me.

But there were endless variations on the dirndl as well. The name came from Germany’s Bavarian-Austrian word for “daughter” or “young miss,” which at the time was a way to address young women from rural villages who came to cities and towns to find work. That title, then, later came to apply to the clothes those nice young ladies wore. Now, some very much *not* nice young ladies were wearing those clothes, so I needed to watch out!

The tartan-patterned bodice was one of those real sexy ones where you could untie the decorative lacing from the front. It also worked like a corset to push up their breasts, and when paired with the brightly colored apron and short skirts on two girls with bangin’ bods, the effect was jaw-dropping. They were so ravishing that all my Raptured status ailment resistance was for naught. Oh, those were some majestic mountain ranges all right. When paired with knee-high socks?! *Hoo-whee!*

There must have been an earthquake happening, because there was a whole lotta shaking and trembling in the valleys of those mountains, and a teenage boy started erupting like a volcano... Yup, dirndls were the durndest things!

DAY 106

MORNING

With these digits draped on my dientes, diplomatic discussion devolved dangerously.

DIORELLE CAPITAL

ROYAL PALACE

LAST NIGHT'S double dirndl treatment from a couple of bewitching babes left me so messed up I thought I might never walk again. While I was too spellbound in my teenage boy way to resist, they whisked my equipment right off of me and trapped me deep in their Alps! *Mountains are a dangerous thing indeed, and four at once is a downright menace!*

"I wasn't ready for them to show up in these new outfits, and the way my systems freeze when I get a Jupiter Eyeballful is my biggest weakness. I mean, I have them under Servitude, so when they come begging and pleading for new clothes, how can I say no?"

Jiggle jiggle.

Recently, Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl had teamed up with the mean girls to design new clothes. Seeing them have so much fun together made me let my guard down. I just wanted to make them smile, you know? The moment I fell under their smile spell, they pounced! Yeah, on paper they were serving me in gratitude for all I'd done for them, but this payback seemed more like the revenge kind of payback, you know?

"We need to leave as soon as we're ready and pick up the nerds along the way, so I say we hire, eh, ten or so young animal girls to wear school swimsuits. That'll bring those nerds out of the woodwork in no time. You feel me?"

"I mean, yes, it would work. But I'm more concerned about the method! So no!"

Oh, and speaking of animal people, the pimpin' king gave me a letter. But it was a trap! Right, because it was actually a black goat!

"I am Leitter of the goat tribe, ambassador of the Gamehlein Republic. I have heard much and more about you, Lord Haruka. The black-haired commander, you are called. You have our greatest gratitude for purchasing such large shipments of the products we produce locally, my lord. Our Beast Nation soy has, in fact, grown so popular as a result that it has begun to sell even here in the royal capital of Diorelle. You cannot imagine how pleased it makes me to see the food of my homeland complimented and sought after. Thank you very much."

Yeah, with the ambassador here, that meant I didn't have to be responsible for accepting the letter. This ambassador was a black goat, and that could only mean one thing: he definitely wanted to chew the paper!

"Hey, so, uh, Letter, was it? I'm guessing you became a diplomat so you could eat letters without reading 'em first, and I have to say, a lack of letters makes for a lunch but hardly a punch when it comes to diplomacy. Claiming you put soy sauce on the letter before reading it so then you'd have no choice but to eat the letter is a pretty novel excuse. I'm impressed, but still, is this really what a diplomat's supposed to eat? Actually, the surprising part's that I think a letter in soy sauce could taste pretty good... *Mmrph, mmrph, monch, munch 'n' crunch*. Hey, not bad!"

"My deepest apologies, Ambassador Leitter. My name is...well... You can call me Class Rep. Yes, I don't understand why either, but this seems to be the way—the *only* way—that we're able to communicate with him. Um, right. Thank you very much for offering to escort us to the Gamehlein Republic. Likewise, we appreciate the invitation to visit."

It was a long-running mystery to me how the girls on blindfold duty could never manage to cover my eyes...but had no issue covering my mouth. Why couldn't they use this power to cover my eyes as opposed to prying my eyelids apart? With these digits draped on my *dientes*, diplomatic discussion devolved

dangerously until Class Rep declared herself our diligent diplomat.

“Why, Lady Class Rep, what a pleasure! I must admit, I’ve heard tales of your beauty, but such rumors do not do your beauty and strength of personality justice. Why, not a soul in the Beast Nation does not know of your bravery in the dungeon deluges. It is an honor for this humble goat to make your acquaintance.”

When faced with a pretty girl, Goat Dude was the picture of manners. Sure, everything he said to me was perfectly civil as well, but I could tell that he genuinely respected Class Rep. *I mean, who wouldn’t?* She was strong, gorgeous, and a class rep, which checked off all the boxes for reverence. *It only makes sense, ya know?* For some reason, Goat Dude acted with deference, even to the idiots. I wondered if he sensed that the idiots outclassed him on the animalistic scale or if he was just plain scared of them.

Yeah, you know what? I was gonna let Mr. Meridad deal with Goat Dude and peace out. Now that I’d ripped off Lolly-Licker, making both my heart and my pocketbook feel all full and happy, I didn’t have any more business in the capital. I’d even finished dumping the last of my massive inventory of worthless magic swords, so it was time to head out. The birds were singing as I went as if to bless the start of my new journey, and my horse whinnied impatiently, the picture of high energy... Ah, and the birds fell out of the sky. I guess the horse had *too* much energy.

And here came the pimpin’ king had to show off with those three wives of his at the gate to spoil everything! But several someones held me back, so I couldn’t go back to kill him. *Darn it!* I wish I’d put a mechanism in his massage throne that would vibrate him to death. Grr, I was so jealous!

The first car on our train was being used to talk politics, so I noped out of there and found the arts club girls in the second car. They were all introverts, the quiet kind who preferred indoor pastimes. Since they lost their ability to pursue their hobbies, they had, in some sense, suffered more than the rest of us in this getting isekai’d thing. Fine Arts Girl was famous in the art world back

home. With her level of talent, she'd had a promising future ahead of her. Now she couldn't draw well at all thanks to the penalties from her job. She still had all her innate talent, the techniques she'd practiced and the skills she'd learned, but that meant nothing if she couldn't execute them. It was like she'd been cursed. She wasn't alone either—Cooking Girl could barely boil water, Accessories Girl couldn't fashion her way out of a paper bag, and Braid Girl from the handicrafts club had to say “so long” to sewing. Book Club President had it the worst. She had the drive to read every book she could get her hands on, but what good was that in a world without books?

“Even so, that doesn't stop you guys from trying, huh? Well, for all but the Book Club President. Don't worry, you can write all you want here. Even if you try to pass off *I Am a Kobold* as an original, no one's gonna know the truth... Although I'd be concerned about anyone who tried to keep a kobold as a pet.”

She could always write a spin-off of Princess Kaguya's story, *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. *The Tale of the Mushroom Picker*—well, that one felt a little too autobiographical. We gathered and chopped up mushrooms every day. Maybe it wouldn't go over well.

“Yeah, and you could rip off Kodo Nomura to write ‘The Dancer Girl of the Dead’ except for the part where she leaves the dungeon. ‘Cause isn't that just going out the exit? Yeah, never mind. That's not going to make it onto the bestseller list anytime soon.”

“I'm not a writer myself,” she told me, “but even if I were, I would never commit plagiarism.”

“Okay, but how about *The Sorrows of the Young Waitress*? Well, that'd be nothing but a lot of whining and moaning, so maybe not. Hmm. What would make for good fantasy world literature, huh? I'd say, ‘The Pimpin' King,’ but I already saw a pimpin' king flaunting his player status, so I don't want to read about it too. Okay, how about you write a documentary series? Like *Castaway: Twenty High Schools Girls' Edition*?”

“Thank you, but I won’t. Besides, you can’t possibly start with books of that sort. You would have to introduce the people here to fairy tales first if you wanted any hope of getting anywhere. I am not much of a bookworm myself, you know. I like information, and I certainly don’t mind a good tale, but I don’t feel the need to go out of my way to read fantasies when I’m already in the middle of an adventure story.”

So much for her being a writer. But I wanted to read a book or three, you know? At this point, I’d be down even to read a young waitress’s sorrows and grumbling. Yeah, like if she was a maid café waitress, then that could turn out to be great!

“I just paint because I want to,” Fine Arts Girl told me. “I’m not trying to get better at it. I just want to express myself, you know? It doesn’t make much difference if I’m not any good. I’ll never be able to express myself perfectly no matter how much paint I slop on a canvas, so...I’ll never be perfectly happy with my work even if I did go home. I don’t care if no one compliments my work or if it never gets famous. I’m just happy that I have paints and brushes after you made them for me. That simple feeling of happiness is much more important to me than fame or mastery. Thanks, Haruka-kun.”



Fine Arts Girl gave her canvas a few nonchalant dabs of the paintbrush. If she didn't mind, I wasn't about to tell her she had to be sad. Besides, I didn't know what separated good art from bad. All the same, I felt like she could have chosen a better subject or model for her work. Yeah, 'cause she was painting some dude with a weird, evil look in his eye and a strangely familiar haircut. What a creep!

"But what about you three? You guys have to be good at what you do since you're, ya know, making actual stuff, you feel me? Like no one's gonna want bad clothes or food and stuff, right?"

If the girls had the know-how and the actual physical skills to pull it off, why did their jobs matter? If we understood how this system worked, we could find a workaround, but it remained a mystery. How come the girls couldn't magic their way out of it either?

"I mean, I'm happy just doing what I can, you know?"

"Yeah, and I feel like I'm really getting the hang of it."

"Although my first results were god-awful..."

I'd picked up quite a lot about making clothes and cooking, but those were both easy to learn provided you had enough knowledge and time to practice. Teaching others was what made you an actual master. It wasn't just a matter of reciting a memorized recipe; you had to know it well enough to pass it on. Which I sucked at.

Even so, none of the girls showed any sign of wanting to give up their cheat jobs. They all chose to fight alongside everyone else and not forsake their fighting ability.

"We're basically back at the same level of skill as the craftsmen in the frontier town, right?"

"Yeah, but they keep coming up with new innovations super fast!"

"Mm-hmm. They're even making a whole new cuisine, which is uber-duber

hard to do.”

“Sure, sure. Hey, but guess what? All the tools Haruka-kun made for us work so well!”

“Yeah, the fabric scissors he made for me are fantastic.”

“He made a writing brush and paper, but I am not writing anything, thank you very much. I consider myself a reader.”

The closer we got to the Beast Nation, the more monsters we saw. They had way less magic than the frontier monsters but were more beastly. There were a ton of animal-like monsters—wolves and deer and bears, oh my—but my horse ran them all down and made ‘em all extinct. *Yeah, talk about killer traffic.*

“Turning monsters spacing out on the road into spellstones is quick and easy, but since the dead bodies don’t vanish, we’re leaving behind a lot of good materials. I’d better get my tentacles on the job and pick them up all... I like cheap methods to get monster hides, but not when the monster hides are this cheap looking.”

“There’s a world of difference between cheap and cheap looking, you know!”

The roads weren’t paved in the Beast Nation. All they had were bad, bumpy trails winding through the jungle. Speeding was dangerous on those jacked-up roads, so all we could do was trundle along slowly, endlessly swaying all the while. Worst of all, the capital of the Beast Nation was super far from the border... I wished there’d been a soy sauce plant or a miso warehouse or even a shop selling dried bonito flakes closer to us. Those were still days away in the capital. So we plodded along through the trees, occasionally passing tiny villages or meager fields scattered throughout the vegetation.

“All right. Let’s take a break and have some lunch.”

I set up the grill, got a fire going, and started the rice while I prepped the barbecue. The girls, naturally enough, changed out of their animal PJs and put more formal clothes on. Well, they were wearing blazers. Basically our old

school uniforms.

“I mean, I have no problem with high schoolers in uniform, but when Elf Girl, Royal Girl, Merimeri-san, and all the nuns have blazers on while me and the brainless bunch are in our regular clothes... I mean, we used to go to the same school as you guys, right? Remember we used to have the same uniforms? I even have mine with me, but nobody told me it was dress code day.”

Yeah, the boys didn’t match with the rest of the group.

Everyone left the train carriage in small groups and started milling about, chatting amicably, but...no one took their eyes off their surroundings. No one let down their guard for even a millisecond. Despite the casual atmosphere, we were all prepared to leap into combat. This lunch site was already a battlefield. Every boy and girl here had enemies on all sides and was ready to fight to the death. *Yup, welcome back to the barbecue battle royale!*

What appeared to be lighthearted conversations were actually tussles to try to jostle their way closer to the food. Every time I adjusted a skewer on the grill, the battle formations shifted, and tension flickered across every one of my classmate’s smiling faces. If they got too close, they wouldn’t have enough of a runway to pick up speed and reach the target. However, being front and center was an attractive option, too. The girls beamed and laughed and struggled to steal the spots of the other beaming and laughing girls. Mm-hmm, and Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl—both of whom were also decked out in school uniforms—were such formidable adversaries they could snatch up a decent hunk of meat from anywhere, at any time. *Well, what else would you expect from dungeon emperors?*

“All right, food’s do—”

“Itadakimasu!”

With oh-so casually extended arms, my classmates tried to block the people behind them and jostled forward for a better position. And thus the maestros of meat-seeking swarmed the food with dizzyingly fast movements in search of

fresh barbecue skewers popping up in ever-changing locations!

“Yum.”

“Ooh, these mushroom rolls are just lightly toasted!”

“Hey, look at those little chicken skewers!”

“Oh gosh, I can’t resist meat and milk both! Mm-mm, delicious!”

“Hey, watch it! That one’s mine!”

“We need to make sure Arianna-san and her group get their fill, too.”

“All right, here I go! Full steam ahead, skewer swiping!”

“Hey! You just grabbed that from my plate!”

“No food hoarding!”

“Uh-huh. It only counts once it’s in your mouth.”

“Hey, we’re out of rice. Haruka-kun! We need more rice!”

“Mm, the mushrooms are really good too.”

Poor Mr. Meridad and the black goat Mr. Letter couldn’t reach over and grab any food thanks to all the elbow jabs and backhand blows. When they tried to force their way through the throng, they just got trampled on. They writhed on the floor in pain. *Welp, time to go make some chicken skewers for the idiots.*

“Incredible,” gasped Mr. Meridad. “Even my daughter is a part of this!”

“Yeah, she’s a pro. Your wife’s quickly turning into the queen of the bargain sales too. Keep this up, and she’ll join the ranks of old house wi—wait, no, I didn’t say anything! My lips are sealed, you know? Yeah, you’re scaring me, so could you stop with the glaring? Besides, it was really only a matter of tim— Gyaah! Don’t stab me with a skewer! Wait, that’s no skewer. That’s a full-on rapier! You’re really scaring me now.”

I must have tripped across a taboo. There sure were a lot of those here in this fantasy world, huh?

Once we finished lunch, we entered that magical moment when the fires of desire kindled in the girls' lowered eyes. They each gently took the cone into one loose fist and moved them to their mouths. Their tongues flicked over it and lapped up the sticky cream. Those luscious lips were parted ever so slightly, almost teasingly, as the white liquid gushed forth from the cone and dribbled down their faces and cheeks. They didn't care about the mess. They licked it up and moaned for more.

Their faces contorted in pure bliss, they took the treat deep, deep, deep in their throats and sucked like their lives depended on it. With the cone clenched tight in their hands, their tongues played out around the creamy pillar; slurping, licking, sucking. Grins broke out across their faces as they took pleasure deep into their throats.

“Wow. Dangerous.”

Things were getting so spicy I half-expected the world to go pixelated and censor this scene out. Funnily enough, I felt like I could recall seeing those very same tongue movements somewhere before...déjà vu, maybe? Anyway, it was time to get back on the road. *I probably shouldn't let the girls eat soft serve in public.*

DAY 106

MIDDAY

Maybe it's just me, but I don't think the kingdom deserves a reputation this glowing...

THE REPUBLIC OF GAMEHLEIN

GAMEHLEIN CASTLE

HOW LONG had it been since we last welcomed a visitor from another nation to the royal palace of Gamehlein? These days, respectable visitors were rare. We had none but uninvited, vulgar merchants armed with weapons so they could kidnap and enslave our people. Those bandits lacked any honor or pride befitting a true warrior. They fought with naught but their cowards' weapons: poisoned knives, magic spells, or magical items.

Frequent visits to and from Diorelle were by now a relic of a bygone era, but this old, sworn ally of ours drove off our foes, routed the invading slave traders, and granted our people a great stock of goods confiscated from the Merchant Kingdom. All in the midst of their own civil war!

"The delegates from the kingdom have entered the woodlands, Your Majesty," one of my aides told me. "They ate lunch near the border before setting off once again. The messenger can provide you with further details."

"And what of that boy? I know he will buy our foodstuffs, but why must we treat with such an insolent child? I grow vexed with this."

For a country such as ours with no other exports, trading in the flavorings of our traditional dishes meant the world. We beastfolk may have been the strongest of all living beings on the continent, but we lacked the weapons and armor of humans and thus found ourselves at their mercy.

Their numerical advantage meant little and less to us, but we struggled with

magic. Armorless as we were, we were hunted down and slaughtered with their cowardly poisons and spells. Our population continued to dwindle, especially among the tribes that produced our strongest warriors. If we could only outfit but a few of our most powerful folk with arms and armor, we could turn the tides. The Theocracy and the Merchant Kingdom knew not how to fight save for with craven cunning and trickery, and were the requisite armor in our possession, we could crush them and all their ilk. Yet for that, we needed funds. Even so, it was the height of humiliation for such proud warriors as ourselves to treat with a human of astonishingly low level who, according to the word of a sniveling merchant, hid himself behind little girls and made them carry out his orders.

“The boy... Your Majesty, I took the person with the lowest level for a manservant, as he was the one who prepared their luncheon. I also did not notice any others hiding within their carriages,” said the messenger.

My aide interjected. “Your Majesty, since the commander’s arrival is imminent, it will prove most essential to provide him with a warm reception. With such important deals on the table, we cannot afford to make any blunders. Pray do not forget that this boy is the leader of the black-haired warriors who rescued our weakest citizens from the Merchant Kingdom’s slavers and gifted supplies to our populace. We mustn’t treat their delegation with any discourtesy, for we are also visited by Princess Shalliceres from Diorelle—the kingdom which has for so long protected our isolated and persecuted republic under our treaty with them, Your Majesty—and Duke Omui of the fabled frontier lands. Please, we simply must treat them to the finest Gamehlein hospitality.”

“You belabor this point, and I tire of hearing you. A warrior I may be, but I am also a king, sir. I am well-versed in diplomacy.”

I may have held many opinions about humans, but I would bow to this Princess of Diorelle as much as proved necessary. Particularly as King Dialleces had continued to honor the treaty and protect us even throughout his civil war.

He likewise opposed the Church faction that refused to recognize us beastfolk as people. Even as his kingdom suffered a terrible crisis, he deployed his black-haired warriors to drive the Merchant Kingdom's slavers beyond our borders and sink the slavers' fleet. I could not repay such generosity with insolence.

I was both king and a warrior of the beastfolk. Ergo, I would not suffer myself to deliver insult to the black-haired warriors who had given us aid, nor the raven-haired maidens, nor Duke Omui, nor Princess Shalliceres, who represented the throne of Diorelle. We respected those of the human race who proved themselves strong, especially those who helped us. I would show them our hospitality.

"Where are the tribal chieftains?"

"All assembled and waiting, Your Majesty. But as the commander is coming, I am afraid I might need to repeat my warning to them as well."

Of course. All warriors respected the strong, and all those who owed a debt to their benefactor likewise shared their gratitude. It may have been a natural reaction to treat this rich buffoon with scorn, but we needed to be as courteous as we could be. For the heroes and saviors who served under the commander and for the cause of securing Gamehlein's economic future, we would humble ourselves.

Indeed, we needed weapons so badly we would bow and scrape for them should that be required. We needed the power to protect our people and defeat the human race, which labeled us mere beasts. Knowing this did not lessen the degree of this disgrace, but I knew there to be no shame in suppressing one's pride for the sake of achieving greater ambitions.

"Those gathered here today are chieftains, every one, and they are prepared to do their duty. We may carry our pride as beastfolk in our hearts, and as such, it may be shameful to stand shoulder to shoulder with weaker, craven folk. It sickens me so much that I do not wish to stoop to sharing bread with them. Yes, good sir, I understand your concern well. However, we are proud warriors, not

puffed-up merchants. Say no more on the subject.”

“If you understand as well as you say, Your Majesty, then I shan’t speak another word. Please remember that any sort of impropriety before the representatives of Diorelle would reflect on us most terribly. Sir, act with caution. There is no greater dishonor for a warrior than to repay his debts with insolence.”

“I have already heard much and more from you, sir. Did I not say that I understand?”

Humans labeled us beasts and claimed we were unfit to bear the title of people. We had suffered all manner of persecution and humiliation at their hands for generations. After eons of such trials, we found ourselves reduced in number, hiding in enclaves in the jungle and hunted for slavery. We respected and held faith in no human clan save that of Diorelle; no, we no longer trusted humankind. And yet we were forced to playact as merchants so we might treat with this foreign jackanapes... Even so, we all knew our duty.

“Did you extend the invitation to the black-haired warriors who are offering our villagers food and medicine as they hunt down the Merchant Kingdom’s minions?”

“Beg pardon, Your Majesty? I was told they’d been informed of the delegation’s arrival date and time as well, yes.”

“Good. We mustn’t disrespect them, either. They’ve helped us many a time to rescue our people and drive out the invaders. We must receive them with the highest courtesy.”

“But of course, Your Majesty. And please, would you be just as courteous—if not more!—to their lord commander? The boy is the master of these fine warriors. Moreover, any disrespect done to him would also be viewed as a slap in the face to the king of Diorelle. Please, sire, do not forget.”

Humans had a tendency to claim other people’s achievements as their own. Even brave deeds in battle were attributed to the commanding officers and

tacticians. While I understood it, I could never condone it, and this made me even further wroth with the boy commander. However, the fate of the Beast Nation was at stake, so I was prepared to suffer all blows to my dignity. As my aide insisted, at tedious length. This was the reason I could not stand the goat tribe.

“Your Majesty, I can see the carriages of our honored guests. Please be ready.”

“I’ve been ready for some time now. Let us be off.”

They had arrived too soon. Had I not just been informed they had but recently finished resting near the edge of the jungle? How could they be here already? If the report had been late in arrival, then I wished I had been informed. I’d been ready all morning long to give our guests a polite greeting...even if this guest was a buffoon, which rankled me. Did I become king solely to suffer such indignity?

“Announcing Her Royal Highness Princess Shalliceres du Diorelle of the Kingdom of Diorelle; His Grace the Duke of the Frontier Meropapa Sim Omui; our esteemed guest from Diorelle, Sir Haruka; and the rest of the Diorelle delegation.”

The crystal chandeliers in the hall bounced flickering candlelight around the room. Shimmering lights and dancing shadows interwove with one another on the walls, casting fey silhouettes as the doors creaked open. Beauty was a form of power and one that could, at times, be overwhelming. This was the fact that struck me as the chandelier light shimmered in the glowing platinum blonde hair of the young woman walking my way. Her beauty was such that it petrified all those along the path she strode. And still, beyond her beauty shone strength. Her face was as elegant and fierce as if it had been carved by the gods; her charm was like a softly polished gemstone of divinity. This goddess descended among us mere mortals in a gown so dazzling it threatened to cause the onlookers to faint. Yet, as sublime as she appeared, she was a warrior at heart. Yes, she was a general and swordswoman known to be the strongest female

knight in her kingdom: Princess Shalliceres du Diorelle. Even the flickering shadows across the wall stiffened to attention at her intimidating aura. She may have held an otherworldly beauty, but she advanced towards me wreathed in the glory of a bold, true warrior.

Behind her walked a living legend, a man who held himself without pretense. He assumed an air of perfect calm and impeccable carriage. He did not seem cowed before us, nor was he eager to cow us in turn. The chieftains of our tribes, veterans of renown all, stared at him in amazement, for this was the one and only god of war, Meropapa Sim Omui. Hearsay claimed that none could match his sword; legends spoke of him like a monstrous blade as he strove to strike down the foe. That he could quell the monster-infested land of the frontier made it foregone history that the Omui name went down through time as guardians of their land's people. Here, in the flesh, was the man who had slain the vilest monsters in all the kingdom. No matter their numbers, no band of weak soldiers was fit to touch this man's shadow as it spread out behind him on the polished floor of the hall.

His Grace was then followed by the final members of their party, and the entire room gasped at once and blinked as if they could not believe their eyes. I, too, wondered if what I was seeing was real. Surely this was a dream, I told myself. This could not be.

It was a band of black-haired knights and a buffoon. They were the party of foreigners who'd featured in countless stories and dramas. Rumors abounded about them, their endless feats of combat, and their mysteries. Although some heaped scorn upon these knights for their vanity, they'd left their mark on legends across the world, even here in the Beast Nation. Neither myself nor my chieftains had doubted their power, but all the same, I feared we had not judged their true strength until this moment. I had not prepared myself.

The stories of their heroic deeds were like fairy tales. These knights bested dungeons, strolled through monster-infested woods leaving swaths of fallen foes in their wake, and put thousands of enemy soldiers to rout. I'd even heard

reports that one among their number had felled dungeon emperors. Even then, I had not given this group enough credit. I had believed them to be the most capable fighting force in all the world, but their strength went beyond their power as an army—every one of them had the makings of a legendary hero. I had not believed that so many champions could come together like so, but the true wonder, I dare say, was the miracle of their sheer numbers.

Each over level 100, outfitted in the finest armor, they calmly walked forward in perfect military order. All doubts that this group could live up to their reputation vanished in my mind. Each warrior could rival an entire army of another nation; they were the stuff of legends—and they were walking in my halls. They were here to see me.

At the head of this group stood an impertinent little brat with a dissatisfied expression on his face. He was a paltry level 25. He was not fit to kiss the ground these divine warriors walked on, let alone lead their company, yet he marched at their head. That, I assumed, must have been the buffoon.

Ah, commanders... Commander is a role for cowards, but only cowards can comprehend dastardly schemes. One cannot counteract the intrigues of the craven if one is not capable of craven thought themselves. When faced with a worm such as a commander, one must confer with commanders and strategists of one's own.

Thus were commanders a necessary evil for a king like myself. Oh, they were clever fellows. They babbled their little japes and tricky plots, but they were all lily-livered milksops, incapable of any sort of fighting save for verbal sparring and criticism dressed up as advisement. Once the real fighting broke out, the commander melted into the background at the rear of the army, cowering in fear in a discussion room while yapping and yawning about their own plots. It was their cowardice that imbued them with such wicked knowledge to see through devious traps. Their weakness allowed them to direct troops in the optimal patterns to save their own hide, thus making them the necessary evil of the battlefield. If you had a commander, your own personal chattering fool, you

had forewarning of worse disasters than they caused with their scheming.

The admiring and awestruck chieftains fell silent. I scowled at the insolence of this jester who dared look so displeased, but I swallowed my anger. We welcomed the crown of Diorelle to convey our gratitude, and yet this insolence! This boy did not know his place. Strategizing scum could cower away from the battlefield, they could swagger about with braggadocio in times of peace, but this? No, this went too far. He did not even bow to me! His eyes roved around the room, neither interested in what he was seeing nor pleased by it. He even had the gall to avoid my eye. He frowned in disapproval, never dignifying me with the merest hint of a polite smile.

After generations of discrimination and oppression, we knew what this meant. Oh yes, all too well. This was a boy who looked down on us, who loathed us. Those eyes declared that he despised us, that the mere sight of us was beneath him. And Diorelle brought this child as their guest?

However, our nation needed his coffers. Diorelle as well, I could only assume, must have made the agonizing choice to rely on his financial support and the military might of his warriors. I'd heard word that a dungeon deluge had rocked Diorelle, and to prevent the loss of the entire kingdom, the chancellor and crown prince had welcomed the entire frontier back into Diorelle's fold. If they had suffered this horrid shame, then so too could we.

We would only stand for it today, and then no longer. Humans had oft scorned us as mere animals for how we forgot our better judgment in moments of anger, but we never forgot a debt of kindness to be repaid. Were we to throw Diorelle's kindness in their face, and then if we were only animals to them? Well, let us be animals.

DAY 106

AFTERNOON

Yeah, things've mellowed out, but...so much for the gravity we started out with.

THE REPUBLIC OF GAMEHLEIN

GAMEHLEIN CASTLE

THE AIR WAS THICK with tension, but considering all the various factors at play, hostility was only to be expected. While I may have not been the picture of decorum as of late, I still assumed that I must carry myself with the dignity of a princess of Diorelle. Yet so preoccupied was I with the upcoming Theocracy issue that I hadn't given much thought to meeting the king of Gamehlein. However, now that we were here, I realized how dire the tension was!

Miss Class Rep and the rest of her lovely companions were kind enough to intercede on my behalf, ganging up on Haruka and entreating him at great length and with great sincerity (not to mention a great amount of nagging) to make me a dress such that I would be less scantily clad. It was a heavenly garment to be sure, and one that all the coffers of the royal family could scarce hope to pay for. He sold it to his classmates, my new dear companions, for a mere fraction of their daily earnings. In so doing, they recognized me as one of their own.

Me. What good was I, really? Nominally, I had braved the pseudo-dungeon that safeguarded the frontier, but I had only barely escaped it with my life. I had no strength to boast of save that of my sword arm, no redemption save my courage. When my father fell ill, the royal family descended into shambles. I died the day I chose to sacrifice myself to end the war between the Kingdom of Diorelle and the frontier. Yet at that very same moment, so too was I reborn—not as a princess, not as a knight, not as a commander nor a foot soldier, but as an ordinary girl who happened to be named Shalliceres. Thus began a series of

dreamlike days wherein my cohorts treated me like a friend. Lady Merielle received similar treatment. Our new, dearly beloved friends ignored our rank and other societal complications. I found myself smiling in earnest, day after day, as I discovered the meaning of happiness. To me, there was no greater treasure than these precious moments.

The fetters of my dying kingdom would allow me no freedoms of my own, but now my chains were broken. The tragedy of my ancestors' lofty goals decaying to obsolescence was destroyed. My fate, the fate to die for my people, had been shattered. My new friends murdered my current sorrows; slaughtered my cruel fate. They committed a devastating massacre that left sheer joy in its wake.

Thus, it was now time for me to use my rank to protect my new allies. Sheltered by the dress that they had sold to me at a friend discount, I pledged to shelter my friends in turn. Now that the time had come, my resolve was as strong as it ever was...but all the same, I was not invulnerable to this hostility.

The Beast Nation offered us a warm, heartfelt welcome and looked upon us with awe in the way beastfolk often did to those of us blessed with strength. In their gaze, I also felt the strong affection they harbored for my royal family. I knew there was no duplicity in this, for the beastfolk were honest folk...which made all too clear the level of scorn they felt for Haruka.

In the Beast Nation, levels meant everything. They were firm believers in one's stats. Thanks to their long history of repeated persecutions, the beastfolk loathed the weak and pursued strength for the sake of strength itself. They were kindly protectors, but that same kindness would instantly transform to contempt for weakness, even in their own kin. And they all-out reviled the cowardly and manipulative.

We had been concerned this might happen. We understood their reasons, yes, but that did not mean we had to tolerate it. We simply could not tolerate disdain for one of our own.

I understood that it was nearly killing the beastfolk to try to be polite to us when they found this so humiliating. Because they owed us a debt of gratitude, they would put up with this disgrace.

None of them knew to whom they truly owed such gratitude. They stood not even the slimmest chance of recognizing how strong he truly was...and thus this horrid hostility! Lord Meropapa feigned calm, aware of the beastfolk's circumstances...but I knew he was furious. Yes, positively boiling with anger. All the same, he understood how the beastfolk felt and the effort they were exerting here.

If anything, I supposed I was most frightened of Miss Class Rep. She was the source of the greatest tension. The beastfolk in the great hall likewise felt the wrath rolling off her and quaked in their boots. The smiles plastered to their faces were purely for appearances, but their eyes betrayed their fear. Every one of us was fierce in our protection of Haruka. I couldn't stand the insult as I knew Haruka so thoroughly. Our emotions sharpened the air into a deadly sword. This was the tension of a battlefield.

Oh yes, I knew all about Haruka. I had seen everything there was to see about him: his tragic strength, his distressing fragility. Haruka was the strongest, kindest, most generous person I'd ever met, and I had likewise known no one person to have undergone such trials. The frontier and kingdom had been reborn in happiness beyond our wildest dreams, but Haruka paid the price with his blood. He paid for it all with a sum of agonies worse than hell. And yet, for every time he collapsed in a bloodstained heap, the smile never once left his face.

The boys in our company looked untroubled at first glance, but I could see deep in their eyes the fire of rage—if you thought you're strong enough to look down on Haruka, then come fight us and prove it, those eyes seemed to say. If you liked strength so much, come get a taste of our strength. There was nothing diplomatic or polite in their intimidating demeanor, which made the tension in the flustered hall all the worse. Oh, there was something beastly in this hall, all

right. Something wilder and more animalistic than any of the beastfolk, yes indeed. The unspoken promise of death solidified more by the moment.

However, Haruka was numb to the aggravation; he cared not a whit for what we felt about him, nor the scorn in the looks the beastfolk gave him. He was, plain and simple, in a foul temper. The way he glared around the hall—like this was not worth his time—made the situation grow even more strained. It was a vicious cycle of mounting stress. He wasn't mad, *per se*. He was just ticked off, in his own words. And I knew that because I knew the look in his eyes intimately.

Once we finished a long round of greetings, we proceeded to a dinner party. They served us a buffet alongside an even larger smorgasbord of introductions. The tensions continued to skyrocket without end. I almost wished someone would throw a punch and get it over with rather than deal with this awkwardness. The atmosphere was strained with the combined force of our shared outrage at the beastfolk's treatment of Haruka.

Miss Book Club President turned to me with a grin and said, "All that's left is to light the match and let this powder keg burn."

The look in her eyes frightened me. I noticed that, while we girls chatted amongst ourselves amicably, we had formed up into a V-shaped battle formation. In my position on the left leg of the V, I would assist in forming the defense and blocking the beastfolk's retreat. Meanwhile, the attackers fanned out on the V's right half. *Oh, goodness.* As much as I wanted to feign ignorance, I understood all too well what we were doing. This was a formation for total annihilation that would allow none of the beastfolk to slip through our battle lines.

"It is my pleasure to introduce you to our brilliant commander and king of the republic, His Royal Majesty Haighpbeest Gamehlein. We thank you, my lords and ladies, for all your aid and support for our kingdom."

"Oh, yeah? I mean, the aid part wasn't us. That was all on a couple of guys

who haven't shown up yet, so you can save your thanks for them. I had nothing to do with it, ya know? Well, I'm more than happy to receive thanks from girls with fluffy beast ears, especially if they're down to clown, and I'd love to add my name to the list of would-be fluffers. But ya know, I don't really care about this Beast Nation gig otherwise? And, uh, King Hype Beast, was it? You're just an old dude, so I'm not hyped about going to fluff town with you, okay? Come to think of it, everyone here's an old dude. Where do you guys keep the babes?"

Oh no. This disrespect would provoke war. The beastfolk snarled and all but threw themselves at Haruka for his insolence in calling the king such names. They shifted into battle-ready stances, seething in rage...only for us to surround them in turn.

As they ringed Haruka, we completed our circle formation around the beastfolk. Our smiles were forced and lethal. *Oh goodness.* From my position in the second unit behind King Haighpbeest, the animosity was chilling.



No one dared move. If any of us acted without caution or uttered a careless word, this fragile balance would shatter. The hall itself seemed so on edge it was quaking. Then, with a perfectly placating and yet utterly self-confident and composed gait, Lord Meropapa interceded and began to make small talk with Haruka.

“Say, Haruka, I’m quite curious. Why is it that you show such animosity towards the Beast Nation? I’ve never known you to have prejudice against the beastfolk. Rather, you’ve always shown an earnest desire to visit. So it puzzles me that you should grow so irritable now that we are here. Diorelle and Gamehlein have always cooperated in building up both our nations, and we are likewise comrades in keeping the monsters of Omui at bay. I understand that the beastfolk have no love for humankind due to the discrimination they’ve tragically faced from the Church, but deep down, beastfolk are an honest, noble, and courageous people. I would appreciate their cooperation if we can have it, yet I fear with such apparent anger in the room, it may prove difficult for me to ask.”

“Oh, I’m just kinda ticked off,” said Haruka. “Yeah, just sorta annoyed. But if I step in, I’m gonna get so infuriated things’ll get in-fire-ated and then I’ll have to burn everything. Yeah, like the king?”

“Please don’t burn the king! I don’t know what you’re upset about, but whatever it is, burning the king is not the answer!”

“What...what insolence! How dare you insult His Royal Majesty to our faces!”

“Oh, I can’t stand this anymore. C’mon, girls. It’s time to duel!”

“Hit ’em! Stab ’em! Cut ’em all down! Grind ’em to a pulp!”

Frenzied with rage, the chieftains of the Beast Nation’s warrior tribes all but swarmed Haruka and Duke Omui...but they had no idea that they, in turn, were surrounded. They were completely unaware that we would destroy them if they so much as moved a muscle. Granted, we would be in a fine mess if we did actually destroy them all, but when they swarmed Haruka... *Oh, did we just*

win? Wait, we're not supposed to be beating them! We need to stop them!

“Please, Haruka, what is giving you cause for such displeasure? Surely you’ve never met His Majesty before. Yet whenever we discuss the Beast Nation—or rather, the government of the Gamehlein itself—you always seemed positively vexed. As much as it embarrasses me to admit, I’m afraid Diorelle is in far worse political shambles than Gamehlein. Yet you’ve never been so displeased with us. Why is that? What is it about a nation with clear goals, unlike our mess of a kingdom, that makes you so furious? Do tell me what upsets you about this land with Diorelle’s friendship.”

“Oh, ya know. It’s the fact that their castle’s right here, you feel me? Yeah, that’s what’s bothering me. I wanna burn it all down and wipe it off the map. Call this explosive anger, ya know? I even gave the nerds a bunch of explosives, but they’re so darn tardy they haven’t even blown the place to smithereens yet. It’s ‘cause they’re so busy getting chummy with beast ear girls, I bet. I’m gonna blow ‘em all sky high. Yeah, and the castle?”

There is adding tinder to the fire, and then there is adding oil. And this is definitely the latter. There was such burning rage the hall was ready to go up in flames. Even though the chieftains were so upset they were losing all sense of reason, they dared not attack Lord Meropapa. When the Beast Nation was first invaded by the Church, Lord Meropapa and Lady Murimour led the armies of Diorelle and Omui to come to Gamehlein’s defense. To the Beast Nation, Lord Meropapa was as much of a savior as my lord father, and they bestowed upon him the title “the Royal Blade of Diorelle” for his swift charges and maneuvers. As they fought alongside him and learned of his military might firsthand, they began to revere him with absolute awe and fear. Thus, I thought that the situation would blow over...but he was fanning the flames! Fanning them something awful!

“Your Majesty, it is a great honor to meet you,” Miss Class Rep cut in, “and I apologize for the rudeness of my companion. Please, would you mind if I spoke up? Haruka, why does this castle make you so angry? The duke’s palace in Omui

is one thing, but... You know the royal palace in Diorelle, right? It's plenty big and fancy, but you've never been upset by it, right? So, what's the big idea?"

Here, the beastfolk found themselves at an impasse, as Miss Class Rep's interjection prevented them from making any sort of moves. Hers was a polite threat, one that told them she could kill them with a smile. The last person you wanted to make mad right now was Miss Class Rep. Believe me, she was livid!

"Oh yeah, that's because the kingdom's so stupid it can't even be put into words, so I couldn't get mad at that. It may be an unspeakably stupid castle doing unspeakable things, but there's no reason to get ticked off about it, ya know?"

"Um, what?"

Oh, I knew what he meant. For generations, my royal family had been known for our meaningless and prideful foolishness. I could imagine this was the first time in all our history that such idiocy served as a point in our favor. Haruka forgave us for being buffoons because we were like him. And thus...we were redeemed—my father, my uncles, and myself. All redeemed by our idiocy.

"Remember what the town looked like when we got out of the monster forest that first time? You know what town I mean, that shabby one without a name?"

"Right, I remember we saw the walls and the duke's palace. To this day, that's what you see when you walk out of the monster forest. Isn't it?"

The god of war looked alarmed. In fact, he had curled into a ball, hugging his knees, and began to weep. You only needed one look at him to tell he was in an awful state. Haruka's unadulterated opinions had dealt the lord of the frontier a critical blow.

"Yeah, exactly. They called that the frontier castle, that run-down poky little thing. And it was directly on the edge of the monster forest, right? The forest was on the verge of swallowing it all up, and it just sat there with nothing else around to bolster its defense. That's kinda stupid, don't you think? Why's a commander out there living on the front lines, you know? And remember

where the royal palace is situated?”

“Yeah, okay, I’m starting to see what you mean. The royal capital is right by the waterway that runs along the border, so it’s at the entrance into the kingdom, so to speak.”

Other nations had laughed at us behind our backs for placing our royal palace in such a prime place for an enemy to target. However, when the first king in our royal line built this fortress, he declared it would be the first in the line of defenses for the kingdom. Thus, it was our family’s royal palace. This was our pride as a foolish monarchy with a moronic aristocracy. We never lost our nerve, no matter how pointless the danger we placed ourselves in by residing there. For we were all taught that our citizenry lived behind our line of protection. For generation after generation, that bastion on the border was where we were born and raised.

Our foolish bravado, the trait passed down from our founding father, was being recognized and acknowledged as a positive thing. Haruka understood how we felt, and in doing so, he redeemed us. Just because we lived in a palace on the front line of the defenses for our kingdom.

“Yeah, so in the Beast Nation, whoever’s got the strongest tribe becomes king, right? And all the other strong dudes are chieftains and aristocrats of various other tribes. And you’re telling me that all these old dudes are hiding way the heck back in here, shivering in their boots? Well, actually, I don’t care. At all, I mean. Yeah, I just want to come buy soy sauce and miso. A bunch of beefcake beast dudes don’t have anything to do with me. Although how come the only people we’ve met so far are old dudes? Okay, that actually makes me pissed! Like the regular kind of pissed! What sort of teenage boy would be happy to see a bunch of old dudes? You’d have to be into some real kinky stuff to get your rocks off to that, and I’m not, you feel me?”

Gamehlein Castle was a stone citadel deep in the heart of the jungle, an impregnable fortress...but one that guarded nothing. This stout redoubt sat as far from the borders as could be. Were the castle to fall, it would spell the end

of the kingdom, just as an army is spent when its rearguard perishes. Hence, according to the typical rules of warfare, the royal castle should be situated as far from a nation's borders as possible. But in such a position, a fortress castle could not halt enemy advances nor protect the country's citizenry.

"...I have no qualms accepting any scorn or affront, provided it be in response to the great debt we owe the crown of Diorelle. We will suffer this humiliation. But if you deride the notions of our founding fathers, then you force my hand as king. If I were to let you make fools of us, then I would not be fit to lead my people. A king must be a leader, and as such, there are lines that cannot be crossed. You have crossed that line, boy, and sullied the honor of the Beast Nation. My pardons, Lord Meropapa. When this matter is settled, you may take my head and bring it to the king of Diorelle with my apologies. Now, we fight!"

Oh, he was furious. As was only proper, really. After all, I'd bitten my tongue when I'd suffered my own shame, but the beastfolk were backed into a corner. And now that Haruka had crossed the line of insolence, they were justifiably enraged.

Perhaps biting tongues was what caused not just this transgression but the full-on fight. We had the beastfolk surrounded, so we could attack and defeat them all in an instant. But to massacre an entire room within a moment was the height of selfishness. The king did not need to make a point of sacrificing himself when we could shorten every one of their heads in a moment.

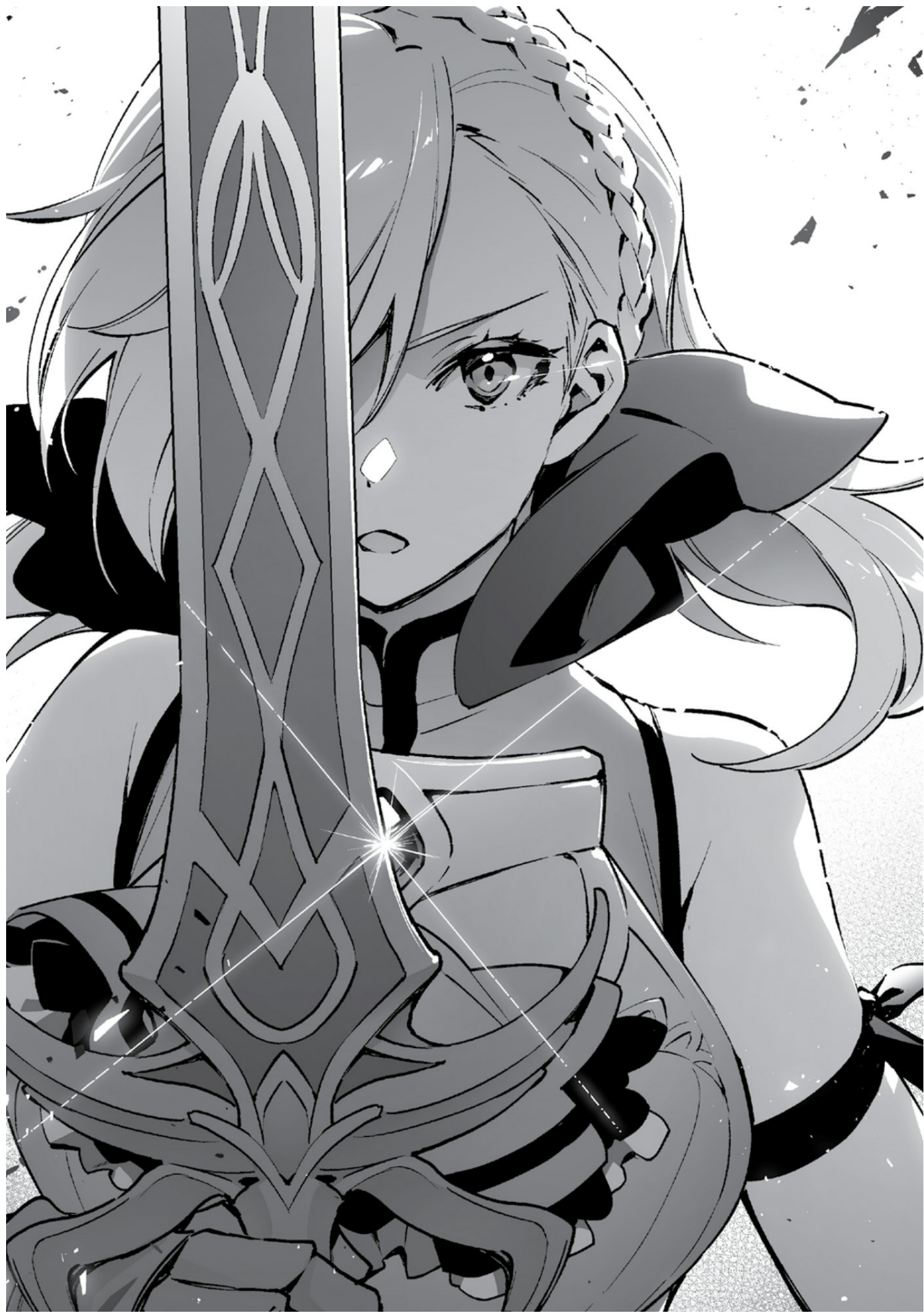
So I said, "Very well. On behalf of the king of Diorelle and the crown of our kingdom, I, Shalliceres du Diorelle, do hereby accept your challenge to a duel. If I must take up arms against our host, then I will go to battle to defend my family's honor. I pledge this on the Royal Blade of Diorelle entrusted to me by my lord father."

When I received the newly reforged Royal Blade of Diorelle, I swore a vow on it to my people. The only things that remained to us from our forefathers were the kingdom, the sword, and the throne that, according to legend, had been a gift to us from our aristocracy. All of those ended up a shadow of their former

selves: the kingdom in chaos, the crown divided and confused, dragged down by the corruption of the nobility. While the frontier suffered, the kingdom, which was supposed to protect that very same frontier and all the kingdom's people, was steadily driven to the brink of hell. A king with no power sat on the dilapidated throne, and the Royal Blade of Diorelle became no more than a symbol of our deteriorating state. This sword, once our royal protector, was so rusted through that a single touch would crumble it to dust. Just like the kingdom... But now the emblem of Diorelle's majesty had returned in a new, resplendent form. My family had failed to safeguard our country, but even so, this sword was granted to us along with a nation full of hopes and dreams for the future. Not to mention a throne—a very pretty one, and one that came with a massage feature to boot!

Hence, we as the ruling family of Diorelle came to a decision: Diorelle would take up its sword for Haruka. As our forefathers swore to the goddess of war, we too pledged absolute loyalty—not as a people to their god, but as a people of a shared clan.

It was for the great debt of gratitude we owed him, yes. Beyond that, it was also because I believed in him. On the sheath of this sword were written two mottos, the front side bearing “The crown lives for the people” and the back reading “This sword is pledged to those in whom we place our faith.” It was a vow that our forefather lamented that he could not fulfill in perpetuity. That he could not follow the goddess of war into battle for all time, that he had survived without protecting her. That he had failed his duty.



The goddess of war was said to have once slain every monster on the continent, and here stood the one I believed to be her successor. So I swore a new vow. My forefather had failed to save the goddess of war, but a new generation would pick up from where he left off. Haruka had reforged this sword, and thus we would become his sword and shield.

...And I was a big fan of the new massage throne, too!

DAY 106

EVENING

Vice Rep B could win the #1 Nicest Person in the World award, but when she's hopping—and thus jiggling—mad, she's downright terrifying.

THE REPUBLIC OF GAMEHLEIN

GAMEHLEIN CASTLE

OH, WHAT A TRAGEDY, what a horror, what an atrocious and vile thing to do! It wasn't a battle at all. It was an evil rout more heartless than a massacre, and not something deserving to be called a duel.

I stepped forward for battle all dramatically, but then they set up a round-robin tournament... *Alas for the theatrics, I suppose.* The chieftains of the beastfolk tribes suggested we engage in a series of one-on-one duels, and everyone assembled accepted this idea. Not a one of us knew that this was a trap according to the customs of the beastfolk.

Once one had agreed to a duel, they could not take on another duel until their battle was finished. Once each of us had been matched up with a partner, that still left over a hundred chieftains who all threw down the gauntlet before Haruka.

To make matters worse, each match was to be *vale tudo*—anything goes. At such close quarters, there was no room for magic, and the beastfolk were known as the strongest melee fighters in the world. Haruka disregarded all of that and accepted their challenge. When asked whom he would choose to fight, he said he'd thrash them all. Then, when asked whom he'd fight *first*, he said he'd take on the whole group at once. And thus the massacre.

First, there was the chieftain of the wolf tribe, one infamous for producing the best sword fighters amongst all the acclaimed fighting forces of the beastfolk.

Then, there was the chieftain of the tiger tribe, whose burly builds and nimble feet earned them the moniker of demonfolk. This was followed by the chieftain of the bear tribe, a people of such enormous size and powerful blows that rumor claimed they had never suffered defeat. The chieftain of the ape tribe brought both the brawn of animals and the brains of mankind together, while the chieftain of the leopard tribe swung a sword with such speed that not even the fastest assassin could hope to catch him. All these renowned fighters jostled to fight Haruka, led by the ruler of all beastfolk, he who was known the continent over as the mightiest of champions: King Haighpbeest. It looked to be a hopeless fight—emphasis on the *looked*.

“Agghhh! You—you filthy cheater!”

“Gwaah brhgghghg, that was a dirty move!”

“Wh-what is this monster? What cowardly device is thi—gwwbbbhhh!”

“Gah-hack! Men, fall back!”

“Gaaaah! Gya-hfff!”

How tragic, how cruel, how despicably unfair—this was no battle, no duel at all, as pitiful voices screamed in agony. But their cries, while noisy, were in vain.

Which was an inevitability, really. I mean...well...they did ask for it.

“I mean, who in their right mind would challenge Haruka-kun to a fight where anything goes?”

“*Vale tudo*’s reckless enough when the opponent’s willing to do anything. It’s even worse when the opponent’s willing to do *everything*.”

“You can believe in yourself and boast about being invincible all you want, but that doesn’t mean a thing if it can’t translate to fighting performance.”

Beastfolk were some of the finest fighters the world had to offer, wielding both human weapons and animalistic strength and instincts. But no matter how good they were, they were nothing but lesser versions of our own idiots.

All the bullying the idiots had endured during last night’s training session had

made their wild ferocity keener, sharpened their intuition to a stupid degree, heightened their wis—well, no, not that... They were all brawn with their brains long since cast aside. But what they lacked in intelligence, they made up for in their glorious, strong bodies.

But for all the might and muscle of the beastfolk, Haruka was a thorn in their paws... They tried to use cheap tricks as he danced circles around him, looking around for support and making crude attempts to coordinate with one another. These beastfolk were fools who boasted of their own speed, but they lacked the decorum of humanity and the grace of beasts.

Strategy, tactics, and other schools of military thought were based upon fundamental fighting basics. Yet where, I ask you, could you ever learn the basics for fighting against a man who blew through dungeons on the daily? Instructive texts could offer little more than tools to counteract the most basic strategies. Certainly no one had ever made a manual for how to counter Haruka's truly baffling or pointless behavior. And yet these beastfolk wanted to challenge him *vale tudo*! Was this one of those prognosticative "flags" he often spoke of?

Hence the pitiful cries of agony. The beastfolk crawled and writhed across the ground in unsightly heaps. Their faces were covered in a disgusting mix of tears, snot, and drool. No longer capable of maintaining their tough facade, they sobbed in pain. This wasn't a battle—this was animal abuse. Haruka didn't fight the beastfolk, really. A fight has more than one fighter. He placidly pummeled and congenially curb stomped them.

There had been no signal to begin, but all the beastfolk descended on Haruka in a flurry of weapons. Swords and axes descended on...nothing. There was nothing there save the empty ground because Haruka had leaped into the sky, and nothing remained on the floor below save his shadow. The shadow's black hair fluttered in the wind of his movement. *Well, flying through the air certainly is in the spirit of 'everything goes', I suppose.*

And then everything went to hell.

Haruka sprayed horribly sour vinegar all across the hall, and to make matters worse, set off such a barrage of flashing lights and explosive noises that the hall descended into pandemonium. Then, to top it all off, he sprayed the poisonous Super Itchy Powder SP over all the beastfolk. What a hell for them!

Haruka's first move following that was little more than a handclap, but the sound of it boomed so loudly it produced a shockwave that sent the lunging beastfolk reeling away.

"That's Vibration magic!"

"I've heard of clapping in front of an opponent to startle them, but this is something else! It's less a thunderous clap and more actual thunderclap!"

The momentarily deafened beastfolk were too dazzled by the flashing lights to keep track of Haruka as he dashed through the air. Thus, once they realized he was above them, they all looked up, all acting as the same panicked beast. With their eyes blinded, they trusted everything to a singular sense: smell. And just then, Haruka slam dunked a rain of vinegar into their faces.

The beastfolk shut their eyes, clawed at their noises, and roared in vain. All they could do was howl about what treachery, what craven trickery, what vile poltroonery this all was. Well, anyone could have told you that. If you challenged the most treacherous, poltroon trickster in the world to a fight where anything goes, why would you expect anything less than cheating?

Haruka was the most vicious man to exist—why wouldn't he be cruel? *That's what vicious means, you know.* This was the man in front of whom the vilest dungeon emperors quaked.

Knowing how bad this could be, my companions and I immediately pinched our noses, covered our mouths with wet handkerchiefs, and used Wind magic to stop the air before it reached us. Even then, the vinegar—that fabled slayer of dog monsters—was so sour it made my eyes sting.

But the beastfolk had noses that were several thousand times stronger than any of ours, and I'd heard that many had the Smell Detection skill. So now they

grabbed at their noses and slammed their heads against the floor, writhing in pain.

“Oh, is that the vinegar he was talking about?”

“Yeah, it’s gotta be. There’s no mistaking that massive firepower.”

This vinegar was a condiment that Haruka had purchased from a village he had once saved. He had bought the vinegar with such glee that he immediately went bankrupt, thus giving the frontier another new export. I could not begin to say why, but this vinegar grew increasingly sour by the day until somewhere along the line, it transformed from a cooking tool into a weapon. The sourest brew of all earned itself the nickname Kobold Slayer. One had to wonder what the makers could possibly be thinking by fermenting such a thing. All the same, its destructive ability was priceless.

“In the name of the house of Diorelle, I, Shalliceres du Diorelle, declare Haruka the winner of this duel. Should you wish to object, come make your complaint with your sword in your hand! On my family’s honor, I swear to defeat any challenger!”



Despite my challenge, no one made any move to object. In fact, no one made any move at all, really...save to groan and blubber in pain. The grand hall reeked of the ravages of war without any of the spoils. And vinegar. Yes, it most definitely reeked of that.

“...We do not object,” the king of Gamehlein finally said. “It was wrong of us to challenge our invited guests to a duel to begin with. For that grievous misdeed, we must all be held responsible, whether we participated in the duel or no. I pray you take our heads in recompen—”

“Ohhhhhh no you don’t. :) We still have all the one-on-one matches to fight, silly billy. :) We’re not done yet, oh no we’re not. :) Nuh-uh. :) No dying for you yet, no siree. :) Tee-hee! :) Get back up and at ’em, boys. :) Because now it’s my turn. :)”

Yikes. Yikes, yikes, yikes, yikes, yikes, yikes, yikes. Major, mega yikes! Vice Rep B was ready for a bashing, and I was already abashed!

“Hmm,” Miss Class Rep pondered. “If I whip out the Thunder Chain Whip, these beastfolk will be roast beast before you know it. So maybe I should start with my sword. Or my ax? Ooh, or maybe my staff. Yup, that’s perfect. It’ll make this nice, long, and *painful*.”

Oh no, Miss Class Rep and all the others were eager to keep fighting! This was lecture mode taken to extremes, a full beatdown that would make even the Sex God turn and run. Worst of all, Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san were cheerfully choosing their weapons, and even Slimey was quivering with delight as he joined the lineup.

“Beat ’em Up Hell Infinite Regen on Endless Loop ft. The Three Dungeon Emperors-no-Jutsu!”

They thrashed the beastfolk all the way to death’s doorstep, crammed mushrooms into their mouths to revive them, and then started the process all over again. Even Arianna-san and her other nuns participated in this battle, looping ad nauseam. Some of the beastfolk sobbed but were soon too far in

despair to resist. Others tried to fight back before losing all hope. Whether they ran, stood and fought, kept silent, or apologized made no difference, as all were pummeled to pieces in this torture session masquerading as a duel.

After all, everyone was just furious—that was, that none of us had realized what had made Haruka so upset to begin with. Most likely, only the nerds had realized, and no doubt that was why they were waiting in the jungle, even as we spoke. It was also why Haruka had kept disappearing from the carriage train.

Indeed, all this came about because Haruka was the only one of us who had been bothered this whole trip. He was bothered for such a long, long period of time by the fact that the Beast Nation had neglected to protect so many of its villages and let the death toll climb so high. He blamed himself for failing to predict the Merchant Kingdom would have been so aggressive. Ever since then, the blame had weighed him down... Every time he vanished from the carriage, he had gone to another beastfolk village to atone for his crime. I could picture him now, whispering a silent, “Sorry,” all alone as he built up wall after wall, constructing tomb after tomb by way of apology. It was for this very reason tears filled our furious eyes.

Haruka came to his first ever meeting with the beastfolk with an apology on his lips, yet none of the beastfolk blamed him. No, instead they heaped gratitude and accolades upon us all. Yes, they worshipped us because we just happened to be their neighbor. Yet we’d done nothing to help them for so long, save for one of our number: the only one who noticed them. The only one who made a move to intervene. From the very moment he had first noticed, Haruka had been wracked by self-blame.

Thus he turned his anger onto the beastfolk even if they were not truly to blame. If only there had been a castle in place to protect this jungle, then he might have made it in time to save the villages. But he did not. He *could not have*, and so Haruka took out his anger on two unjustified targets: the Beast Nation and himself. The slaughtered beastfolk had long since been buried, but Haruka alone still mourned their passing.

He was angry over the loss of these beastfolk, and yet how did their living countrymen think to treat him? ...*You know what, I think I just might join in the beatdown.* It seemed my new Royal Blood of Diorelle hungered to whoop some butt.

“Re: Beat ‘em Up Hell Infinite Regen ft. The Three Dungeon Emperors and Starring Special Guest Kingdom Squad! Go, Fight, Win!-no-Jutsu!”

Class Rep and her whip delivered a biting sermon to inform them of the error of their ways. Even when she delivered the lecture with ultimate compassion, her eyes were alive with the spark of ass-kicking! A sea of beastfolk cowered around her in the great hall as waves of highly concentrated lecturing washed over them. She lined them up and made them sit in an uncomfortable position on their knees as she delivered her lecture, and if she heard so much as a peep of an excuse from one of them, the incessant hell of the beat ‘em up loop started all over again. As the lecture dragged on, the beastfolk prostrated themselves before her. She simply kept right on lecturing. It was a ceremony of diplomacy and friendship.

The nerds, who could not choose the right moment to show up if their lives depended on it, showed their faces now to talk with Haruka. They were currently investigating dangerous areas in the far-outlying villages, the same villages Haruka was touring to do his solitary penance. The reason we were all upset.

This was some truly powerful brainwashing. Arianna-san and her other companions had once felt their lives were shattered, but thanks to our collective efforts, we had raised their spirits...and now they were ready to join us in shattering other people. We weren’t acting with our heads, but our hearts.

We’d taken to heart (and been hoodwinked by) Haruka’s lesson: “You can do anything if you put your mind to it.” Yet somewhere along the way it had turned into “You can do in anything if you put your mind to it. Now, go do it!” A rather frightening instruction! The beastfolk were following our every directive with teary eyes, heartfelt fervor, and a “Sir, yes, sir!” I don’t think Haruka and

his classmates were especially keen on being sirred by a group of aristocrats. In fact, they were disdainful of such a promotion.

If you became a frightened follower of Miss Class Rep and Haruka, you would face endless lectures and wind up brainwashed. Any doubts would lead to merciless, violent beat-up sessions under the guise of training, courtesy of the three nightmarish instructors. Gradually, frenzied admiration and loyalty bloomed in the beastfolk's eyes. It was a brainwashing masquerading as instruction.

The beastfolk were under their spell. They escaped the whiplash and horror of what was happening to them via zealotry and even more whipped lashes. Those that followed Miss Class Rep's terrifying orders passed and were rewarded with equipment of quality beyond their wildest dreams.

The beastfolk soon returned to their animal instincts. They fearlessly sneered at the idiots and launched themselves into battle before getting their sobbing, sorry asses handed to them by the girls. At the same time, these animal instincts warned them to stay far, *far* from Haruka.

In their time of crisis, the beastfolk's instincts had grown rusty. They had grown too cautious of fighting. Yet they pretended they took great pride in their fighting, that they could not lose...and lost horribly for it. Well, I suppose any match-up against the three dungeon emperors couldn't be considered fighting, really. It was more like one-sided slaughter.

After Miss Class Rep literally whipped them into shape, she doled out their rewards: new equipment. The beastfolk received it with teary gratitude. Once they donned these new gifts, they found the three nightmarish instructors lined up to give them another round of training, aka terror.

The dungeon emperors destroyed them in both body and soul, but the beastfolk were nothing but grateful for it. Once defeated, we healed them, and the more disheartened they grew, the more they returned to their animal roots. According to Haruka, this was in accordance with the enormously popular and

well-known teachings of a person named Mr. Hartman from Haruka's own homeland. I was quite glad, really, that Haruka's home was so far from mine. The way he talked about it would make anyone long to visit it but simultaneously conclude it was a place of many horrors. It was a place where a vast number of people were just like Haruka. What's worse, he and his comrades were treated like ordinary school children and not outliers. There, Haruka's way of thinking was the norm, and there was such a glut of others like him I might not survive should I meet too many of them. *Such is what makes it an exceptionally peaceful place, I would imagine.* After all, there was so much to be frightened of that one couldn't be frightened at all!

Many varieties of monsters were on the verge of extinction altogether and yet, or so Haruka claimed, his people worked to protect them. Haruka also said many countries possessed weapons of such power they frightened even him—him!—which made it much too dangerous to go to war. *What a terrifying prospect.* But if the citizens of that country were so strong and kind despite that, then I felt certain theirs must have been a happy, peaceful land. After all, everyone was so wonderfully kind...and frightening.

Incessant sword fights, blades clashing against blades, angry roars and deep growls filled the hall. Such was...the mark of friendship and diplomacy. *After a fashion.*

DAY 106

NIGHT

I got a supply of root vegetables, but the root of the problem's that they're trying to be sexy.

THE REPUBLIC OF GAMEHLEIN

GAMEHLEIN CASTLE

THOSE GRUFF, fierce old dudes turned into a bunch of fraidy-cats, and they even had the kitty ears to prove it. Class Rep schooled them with plenty of nurturing love and plenty of torturing whip lashes. You'd think that brainwashing—ahem, edumacating—the king and aristocracy of another country would be a terrible crime on par with a coup. But hey, if it meant they got a really pretty girl beating them with a whip...maybe it wasn't so bad after all, you know?

“Problem is, how come I've gone all the way to the Beast Nation castle and found nothing but old dudes with cat ears?! Has anyone ever heard anything so tragic? I think not! I've never read a single book that has any plot point so dreadful. For shame!”

“True enough, I've certainly never read a book with *that* in it...”

I could see maids with animal ears just outside the main hall, but they never so much as crossed the threshold thanks to the weird way the old dudes were acting. Whenever the maids tried to bring drinks for us and stuff, the old dudes always made a mad dash to grab the goodies and bring 'em over to me themselves. The maids never made it my way, which meant that the only animal ears and tails in my vicinity all belonged to old men. *Oh, the pain!*

The old dudes had said the duel was a free-for-all, and I didn't even do anything that extreme. I just knocked them out like I would any other animal opponent. For some reason, my classmates were giving me uber glares. I guess

if you wanted to drive off a kid flinging vinegar at you from midair, glares were your best anti-aircraft weapon.

“Look, I checked the rules and everything. They said it was anything goes, right? Are you telling me that was all a lie? That vinegar’s actually banned? Man, that sure was some sour vinegar, huh?”

“Way too sour!”

“What the heck is that village thinking making that kind of weapons-grade vinegar?”

“And what was the point of that duel, anyway?” I asked. “Look, I get it, old dudes. You’re getting up there in age, you’ve got a bunch of energy you haven’t let out in a minute, and just locking eyes with someone, your blood sugar spikes and you wanna throw down. But can you give it a rest? I mean, can you cool your tits? I don’t have a problem with folks roid raging for no good reason, but only high school boys can do that and get away with it, you know? You old dudes never passed any high school entrance exams, so you don’t get those boyhood benefits. But me? I’m a privileged high school boy, so I didn’t do anything wrong, right? Yup, I’ll be a high school boy right up until the day they call me for graduation, so until then, I’m innocent of all charges!”

“Sir, yes, sir! Apologies, sir!”

Class Rep’s punishment was pretty effective, apparently. *Too effective*. Her drill sergeant impression rattled in their ears. Yeah, I guess getting bopped by Miss Armor Rep, Dancer Girl, and Slimey (and he did it just for the heck of it, ya know?) before my horse trampled all over changed the beastfolk’s personalities for good. *Uh, this was a mission for diplomacy and friendship, right?* With this kind of goodwill, it probably would’ve been less frightening if we’d invaded them.

“So, what’s the plan with the old dudes? You’ve got ’em standing at attention, and not a one of them’s moving so much as a muscle. I think you might have broken them.”

“Not to dodge responsibility here,” said Class Rep, “but I think it was less the Sergeant Hartman impression and more the sheer force of you screaming at them for so long that you lost your voice. Then your servants started merrily terrorizing them in the name of training, and to round it all off, your horse trotted back and forth all over them. Trust me—there was nothing training-related about *that!*”

“I mean, you were pretty merry yourself when you were thundering ‘*You pigs!!*’ and lashing them with your whip. Madam Class Rep made an appearance, and my hand slipped, so now I have a bondage dress for you to wear—no, never mind, I didn’t see a thing! Mm-hmm, I was looking up at the sky the whole time, making a nice romantic wish on the stars. Yup, my eyes were locked on the sky, and I didn’t see anything...Mommy.”

Honestly though, Vice Rep B was the brutalest beastfolk basher of the bunch. She kept a big ol’ smile on her face as she beat up the beastfolk, healed them, beat them up some more, healed them again, obliterated them one more time for good measure, made them right as rain, and then rained destruction on them all over again. It was an endless cycle of butt-kicking with a healthy dose of sunshine and rainblows (that is, she rained blows on them).

Yeah, even the dungeon emperors were quaking in their boots and keeping their distance from her... I mean, the jigging was *mwah* perfection, but I was too scared to watch. I made Wisdom record it all for me, but it ended up such a gorefest, the whole thing was censored out. Yup, that bustling bust was so large I wondered if I could call those assets mommy milkers. As for the girls with the smaller bustling busts—*ah, two girls who shall remain nameless are glaring at me, so let’s just quit while I’m ahead.*

“You think any of the tribes’ll take in this tiny tanuki? The chieftain of the wolf tribe’s out of the running because the Queen Bee gnawed him to death. Yeah, it’ll be difficult to find a forever home for her. Even the beastfolk don’t want to take in such a vicious cub.”

Chomp, chomp!

The goat dude and wolf dude already gave me permission to do business here in the Beast Nation, so everything I'd bought in the jungle was now nice and legal. I was only able to get my hands on a tiny bit of tofu, but they told me they'd have more ready for me by the time I left. Still, food didn't keep forever. I'd have to get them to cough up how they made tofu and get some *nigari*—tofu brine—to bring back to the frontier. Then we could make it at home. *Yeah, I gotta make sure the tofu stays fresh, ya know?*

“Speaking of preservatives, I bought up all the soy sauce, miso, dried bonito, and dried seaweed they had put away. Plus some yuzu lemons and green onions. I guess I missed out on mikan oranges because yeah, they're out of season? Yup, I've got dried sardines and dried sea slug, and I even have kelp and some weird yam-lookin' thing called a...path to sailors pulling oars? Yeah, a tar-row route? I guess that's related to a taro root, but I dunno know what to do with it. I mean, I get the name, but I've never cooked them before, you feel me? Well, since they claim to be similar to taro, I guess I could boil them or bake them or stick them in a stew. Or mash them up?”

I remembered hearing people used taro in a traditional Hawaiian dish called lau lau, but that only entailed wrapping up pork in young taro leaves and steaming the thing. It wasn't the actual root's time to shine, you know?

Yeah, you know what? I'll let the cooking club girl handle it. It has sailors in the name, right? Girls like big, burly sailors...right? I mean, I'm sure Mr. Tar-Row Route would rather slip out of its peel for a teenage girl than a guy like me, you know?

Anyway, someone told me we were going to be having a feast, and when I was on my way to the guest room, I happened to overhear an amazing fact: they had tatami mats in this place!

“Yooo, they have tatami mats everywhere! And floor cushions, even!”

Jiggle jiggle!

If we had those puppies back at the White Loser, then we could have

renovated one of those rooms into a Japanese-style joint. *Wait*. Actually, that would only end up raising the rent. *It's a trap!* But we rented out the inn for very cheap, really just a drop in the bucket as far as my wallet was concerned, so then the question begged: how come I never had any money to pay for it? Yeah, every morning without fail, I hit up the general store, the guild, and the armory to walk away with my bag bulging with gold coins. So how come whenever I looked up, I was flat broke? I went around practicing *fat cat oblige* and having the time of my life draining my wallet. And then I was out of money? It was almost supernatural, like some majorly messed-up version of samsara.

Anyway, we were planning on leaving for the Theocracy tomorrow, so I decided to let Mr. Meridad handle all the negotiations with the beastfolk. I mean, it had nothing to do with me, right? I didn't know if he planned on sticking around or coming back with us on our way home from the church business, but for now he was on negotiation duty here at the castle.

In exchange for the tar-row routes, I built a Great Wall along the river and garrisoned the nerds and idiots there. It was a very small price to pay for the food, and the paying process allowed me to start a line of defenses. *Killing two birds with one stone*. Yup, turned out I could rip off people at an international scale. By defending the Beast Nation, we then had an ally to retreat to if everything went tits up.

"All right, now it's time for my freelance work. Gotta make some cash!"

Rice was crucial, after all, and I couldn't stint on miso, soy sauce, or *akazake* liquor either. I couldn't have cared less about the old furry dudes, but the Japanese food and the girls with beast ears had to be protected at all costs.

"I wonder how they managed to produce a food culture that's just like Japan's. Either way, though, it's valuable that this cuisine's been around for generations. I'd definitely say it's worth more than anything the Theocracy's produced. What has the Theocracy ever done for us, anyway? All they do is pray to that one old dude."

“I agree with you. Japanese food should be kept safe no matter what. All the same, you’re making poor Arianna-san flinch. It wouldn’t hurt you to be a little nicer to the Theocracy, you know!”

“Look, even if I’m not choosing one or the other, consider this. If the Beast Nation is destroyed, then we have to say bye-bye to Japanese food. On the other hand, if we lose the Theocracy, all we lose are some folks with a thing for that old dude. Wouldn’t our society be better off without them?”

“She’s full-on sobbing now! Stop bullying her!”

“Look at her! She’s writing ‘What am I, chopped liver?’ in the dirt!”

Even the Merchant Kingdom couldn’t compare to the Beast Nation. Trade may be important, but the Merchant Kingdom was all about making a quick buck with monopolies and usury. They never actually made anything themselves. *What’s the point of an organization that only exists to make money? Who likes chowing down on gold, dressing in silver, and living in bronze? Not me.* Plus, there were old dude fetishists up and down the continent, while the beastfolk were facing total extinction.

“Yeah, even though they’re so tough. Ya know?”

“Sure, they’re tough, but they’re too easy to break.”

“Mm-hmm. If they hadn’t, like, totally abandoned all hope, they could definitely have put up more of a fight.”

“Maybe they were just too traumatized by the vinegar.”

“Yeah! Someone needs to pull the plug on that village’s vinegar-making villainy!”

“I guess they dealt with human tactics for so long they forgot how to fight in the original beastfolk way.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. No wonder they hit it off with Kakizaki-kun and the other boys. Seeing them reminded the beastfolk of the no-thoughts, head-empty lifestyle.”

They'd been taught (brainwashed) the bad habit of desperately fighting for their lives whenever they started to lose in a fight. But from our training sesh, they learned real quick that getting knocked down meant getting hurt, and not getting right back up hurt even more. If they stopped moving, they got pummeled until they started moving again, a lesson in the spirit of Mistress Marie Antoinette: If you would not eat lead, then don't be a flake. Yup, we'd ingrained it into them at the level of a Pavlovian response that giving up equaled getting hurt. Now they no longer fought back like plucky underdogs. *Yeah, they were broken? And how come everyone takes up knife-licking after I train them? Do knives taste good or something?*

Given their fighting styles, the beastfolk prioritized agility over armor. They chose to evade rather than defend. That meant light armor was the way to go, aka the beastfolk would be perfect for all this armor I couldn't offload on the army. The soldiers all needed weapons of the same type and preferred heavy armor, but I could let the beastfolk make the most of their individual strengths while disposing of the last odds and ends of my stock. *Perfect.*

"What do you think of paying the beastfolk in advance?" asked the duke.

"I think it's a good idea. That means they'll need to pay us back, and that'll work out in our favor in the long run. Since it'll give us a stable supply of their special foods, ya know? They'll be able to defend themselves better once we give them equipment. This helps them maintain the peace and lets them rebuild independently, and *that* means they can make more Japanese food, right?"

Currently, their local cuisine was their only export, so I figured they could put all of their manufacturing power into it. I'd buy everything they made and give them a stable source of income. The general store lady could handle the rest and secure us a nice supply of these goods at reasonable prices.

"Haruka, do you want to stay longer? We can make the arrangements to leave later if you so desire. Princess Arianna does not mind either."

“Nah, I’ll leave the nerds here and stay up late building defenses for my side job. Yeah, ’cause we’re prepaying, you know? Yup, we should be ready to go by tomorrow morning. Sister Girl and her pals are putting up a strong front, but I feel kinda bad for stalling when they’re around, you know? Although it could be worth it to teach the idiots a new trick—you think they know ‘stay’ yet? Whatever, it’s not like they’ll remember even if I teach ’em. I mean, they’re idiots.”

“Bro, why the heck did that segue into a roast?”

Yeah, we were ready to roll out. The girls in my class were ready to take on the church. Even Elf Girl, Royal Girl, and Merimeri had trained for this. Plus, Sister Girl and the other girls showed jaw-dropping improvement.

The nuns had shown up at the frontier just days ago with zero fighting ability. Now here they were, beating the super tough beastfolk to a pulp all while dressed in super sexy nun habits. Once properly equipped, the beastfolk old dudes put up a better fight. Even if the nuns didn’t win decisively, they still maintained the upper hand throughout the fight. The priests were putting in a lot of hard work, too, I guess. Kinda. I was too busy cheering on the slits in the habits to pay attention to anything the priests did. But the priests had joined the knife-licking lot, so I guessed they and the beastfolk were making friends. *Heartwarming! A tale of diplomacy and friendship.*

This episode gave us great experience fighting other people instead of monsters. Plus, none of the old dudes complained about getting the stuffing knocked out of them by beautiful girls. Yeah, at the end there, they were so happy they were wagging their tails.

Looked like we had a bunch of perverts on our hands. It was definitely time to get the hell outta Dodge.

DAY 106

NIGHT

*In modern society, the pen is mightier than the sword.
Whodathunk that'd hold true in fantasy worlds, too?*

THE REPUBLIC OF GAMEHLEIN

GAMEHLEIN CASTLE

THE KING OF GAMEHLEIN threw a welcome banquet in our honor. We all chatted and supped together. His Majesty and the beastfolk chieftains trotted about briskly to serve us all on bended knees, but...I fear their efforts backfired. Haruka sat upon the king's royal throne as the beastfolk swarmed him, trying to ply him with treats—but he only looked cross. Why, you might ask? Well, because the king and his men were working so very hard to wait on him that none of the serving girls could come around. Whenever they tried, a beastfolk chieftain would rush over, snag the dish from their hands, and sprint back to Haruka. His mood grew fouler and fouler. The rest of Haruka's companions couldn't be happier. The contrast was remarkable.

"Oh. My. God. It's miso soup!"

"Plus tofu! And *wakame* seaweed!"

"Get out of here. Is this actually glazed fish?!"

"S-s-s-sushi!!!"

"Well, it's only *oshizushi*—sushi rice and fish cakes—made with freshwater fish...but it's better than nothing!"

"Hey, share the *oden*!"

"My, my. Spinach and daikon radish too? Although I must say, the manner in which they are prepared is rather atypical for Japanese cuisine."

"Guys, calm down! You see what's coming next? It looks just like sukiyaki!"

“Sukiyaki? The one and only?!”

The beastfolk were dumbfounded. Beastfolk food and culture were unlike any across the continent, and yet these teenagers recognized every dish. Their appreciation of its flavor spoke to these young men and women’s sophistication and appreciation for beastfolk culture. They were far more erudite than the most acclaimed officials and scholars from Diorelle.

I didn’t think we’d need to worry about negotiation anymore. The beastfolk were deeply moved by the way Haruka-kun’s classmates relished the food...but most importantly, they agreed with everything the teens said with a “Sir, yes, sir!”

“Many humans avoid our cuisine,” one of the beastfolk explained, “due to its unique flavor.”

“Yeah! A super yummy taste!”

“Yup, it’s awesome.”

Yes, negotiating between Diorelle and Gamehlein was easy. The hard part was getting Haruka-kun to cooperate.

“Hmm? Wait, I recognize this flavor.”

“This is yuzu-flavored hot sauce, isn’t it?”

“My, my! So you’ve heard of it?”

“We’re very pleased to see how you enjoy our local cuisine.”

“Yes, especially considering how sophisticated many of our dishes are.”

“They’re all super-duper amazing!” the students insisted.

This castle’s location provoked Haruka-kun’s ire. Sequestered far from the borders as it was, the fortress could do little to protect its people. Thus, the thought of all those whose lives could have been saved had they sheltered behind the castle walls kindled his wrath. None foresaw the attack on the Beast Nation save Haruka-kun, and none could laud him enough for the ingenious

stratagem he developed to nip the attack in the bud. As they sang his praises, none knew that he blamed himself for having been too late.

Hence my disapproval of his plans. He and his classmates had no business in something as foolish and unsightly as a war between our nations. They did not deserve to be dragged down in our base hatred and greed, for none the world over were so pure and gentle as these fine young people.

They always extended a helping hand and said, “But of course—anyone would do it.” Unlike those of us who lived on the frontier, they didn’t help their neighbor with the knowledge that their survival hinged on one day asking for help in return. Unlike the merchants, theirs was not a calculated kindness. Unlike the Church, their benevolence was not for show. They acted the way they did *because it never occurred to them to do otherwise*.



Imagine if they were right. What would a world be like if anyone really would do the same? Just think of how many people might be saved from perilous fates. Think of how much happiness there might be! Were everyone to act with the generosity of Haruka-kun and his friends, the world would be a very paradise.

Miracles abounded on the frontier. Thus, their charity was becoming second nature for our people, allowing the frontier to develop and achieve greater and greater happiness. These young folk lent us their help because they took the notion for granted, and every person they saved strove to adopt their mindset in an ever-expanding miracle. This was what made the streets of our towns ring with the laughter of children. It brought a smile to my lips and made me determined to spread that laughter further in the world.

The students' aberrant strength was horrifying. Were any other cursed with such power, I would have been terrified. But no one feared Haruka-kun and his friends because of their sheer strength and character.

Were one to fear a nigh-on invincible monster, then whoever slayed the beast would be worthy of far more fear. *It is only natural, no? Defeating the monster would require a more terrible power. To conquer a dungeon that threatens to destroy the world, one must have the power to cause an apocalypse themselves.*

Yet these heroes used their power to save the world. They wielded their kindness to transform it into something new. Why should these young people have to suffer because of our puny conflicts and other trivialities? They were all much too kind for this brutal world—they deserved nothing more than to sit out our troubles, yet they took them on for us. Why should this boy—this boy who wept when a village full of strangers was wiped off the map—why should this boy be forced to participate in the cruelest, most barbarous acts of slaughter? Hence, I disapproved of his plan.

“Haruka-kun... Oh, I know what you want to say. No, no, don't say it. You already have my allegiance, so there is no need for words. But if I might speak up... The beastfolk are a minority in this day and age. They struggle dearly to

ensure the survival of their fighting tribes. To the best of my knowledge, there were once easily over a thousand beastfolk tribes, but many and more have been snuffed out. Of the fighting tribes, those here are the only ones who remain. Thus, they have barricaded themselves far from their borders, eking out survival and dreaming of one day in the future when they might reclaim their former strength. We frontier folk were once just like them, you know. But while we were able to march on our invaders and protect our home, the beastfolk have been stuck. They cannot mobilize and fight back. We were all once dependent on this mythical ‘one day’ that would never come. But then you arrived, and you were our ‘one day.’ Yet ‘one day’ has never dawned for the Beast Nation, and that, Haruka-kun, is the sole difference that divides us from the—excuse me, are you listening to me? Hello?”

The boys joked around with one another as they scribbled all over the papers they had spread out in front of them. They mirthfully filled in details and plotted the future. This was how the ultimate blueprint for our tomorrow was written: with jokes. With laughter. It was the same merriment with which they crafted the frontier’s miracles.

“I mean, like, it’d be easiest to connect ‘em here and here, right? See, there’s a village and a bunch of fields right here, so why don’t we plot a detour? Like over here? Or...over there? Bruh.”

“Nah, nah, what if we make the wall longer and higher at the same time? Then it’d connect over here, right?”

“Huh. So if we make a ditch right here goin’ from the river, we can turn that into a moat. Oh, shoot. Never mind. ‘Cause if you come around from *this* angle, you can get right past it.”

The map before them grew steadily more elaborate as each boy added a detail here, a line there. With every edit, it transformed from a construction design to a magnificently advanced and playful scribble. Such scribbles had breathed new life into the frontier and sparked the developments that even now were still picking up steam. To these boys—these technocrats—making

precise measurements and calculations, this was more than a map. It was a game.

“If they come this way, they’ll run into a swamp, which blocks off that path, right? Oh wait, I think they could come over the top of the wall here.”

“There’s a cliff right there. That’d stop most attacks. But they could circle around the back and attack that way.”

“Yeah, true. How ’bout we stick a trap right here?”

“Sure. Then we can hollow out the mountain and turn it into a fortress.”

“No, hold on. I hear that’s a sacred site for the beastfolk. It’s like a grave marker for them or something.”

Every line they drew recharted the map. Where once was nothing but rivers, they threw up walls, plotted fortresses, and sketched canals and roadways. As carefully calculated and researched facts whizzed out of their mouths, the future took shape. It was a miracle. It was a dream coming true right there on the map.

“We don’t have to extend it that far, right? Because now we can make this farmland, right? You get me?”

“Yeah, that would work. Oh wait, but if it turns like that, we have to worry about it flooding. Here, how’s this?”

“Nah, if you put it like that, that wall’s gonna come down and flatten it. Here, straighten it out. Oh wait, is there a village here too? Uh, was a village, rather?”

“Yeah, that’s where the otter tribe lives. Hey, if we turned their village into a lake, they might actually like it!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m feeling it. Like this, right?”

“Oh snap! That’s perfect, dude!”

With every thought explored to its fullest, the boys developed a multifaceted rationale for their work. It was a brilliant design, one so complex it would amaze

experts in every field. The boys knew this land like the back of their hands, which enabled them to dream up a holistic vision based on a long-term approach. Their brushes raced as all five of them played around, sketching carefree lines, as if the boys were simply doodling.

“But if we put a wall around this part too, that’ll expand our Great Wall. Here, you guys know that fort that’s in this corner? What about using that?”

“I thought that fort was basically falling in on itself.”

“True. Okay, then let’s put up a line of strongholds starting here and ending here. There’ll be fighting right around this area no matter what, right? Ya know?”

“Yeah, that’ll let us protect even the smaller villages, but that’s a pretty long distance, dude... And we’d have to connect it to the canal system and all.”

“Yeah, exactly. We start off with a moat down here in this low part, and as the elevation rises, we turn it into a wall. That kills two birds with one stone, you feel me? Saves on magic, too. And stuff?”

“Yooo, you’re on fire, dude.”

The map the boys drew up was a plan for the Beast Nation’s defense. It explained how to keep every village safe. Once all the pieces were assembled, it would become the Great Wall of Gamehlein. Written on that paper were promises for safety today and prosperity tomorrow.

This was the boys’ strategy document, a pluralistic concept of the future that smashed anything threatening to obstruct growth. It even enabled provisions for every kind of unlikely disaster.

“You don’t mean I’m on literal fire, right? ‘Cause that’s a job for the idiots,” said Haruka-kun.

“No...? Why would we mean that literally?”

Last but not least, the boys calculated the cost of this plan: all the money available in the Beast Nation’s coffers, miso, soy sauce, and a contract to obtain

every grain of rice Gamehlein grew at a discount. On another document, they listed the cost to reconstruct every miniscule hamlet as bigger and better towns with their own specialties: dried sardines, tar-row routes, and much, much more. They drew up repayment plans for it all.

“Yup, the pen sure is mightier than the sword. That’s because this pen has the Piercing skill. I call it the Pen-etrator!”

“That’s way too OP.”

“Mightier than the sword? Uh, isn’t that a matter of the laws of physics?”

“Whoa, hold it! Oh shoot, that thing can go through my shield!”

“Ahhh! Dude, that is not okay!”

Happiness was on its way to the Beast Nation. I was sure of it. This document was the Beast Nation’s own version of the blueprints that these children had provided to the frontier. These magic pens brought dreams to life and laid down the groundwork for happiness.

“Get ’em, pen funnels! It makes no difference to my magic pens who you are. You’ll all feel my stabby-stab anyway! Yup, these bad boys have automatic tracking, and they send out a hundred pens at once, ya know? Pretty good, don’t you think?”

“Agggh! Come on, Haruka! That’s way too many. Ow?!”

“And to add insult to injury, these pens’re doodling all over my face!”

As it turned out, the magic pens also proved to have Piercing and Automatic Tailing skills. Even if they could draw the dreams of a utopian future, it still hurt to be run through with one. *Ooh, that looks painful.*

DAY 107

MORNING

“Don’t you know who I am?” Yeah...no? No one does. Okay, that might be a problem.

THE REPUBLIC OF GAMEHLEIN

GAMEHLEIN CASTLE

YUCK—*there’s a line of gross, fluffy old dudes.* There was also a line of fluffy maids standing behind them, but all the huge, burly old dudes jostling about in the front row blocked them from my sight. Every time I made a particular effort to get an eyeful of maid, I got a glareful of murderous rage from my classmates! How did they know where Jupiter Eye was looking? I mean, it could twist around mid-air and sneak a peep from different angles, ya know? Uh-oh, I heard someone unsheathing a sword right behind me. *Yikes!*

“Face Class Rep, soldiers! Aaaaaand, salute!”

“Sir! Farewell, sir, and safe travels!”

Class Rep had drilled perfect discipline into the old dudes. Who wanted to be seen off by a bunch of old dudes with nothing between their (fluffy beast) ears, you know? Ah, whatever—someone had told me beastfolk women tended to be scared of humans. It made sense, right? So I could live with it, I guess. Still, I came all the way to the Beast Nation, and all I got were these stinking old dudes! *I’ve had it up to here with this fantasy world!* The icing on the cake was that the nerds got a warm welcome from girls they’d rescued from a village or something or other. Why was I the only teenage boy left out? *This smacks of discrimination!*

Yup, the biggest problem this place had was their levels-based discrimination. Even though the beastfolk were targets of bigotry, that didn’t stop them from being bigots themselves. These level supremacists treated people differently

depending on their stats. Low levels equaled low chances of getting a girlfriend! Between my low level and my low sex appeal, there were no fluffy-fluffy times in the cards for me. My level had been nothing but a constant pain since day one, but I had never expected such a vicious trap awaited me.

“I can’t rub those fluffy bear ears unless I level up. I wanna fluffity fluff it up, but I don’t think I’ll ever get to level 100 even if I defeat every monster and old dude in the world!”

Wobble wobble.

After all, NPCs like me didn’t get sex appeal or dating events. I didn’t seem to get any flags either. *What a cruel, cruel world.*

“Thank you for all your work on your side jobs, Haruka-kun. Be safe out there, now.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll make sure that you’ll have somewhere safe to retreat to, what with these new fortifications and all.”

“Yeah, the villagers said they’d help out too. So I think we’ll be able to pick up where you left off and finish the job.”

“Oh, and can we make a catapult? I really want a catapult!”

“No way! You guys never actually build what you set out to make, you know? You always end up in a massively messed-up version of samsara and you make something that’s way, way different from what you wrote in the blueprints. Look, don’t do it, okay? You’ll start off making a catapult and wind up with some flying fortress or mecha golem fort thingy! I worked all night long building the Great Wall of forts, and if it up and flies away, then there goes all our defense. So no! Don’t make a catapult! Don’t make anything! Just be your nerdy selves and nerd out!”

Yup, with a pamphlet of the plan—a planphlet, if you will—in tow, I called on villages all across the kingdom to talk business. I made them sign long-term contracts to pay me back with goods from their local cuisine. Then boom, I had

all my negotiations done, and boom, I had the Great Wall done. I then added in rivers and deep, wide irrigation canals for a series of moats. Finally, I built a bevy of bastions.

All that hard work used up my MP. When I got back to the castle, the two cheongsam-suited dungeon emperors made a mess of me. They left me so utterly defeated I didn't even have the strength to take my revenge come morning. Oh, the humiliation I suffered! Oh, those lovely cheongsams! I mean, it'd been ages since the long cheongsams had shown up. So it actually made for a delightful change of pace, you know?

All I had left to do was arm the beast-ear old dudes with good equipment, and then everything'd be nice and garrisoned. I made them myself at my side hustle—a guy's gotta make a living somehow. While I did that, the nerds went off looking into some local issue and the idiots trained the old dudes. I couldn't do either of those things. All I could do was work nights. I was just an NPC who went "Hello, traveler! I have just the thing!"

"If anything happens, you let us know at once. I don't care how—use a beacon or something, whatever works. Just keep us in the loop, got it?"

"Hey, why don'tcha make Theocracy's armies tail you and bring 'em back here? We can lie in wait."

"Bruh. We followed Haruka all the way here, and now we're just gonna sit on standby? Really?"

"Hey," I said. "You guys need to look out for yourselves before you worry about me. Go practice your dancing. Your girlfriends are level grinding back at the frontier, and that means their dance moves are getting more destructive by the minute. Emphasis on the present progressive, ya know? If you don't have serious dance skills of your own, they're gonna combo you with knee strikes and foot stomps. And then RIP you."

"Oh, crap! If they power up, we'll never be able to dodge 'em."

"If you want to learn to boogie with the baes, then you need to practice. Got

it? Although if you meatheads dance with each other...that starts drifting into BL territory.”

“Yo, Haruka, hold up. Teach us that move where you drop to your knees to dodge stuff.”

“Nah, wait, teach us that shimmying thing that stops the knee strikes.”

“Wait, wait! Teach us the technique that’s like, you drop to the ground to get out of the way and turn around to slide off in the other direction. That one, teach us that!”

Uh-huh. If these guys didn’t learn to dance, then their girlfriends would soon be more than a match for me!

“Once you dance for long enough, it becomes second nature, you know? Or... I mean, even if you don’t dance for long enough, if you’re like me, with the girls threatening to destroy you if you slip up. Then one night of dancing will scar you for life. Yeah, try going toe-to-toe with Dancer Girl sometime. You’ll either become a natural dancer or a corpse.”

The idiots turned white and shook their heads. They immediately realized just how fearsome their girlfriends’ dance moves could be. They must have smelled danger on the wind. Teenage boys were normally all over dancing with super pretty girls, but these guys knew that dancing with their macho girlfriends would put their lives on the line. They must have glimpsed Dancer Girl’s ferocious footwork. *Yeah, so I recommend you take up tai chi. You can’t possibly perceive their next move unless you can pick up even the tiniest vibrations from their movements.*

And then my horse took off running, ending our short stay in the Beast Nation. The castle receded behind us, growing smaller and smaller until it vanished in the distance. Before long, the only sound was the wind whistling past, and the view from the windows became a wall of forest green. The horse glided along so smoothly the carriage didn’t rock at all. We simply skated over the rough ground. The roar of the wind was so loud it kind of annoyed me, so I

used Holding magic to grab the carriage train. And yup, that sure quieted things down.

“H-h-hey, Haruka-kun! What the heck are you doing? We’re going way too fast. Something’s not right about this.”

“Yup, horsie’s doing a good job, isn’t he? Who’s a good wittle horsie? Who’s a good boy?”

Whisper whisper... “Sleipnir is a mythological creature whose name means ‘the slipper’ or ‘the glider,’ I suppose...”

“Are you sure? It still looks like a horse to me.”

“Are you kidding me? You only need one look at that thing to tell it’s some kind of legendary creature. It stopped being an ordinary horse long ago!”

“Yeah, but so what? It’s not like saying that to Haruka-kun will do any good. He’s convinced that’s a horse.”

“Sleipnir is said to run faster than any horse that’s ever lived. It can also fly between the worlds and used that ability to carry the god Odin wherever he pleased. Not to mention, it’s the child of Loki, the god of scheming and creativity. So I suppose anything’s possible.”

“It’s too late... Haruka’s already calling it his horsie.”

“Ah ha. And that’s what turned his old horse into Sleipnir.”

“Uh-huh. We’ve found the culprit!”

The girls, I heard, had nothing but praise for my horse. *What can I say? Cuteness is king.*

“Lord Haruka, what comes next? The Theocracy allows messages from envoys to enter, but I must ask: How we do we hope to gain entry?”

“That’s where Royal Girl comes in. At the right moment, she’ll be all like, ‘Do you even know who I am?’ (I don’t, honestly). ‘What, did you not receive my letter?’ While they’re all poring over that letter, we’ll sneak in. Yup, the plan

calls for covert infiltration.”

“I get the trope you’re going for, but you’re doing it wrong from start to finish!” my classmates yelled at me.

Yeah, I couldn’t wait to get my sneak on. Ooh, what if I snuck in on someone bathing? Now that I’d equipped myself with a revolving windmill of cover fire, I was good to go. My hydra and chickenatrice would end things in no time. This was their long-awaited time to shine. Yup, and if I just so happened to accidentally sneak in on someone, who would it be? If she had them curves, then... *Wait, crap!*

“Hold on, I didn’t even say anything! With my luck, I’d probably wind up looking at a bunch of flabby old priests, not a girl with a little meat where it coun—aghh! Tiny Tanuki is too well camouflaged in the Beast Nation! Stop biting me, it hurts! Can I return you to your tanuki tribe and get a refund?”

Gnaw, gnaw, gnaw!

“Gwaaaaaaaargh!”

This trip had been a rollercoaster from start to finish. I didn’t have the time to see any sights, befriend any locals, or get any fluff-fluffing in—but hey, that’s what happened when you’re in a rush. Maybe we could take it slow on the way back and do a little tourism.

Man, I felt bad for leaving the Beast Nation all alone and undefended... *I guess that’s why they always summon high schoolers in fantasy stories, ya know?* Kids believed they could live forever. They always dreamed of the future completely earnestly. But as they got older, they discovered their own limits and recognized that they, too, would actually die someday. That’s when they stopped thinking about the future and gave up on their dreams. So gods in fantasy stories always went for high schoolers. *Because that catches them right on the cusp of that moment, ya know? Just before they go over the edge into adulthood.*

When people stopped dreaming, they never thought about what the world

would be like if they gave up. Whatever happened to them after they were gone didn't affect them at all. *So why bother?* That's why everyone here in this world ignored the certain death promised by the frontier. That's why they squabbled over momentary happiness. Man, this world was rotten to the core. This was no place for a bunch of high schoolers and their dreams to go on a field trip.

"This road's going to lead us straight to a Theocracy waystation on the border. We'll have to find another way around."

"We'll never be able to get the carriage over the border. If we're going to be sneaky, then we'd better try to cross in the forest."

"Nah, we can totally gallop on through. Sneakily," I said. "Yeah, horsie would be lonely if we left him behind. Don't you feel sorry for him? And he's so cute, ya know? Especially with Slimey sitting on his head. If cuteness was king, then double the cuteness was emperor."

"Wait, does this carriage come with a stealth mode?! I would say that even magic couldn't pull that off, but are you telling me you've made it work?"

"Oh yeah, it's got major stealth stuff. I've got Perception Disruption and Camouflage and Presence Concealment and Stealth skills. In the end, you can still pick up on it if you use a spell or a skill. Like if you're one of the beastfolk with their good noses, or if you can sense emotions like Elf Girl, you can pick up on it. So it's not a total stealth mode, I guess. That'd be impossible, ya know?"

"They run a customs check on anyone entering through the fort, so I would expect they have some sort of setup to detect magic, you know."

Magic and skills were incredibly powerful...when they worked. When they didn't, they were basically pointless. Here in a world where you could cancel out the laws of physics and magic, even nullification could be nullified. This world made no sense, and nothing was completely surefire.

"Wait, are we going so fast you think we can leap the fort? In a carriage?! Hey, you need to tell us first! We need to be ready for landing...or a crash!"

Yup. I mean, stealth was all about not being seen. Who said you had to use magic?

“Come on, that makes no sense. Carriages don’t *fly*. ’Cause yeah, if it flew, it’d be an airplane? Please, Class Rep, you’re an educated high schooler! Public Morals Committee Rep would tell you off for your stance on the flying carriage controversy if she knew! Except I don’t know who Public Morals Committee Rep is, and back at the inn the morality police are wearing miniskirts and joining in on the debauchery instead of cracking down on mini cheongsams. Even if we had a Public Morals Committee Rep, I think she’s falling down on the job. And speaking of jobs, the job of a carriage is to get pulled by a horse, right? And since a horse is pulling this carriage, that makes it a carriage, not an airplane. That’s just common sense, you know?”

People said boys and girls saw the world in vastly different ways. Both objectively and subjectively speaking, boys and girls would logic stuff out in directly opposite ways. That’s apparently why girls had a harder time distinguishing mechanical equipment and stuff. I never imagined it’d be so bad girls couldn’t tell carriages apart from an airplane... Yeah, just taking in all the objective facts, a horse-drawn carriage was a carriage drawn by a horse so, logically speaking, where there’s a horse, there’s a carriage. Right?

Anyway, I could see far off in the distance. We were drawing closer to a fort. Well, a fort in name only. It was a dome-shaped checkpoint carved into the side of a mountain. Soon, we would be in the Theocracy...or how would people say that these days? the Theocracy? Okay, well, either way. The Theocracy was coming up.

“What the heck are you thinking?!”

“Whoa, what?”

A bunch of girls climbed up in the driver’s seat next to me. They were all dressed in super tight habits—and believe me, *they* were super tight, with those deep slits running up those luscious legs. Those thighs were peeping out and

saying “nice to meet you” because there was plenty of meat under those fishnets—the bit peeping out above their garters. And they were absolutely taking over my seat. Yeah, and there wasn’t a lot of room up here to begin with!

“Don’t ‘Whoa, what?’ me! What did you just do? What’s that giant dust cloud waaay behind us? And did the fortress just collapse?!”

“Maybe I’m imagining things, but I could have sworn we head-on charged the fortress and smashed through! Not even the gate part! The literal side of the building!”

“I have so many questions, but first of all, whatever happened to sneaking?!”

Ah yes, stealth: the secret art of surreptitious slinking, tricky tiptoeing, hush-hush hiding, and clandestine creeping.

“I mean, my horse was working so hard, what was I gonna do? Slow down? No, we sped up, and, well, we blew through them so fast they didn’t see us. That counts as sneaking, right? We sure didn’t leave any eyewitnesses.”

Yup, stealth actions fell into two camps: the time-consuming slinking around kind of stealth that involved not being seen and the more expeditious kind of stealth where you zoomed through before you were discovered. Right? Yeah, it went hand in hand with the five-second rule.

“Just in case anyone noticed, I blew the fortress up with the shockwave.”

“I think we blazed through so fast they didn’t have time to see anything.”

“Yeah. I doubt they had the time to send word of our arrival, either...”

“Okay, but on what planet does this count as sneaking? This is *not* sneaking!”

Nah, we’d already snuck in. I mean, we were right in the thick of the Theocracy right now—and speaking of thick, those were some thick thighs. We were packed in like sardines here. What other choice did I have but to ogle those exposed legs?

“I mean, there’s an awful lot of us for spy work. But one of us is a horse that can speed right on through things before anyone’s had time to spot us, you

know? And since all the guards were focused on the gate, we went through the side of the building. I mean, no one would be looking for us there, ya know? We also ran over and pulverized any potential eyewitnesses, which, all in all, makes this a perfectly straightforward stealth mission, right? Yup, because now no one will know we got in.”

The girls just stared at me.

“Huh? What, are you guys hungry? You want some ice cream?”

“I’m not missing food, I’m missing basic common sense! And yes, please.”

Well, I guessed that meant it was ice cream time.

Anyway, yeah, here we were in the Theocracy. No one had noticed us yet, and no one knew we were here. The church didn’t know nada. *See? That’s stealth, now isn’t it?*

DAY 107

MIDDAY

You don't need perfect camouflage. You just need the confidence to march in brazenly.

THE ROAD

IN THE BEAST NATION

WELL, THE HORSE was indeed smaller now, and it did only have four legs. I couldn't deny that it was much less eye-catching than the enormous eight-legged creature of legend it once was...but now it looked like something the four horsemen would ride in on. Still pretty noticeable. *See!* Everyone we passed by did a double take, scrambled out of our way, and then refused to meet our eyes. Still, I supposed this did technically qualify as a disguise.

The church did not allow foreign carriages to enter the Theocracy. In fact, just about every vehicle apart from those with permits or public transit carriages were denied entry. This, apparently, was Haruka's rationale for saying, "So we'll write 'Property of the Church' on the side, and boom. It's perfect, ya know?" Since we now bore that label, we were "stealthy." My classmates and I had stopped Haruka-kun from infiltrating the country on his own because—well, it was dangerous, for one—but mostly because we sincerely doubted Haruka-kun could pull off sneaky spy work. I guessed we had been worried about nothing all along. Why were we ever concerned? What'd we stay up night after night talking about for? By all appearances, we were a church carriage!

Neigh!

We made it past the fort at the border. In fact, we reduced it to rubble. The secret of our infiltration was still safe because we'd left no one alive to raise the alarm. The various soldiers patrolling the Theocracy didn't present us with any issues, either. We just ran them over the minute they came forward yelling

“Halt!” Or “Ha—” actually, since they didn’t live long enough to finish the word. Yes, we seemed to be perfectly safe. Even if they spoke as quickly as possible to get the words out, the five-second rule still applied. Basically, I had full confidence that Haruka-kun could run them over within five seconds. We were a lean, mean, hit-and-run machine on a so-called stealth mission.

“You guys remember the alarm system on the fort?” Haruka-kun said. “It was pretty robust, ya know? It had both Physical Resistance and Magic Reflection. But.”

“‘But’?”

“But the fort itself was just a big heap of stone. I smashed it with a super stealthy magic-rocket-propelled battering ram, barreled through it, and blasted it all to pieces with the cutie combo of Slimey and my widdle horsie, right? Super sneaky.”

Sensibly, the Theocracy had outfitted their borders with a system of sturdy gates. However, a particularly insensible person went, “If the gates will not spread, let the walls break.” M-san was having a bad influence on him—and charged the fort instead. The Theocracy was only concerned about anyone breaching the gates. Well, the gates were still standing...just as the sole thing left in a pile of rubble.

“So, what’s our next move?” I asked Haruka-kun.

“Huh? I dunno. We’ll just go for it, ya know? Stealthily.”

Haruka-kun explained that the magic-rocket-propelled battering ram was made for one-sided, long-range assaults. It was a simple setup, actually. The battering ram was just a big tube packed with a bunch of explosive spellstones that went off in a chain reaction to propel the ram forward. Truth be told, it was one of Haruka-kun’s failed experiments. Sure, it packed plenty of forward thrust, but it couldn’t be set off at an angle or go very far. As a battering ram, though, it definitely got the job done. *I guess it all just depends on how you look at it, you know?*

“Are we seriously making this up as we go along? That’s so reckless!”

First things first, we headed for the city in Arianna-san’s archdiocese. We’d gather intel there and make it the base of operations. This also served as a good excuse for getting Arianna-san home safe and sound. If we approached the Theocracy capital instead, fighting would no doubt break out. Now I worried about whether my classmates and I should stay with Arianna-san to guard her or go with Haruka-kun to the capital. For now, we’d play it by ear depending on how the Theocracy reacted, but this was one slipshod rip-off of a plan...in the sense that we ripped the equipment and wallets off of every soldier we ran over.

“If the enemy’s perfect, there’s no point in having a strategy. But if they mess up, then you take advantage of that, mess with their heads even more, and sit back as they continue to screw up. Eventually, they’ll take themselves out of the equation for you. If they’ve got a perfect defense, your only hope’s to take them down from the inside. We could bait ’em to come after us, but you know what’s even faster? Being sneaky and sowing chaos with quick, accurate strikes until they go down. We don’t stand a chance of winning unless they self-destruct first. Once they do break, we can rush ’em and stab ’em and hack ’em to death. If that doesn’t work out, we can just retreat. We just have to hold the line, right? Anyway, yeah—that’s the reason we’re here.”

Oh, that makes sense. If we had fought on the frontier, we wouldn’t have had anywhere to retreat to. After all, if we fled, we’d expose all the towns and villages to danger. Here in the middle of enemy territory, we could always fall back. We just needed to be careful to keep a clear path of retreat. That’s why Kakizaki-kun and Oda-kun’s groups had stayed back. We would wreak havoc here and then disappear back into the Beast Nation, hence why Haruka-kun had built them such an extensive range of bulwarks... He did mention he picked up a part-time construction job for pocket cash, didn’t he? Well, yes, this *did* count as construction work, but...the nuance was not quite the same. Most construction work didn’t involve building huge walls and fortresses in return for

an entire country's harvest. Most customers wouldn't be willing to dig a series of moats and canals around an entire kingdom as payment for miso and soy sauce. Incidentally, it turned out we couldn't get dried bonito flakes, *wakame* seaweed, *kombu* kelp, or other food and medicinal items. *But oh well*. My point was, the Beast Nation was now defended. They would be fine. In fact, the beastfolk were so grateful that we'd gifted them such an impregnable system of defenses that they'd named one of the fortresses Tar-row Route Castle.

Mmm, taro root!

Anyway, that gave us a secure escape route. However, once we rescued anyone, we would then be tied down to protect them. That would rob us of our greatest advantage. Then the real challenge would begin. We absolutely needed to have the upper hand by that point.

Ah ha. That's why Haruka-kun had made sure to destroy the fort. (Well, except for the gate.) He didn't want it potentially cutting off our retreat. Haruka-kun wanted to avoid killing anyone if he could help it, I was sure. Presumably, he didn't want to have us be forced to kill people, either. He flattened the fort to its foundations and immediately put a huge distance between us and it. Why? So the responsibility and the crime of killing the many, many people garrisoned there would all fall squarely on his shoulders.

"Haruka-kun, from now on and no matter what happens, I want you to let us be responsible for ourselves," I told him. "We're happy that you're looking out for us, but it really makes us sad. Speaking as a girl, I'm delighted that you take care of me like this—that you come to my rescue, that you treat me so well, that you worry about me so much. Speaking as a woman, my heart aches for you. I feel so upset for you that I can't stand it. Haruka-kun, women can be much, much more vicious and self-centered than you think. We're willing to murder if one of our loved ones is hurting. That's how self-centered we are—if our most special someone needs us, we can become the most vicious people in the world. That's why we came to the Theocracy. So you'd never have to cry alone again. And...um..."

Whisper whisper... "Yass, you tell him!"

"You're rocking it, girl!"

"All right! Now push him over and go in for the kill!"

"Ooh! Is it kissing time?"

"Ahh! Oh my god!"

"C'mon, hurry up and take his clothes off. Go get your man!"

"Hoo hoo hoo, showing the Sex God who's boss, are we?"

"Getting a leg up on the Sex God, literally!"

"Go, go, put those arms around him! Push! That! Man! Into! Bed!"

"They call it a carriage bed for a reason, so...give that boy a ride!"

"Ooh, great idea!"

There was an awful lot of whispering going on back there...! *If you're going to try to be sneaky, then make an actual effort to hide!* And which one of them had just demanded I take one for the team?! *Plus, please stop making up new, suspicious-sounding phrases like "meat sacrifice" and "meat decoy." What even are those?! I refuse to be the Meat Rep too!*

Anyway, I took over driving while Haruka-kun went inside the carriage to change into his disguise. When he came back, the sight of him made every one of us stop breathing. I had never seen such a sinister-looking priest in my life!

Haruka-kun wore a tight garment with a stiff, stand-up collar: a cassock, as it's called. Compared to the usual baggy robes priests wore, it almost looked stylish. It worked just fine in terms of a disguise...but seeing it on Haruka-kun wiggled me out big time!

"How on earth can a cassock manage to look so evil?" I asked.

"Right? Isn't it supposed to be a holy uniform?"

"Well, considering that the guy who's wearing it is the one who lectured god

to the point of tears and now wants to go back for more...”

Especially now that he’d reunited with his demon scythes, which were gamboling around him in delight. It should have been heartwarming, but it was a portrait of Death and his little hellish minions.

“I mean, it looks good on him...but something’s giving me major heebie-jeebies. Right? It’s not just me?”

“I think it’s an instinctive reaction. The people who wear those clothes are supposed to swear a vow of poverty and Haruka-kun’s, like, the king of ripping people off.”

“I doubt anyone’s ever worn a cassock with such evil intentions, you know?”

“If you tried to pray to god looking like that, he’d probably run for his life. Even demons would book it!”

Haruka-kun had taken prep work for this spy mission unusually seriously. Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san told us he’d made this with every intent of going in alone. The cassock was to help him blend in. It had Presence Concealment for extra protection, but he looked so terrifying that it made him stick out even worse. Now all he needed was his black cloak on top of it, and then he’d be the spitting image of a priest in the pope’s faction. There was no hiding that evil aura that surrounded him. Despite his attempts to look like a clean, god-fearing priest, his sheer wickedness gave him away. It wasn’t a question of whether he could pass as a priest. It was more like—how did he even manage to convey, without opening his mouth, that he didn’t revere god one bit?

“I’m guessing...he’s pulling a face since he doesn’t like wearing it. That’s kinda adding to the evil look.”

“And he’s here to do awful things, so that’s putting his villainous aura on max?”

“But he’s convinced it’s the perfect disguise. He’s totally confident he can rock it.”

“I mean...there’s nothing wrong with the *outfit*. The problem’s the evil person wearing it...”

The minions fluttering around him really paired well with the cassock. And it was endearing to see him feed treats to Slimey and the demon scythes. They played around together like this was all totally normal. Even though I knew it was just strawberry jam from their treats, I couldn’t shake the impression that it was fresh blood from an execution dripping off those scythes. You know, maybe the church had better judgment than I’d first thought. Yes, this boy was an affront to god. More precisely, he was god’s archnemesis!

The capital city of the Theocracy sat square in the center of the nation and controlled all cross-country traffic via four checkpoint cities in each of the cardinal directions. These cities were known as the Gates to the Holy Land. Every road that came out of the east ran through the walled city Holy West, a stronghold garrisoned by a permanent reserve of Theocracy soldiers and the church’s army.

I was concerned. Very, very concerned. Haruka-kun said he had a plan, and everything would be perfectly fine! Keep in mind that Haruka-kun’s plans had never, not once in the history of me knowing him, gone perfectly fine. Yet now he claimed everything would be okay. *I certainly wonder if the city will be okay...* Unlike the fortress on the border, this city was densely populated. Every one of its citizens were believers in the church’s faith, so perhaps that made them all our enemies.

A long line of people waited at the gates of the city. We had to pass an inspection checkpoint before we could enter... And here sat Haruka-kun in the driver’s seat of our carriage, dressed as a priest. Uh-huh. This could only mean one thing: we were doomed.

DAY 107

MIDDAY

Anyone who writes “Property of a Shady Character” on the side of their carriage is pretty honest for a shady character.

THE ROAD

IN THE THEOCRACY

AS WE TRAVELED across the plains, we noticed wheat fields and houses sprouting up at scattered intervals. Later, we passed by tiny hamlets and modest towns before we finally came across our first actual city: Holy West, the fortified town that served as the transportation hub of the eastern part of the country. It was also a key military outpost that housed the eastern portion of the Theocracy’s army and church troops. Every road in the Theocracy’s east eventually led to Holy West.

We joined the line to wait for our turn. Between our intimidating horse and black, armored, eight-car carriage train, we stuck out like a sore thumb. An actual church carriage was ahead of us in the queue, but it could not have looked more different. It was just a little wooden thing pulled by two normal horses. Sure, compared to other carriages, it was definitely a fancier sort of vehicle. But it was still your ordinary, everyday, run-of-the-mill carriage. Not like our enormous and enormously expensive vehicle with “Property of the Church” written on the side... That label was the only thing our two carriages had in common!

The driver of the real church carriage snarled at the other vehicles in the road, trying to make them move out of the way so that he could cut forward. No doubt he was driving some bigwig from the pope’s faction. Yet despite being the actual property of the church—ostensibly a benevolent association—the driver lashed out with his whip and sent the people in the queue scattering so he could cut ahead.

Meanwhile, over here in the fake carriage, we had an evil priest for a driver, complete with demon scythes, their blades dripping red liquid. Yup, Haruka-kun had given them strawberry jam. *Oh my god, Haruka-kun.* The optics were fatally bad. I would have called him a shifty figure, but that would have insulted shifty figures the world round. *Let's just say his character looks questionable to the point of being unanswerable.*

All those in line gave him a wide berth and stared in fright at this eerie, self-proclaimed church carriage. They probably thought Haruka-kun was some kind of demonic spirit that'd hijacked a church carriage. He wasn't just a creeper; he was the creepiest. Never mind stealthy—our wonder-carriage attracted every eye in the queue. It was unlike any vehicle anyone had ever seen before.

To be honest, calling this a disguise kind of hurt my soul. All the people staring at us kept recoiling in shock. *Once I get out of this thing, I think I might join them.* Haruka-kun was the only one who was happy with our new ride. As we sat in line, he messed around with Slimey (riding on the horse's head) and the demon scythes. He was the only person enjoying himself in the middle of this bizarre scene... Maybe that was his version of going undercover.

Naturally (or should I say *finally*) a group of soldiers guarding the gate noticed the disturbance and ran for help. They must have thought something was fishy about the situation—I mean, not like you couldn't tell at first glance. Our carriage was fishier than the ocean. Not being spotted was a foregone conclusion, but I really would have preferred for us to go unnoticed... *But oh well.* They'd finally caught on to us.

This resulted in utter chaos. Mr. Chaos thought his disguise was rock solid, so he drove right up to the gate in broad daylight. And then it got weirder.

"Y-you there, state your name and business!" one of the gate guards stammered. "I want to see your permit and your carriage driver's license!"

"Uh, well, if you really wanna give me a name, I guess you could call me bad news? 'Cause, yup, I travel fast?"

Whisper, whisper... “You don’t actually have to tell him!”

“A-all right! This is suspicious. Get out of the carriage, now!”

The guard had waved through the pope faction’s carriage without a second thought, even though they had cut in line. Yet while theirs was fine, he lodged a complaint against ours. The other carriage—the real carriage—looked completely proper and legitimate even if it only housed a crook. Our fake carriage looked downright treacherous and... Okay, yeah, housed someone just as bad.

The guard who had to talk to Haruka-kun looked frightened out of his wits.

“What kinda sorry excuse of a gatekeeper are you?” Haruka-kun asked him. “Seriously? You see these clothes and don’t know what kind of business I have? You see that nice, big ‘Property of the Church’ and don’t know who we are? It says this is a church-owned carriage, so it’s a church-owned carriage. Now, if it said it was a church-owned carriage and it turned out to be a boat, then that’d be a different story! But this here’s a church-owned horse-drawn carriage with a label saying it’s a church-owned horse-drawn carriage. Even if I were to run you over, it’d still be a church-owned horse-drawn carriage no matter what anybody thinks. You feel me? You catching my drift?”

“Haruka-kun! You are not helping!”

“Huh?! Oh, o-oh, okay,” said the guard. “Wait, a-aah! Y-yes, that certainly does say ‘Property of the Church,’ but it just doesn’t seem...quite...right? Is...is this entire vehicle yours, Father? All...eight cars of it?”

“Yeah! You tell him, guard guy!”

For some mystifying reason, my classmates and I were all on the same page: Team Guard. We understood how he felt on a molecular level.

“Yeah, you gotta problem with it? I’ve got a horse pulling it and it says it’s the property of the church, so what else could it be but a church-owned horse-drawn carriage? Besides, doesn’t it look like a carriage? And it says it’s owned

by the church. If it was owned by a company, then it'd say it was owned by a company. And if it was owned by someone up to no good, then it'd say it was owned by someone up to no good, but it *doesn't* say that, and it says it's owned by the church! Have some common sense, man."

"Common sense says that anyone who writes 'Property of a Shady Character' on the side of their carriage is an awfully honest shady character!"

"Huh," said the guard. "Okay, that makes sense."

"Wait, that actually worked?!"

We all cried in sympathy for the gate guard. Here he was, doing his absolute best to guard this gate, and...his common sense had flown the coop.

"Gatekeepers these days! None of you know what you're doing. No one's got gatekeeping sense anymore! See, just look at that carriage right in front of us. What do you think it is?"

"Pardon, Father? Isn't that a regular Church carriage?"

"Yeah, yeah!"

"Exactly my point. You're thinking with your commonsense brain instead of your gatekeeping brain, and where's the sense in that? What if a scoundrel were to come through disguised as the church, huh? Hmm? Use your head, man! Think!"

"...Huh?"



“B-but Father, it looks exactly like all the other church carriages?”

“Well, it would, wouldn’t it? See, if there’s a shady character around here, whose carriage do you think it’d be in? Mine? Or theirs? Which one looks more like a church carriage, hmm?”

“Yours, Father! Which means the scoundrel would be in theirs, Father!”

“Well done! You spotted them, and that proves you have what it takes to be a true gatekeeper. Now get in there and arrest them! And stuff?”

“Thank you for teaching us so much about the art of gatekeeping, Father!”

“No flipping way. They bought it?!”

“How? How does this make any sense?”

Never, ever try to have a serious conversation with Haruka-kun. Because if you take him seriously, it will break you. Conversing with Haruka posed a major threat to your sensibilities and judgment, because the way he stated his arguments as if they were obvious, logical fact got into your head. He spoke with such confidence that for a second, you questioned if you had it wrong—and that was when your judgment gave out. His conviction tricked you into buying his nonsense. Later, when you looked back on it with a clear head, you realized it couldn’t possibly have been true. But when you heard it in the moment, you’d be like, “Huh, okay.” All across the frontier, people spoke in awe of Haruka-kun’s rambling, claiming it was purer evil than the temptation of Mephistopheles himself. You couldn’t consider anything he said seriously. You’d be doomed.

“Father, they insist they’ve done nothing wrong!”

“Think back on every criminal you’ve arrested. What’d they tell you?”

“That they’ve done nothing wrong, Father.”

“Exactly! Anyone who says that is clearly guilty of something. Ya know?”

“That’s rich coming from you! And that’s exactly what someone would say if

they really were innocent, too."

Oh boy. Now all the gatekeepers were weeping. As much as Haruka-kun's raving surprised them, they still swallowed it. Now their tear ducts had broken as well.

"Brilliant, Father! Come, men. Detain them all and bring them in for questioning!"

"At once, sir!"

"They're trusting the least trustworthy person in the world..."

Even we started crying!

Thus the innocent church carriage was seized and subjected to a search while we got to skate right on by. Haruka-kun's cassock was only worn in the upper echelons of the church, so it greased the wheels for us. With the dignity of those robes, Haruka-kun conned his way through the checkpoint. If the real priests were being branded as shady figures, then that cast suspicion on everyone present. As the guards desperately searched for some kind of suspicious item on the real priests, the excessively suspicious carriage was cleared of all charges.

The guards dragged several innocent clergymen out of that particularly fancy carriage and arrested them. As the guards bellowed in the priest's faces on Haruka-kun's supposed authority, the priests shouted back and pointed at us.

"Just what is going on with that carriage? What is going on with that priest?"

Well, this was what happened when you messed with an enemy of god. *Give up, okay?* The church started this fight, so the least they could do was expect to be ripped off or bullied in return, right? After all, we were talking about the rip-off king who bullied god and made off with the entire list of leftover skills.

Prior to our arrival, the phrases "rip off" and "fat cat" didn't exist in this fantasy world's vocabulary. Nowadays, people had started to call acts of charity "rip-offs" and anyone who overcharged "a fat cat." Even though they were

using the words wrong, there was a hint of truth in that. *You can use nice, fancy language all you want, but fancy words don't mean anything.* No doubt, the frontier folk would gladly deal with a fat cat who shouted, "I'm ripping you off!" and left happiness in his wake. Words, titles, and authority didn't change the world. Actions did. Of course, I was positive Mr. Rotund Feline was the one person who remained blissfully unaware of all of this. He pretended to be evil and kept going, "Heh heh heh, I'm rich! I've ripped them all off!" He was the only one who saw things that way. He never factored his own cost of labor into the profits, after all.

He never considered the impossibly high technical fee for his work. He used his Magic Hands to complete monumental tasks in moments. He kept everything in his item bag to save on storage and transport fees. At this point, he was the only one who thought he was turning major profits.

As we drove away, I could still hear the priests yelling, "Do you know who we are?!" *Nope.* I didn't spare a single thought for them. I had better things to think about than people who did nothing to help others. Maybe they had some grand, impressive titles. Who cared? If not for his appearance (and, well, personality), then our fat cat was certainly a finer man than the pope or any member of his cabal. Why should we care for a religion that couldn't make people happy? If any religion caused suffering, whether it was the "true" religion or not, then it was wrong in my book.

The only object worthy of my faith was a nonsensical, lying, messed-up boy pretending to be evil. If he was evil, then his evil could put a smile on the faces of everyone in the world. And not once had I ever heard him brag or be condescending about it. Yes, I couldn't deny that Haruka-kun was evil. The yelling priests were right: we were the ones conning the gatekeepers. We were the villains. *But hey, you know what? At least we didn't cut lines!*

DAY 107

EVENING

Before we start worrying about rust, I think they should be concerned about not cutting their tongues...but that's just me.

HOLY WEST

I'D ACHED FOR HOME as if I had been away from home for eternity. In truth, it was only a short time ago that I led a group of volunteers to join me in the frontier. The moment I heard of the Church's invasion, I made preparations and said my goodbyes in the greatest of haste. Then I ventured to the ends of the world—a land thick with monsters.

Now, that seemed like something of a bygone age. After a long, long journey, jostling over hill by carriage, sailing the seas by ship, I arrived in Diorelle and received His Majesty's express permission to visit the frontier. Then followed another long, bouncing carriage ride to our destination. The way back, by contrast, had been most easy. In fact, I was home in a matter of three days.

Why, then, was the journey out so arduous?

When I finally arrived in the land known as the home of monsters, the world I had believed in was shattered. I realized the truth in front of me with my own two amazed eyes. Although we had been detained in the capital of Diorelle, we suffered no ill treatment. Indeed, when we who chose to clothe ourselves in the garb of our faith entered the frontier, we were not greeted by hails of stones or rancorous voices. No, instead the people spoke to us words of gratitude. Everyone up to the duke himself bent the knee before us and thanked us—the people of the Church that had invaded with intent to destroy them.

They thanked us for visiting the land that the Church had sworn never to set foot in. They thanked us for bringing them healers and aid for all those victimized by the war. We had expected to be sworn at and despised, but this

place was a land of peace. Our healers were little needed. This was not the pit of corruption the leaders of our faith had made it out to be. No, it was a land of prosperous towns, kind souls, and beautiful, shining people.

And this was the very reason the Church had attempted to invade it. The Church coveted that prosperity and the spellstones that brought such riches.

Then, we met the black-haired commander and the beautiful, black-haired princesses. They could not have been more different from the stories I had heard about them. Oh, and they were strong—strong enough to make their dreams come true with their own two hands. They did not pray to God; they made everything for themselves: peace. Prosperity. Happiness. They slew monsters, took in orphans, sold goods to the city stores, and put a smile on every person's face across the entire frontier. They were miracles.

It seems so long ago now. I had once been only a little girl who feared monsters and soldiers. She lacked all ability save praying, healing, and worshipping God. Now, that little girl was gone.

No sooner did we arrive in town than a squadron of Church soldiers surrounded us with the aim of taking us in. They attempted to seize us helpless priests and frail nuns by force...but unfortunately for them, we'd left all frailty behind on the frontier. The once kind and gentle priests screamed bloody murder and launched themselves at the soldiers for a bloodbath. The townsfolk who had come out to meet us recoiled, alarmed by these priests whose beastly natures so mirrored the beastfolk the priests considered their kindred spirits.

Once, my priests were known for being too kindly and reserved for their own good. Once, these same priests had shrunk back in fear when faced with any violence. Now they were firm believers in the cult of cutthroats. The five of them laid waste to these forty soldiers. Some of the soldiers turned and ran, but the priests knocked them out and dragged them back over to us. Their eyes were more alive than I'd ever seen. They smiled the truest smiles I'd ever witnessed as they licked up their knives. *Oh, goodness!* The townsfolk were well and truly alarmed now.

“W-welcome back, Your Excellency. I am glad to see you looking so w-well... But please, I must inform you of something. There are soldiers here to arrest you and... Well, you’ve destroyed all of them, but there are more on the way. Oh. Never mind. There they are, lying in a bloody heap. Your Excellency, I’m afraid I don’t know these nuns well, but might I ask why the good sisters are dragging in unconscious soldiers and laying them in a heap? And might I ask why all your clothing is so sexy now? You’ve changed!”

“It is good to be home, Sabbatha. We’ve all grown stronger during our sojourn in the frontier... Or rather, we were made to get stronger. Forced to, really. We were swung about and forced to roll through dungeons, and when we objected, we were trained to kill monsters. One must be strong in order to protect those they hold dear, you know. Some of us may have snapped ever so slightly, but overall, we all made it through our training in one piece. The priests take up knife licking periodically, but don’t pay that any mind. And we’re all prone to battle screams at times. Yet fear not! They’re perfectly functional.”

“Are you sure this is fine, Your Excellency?!”

Lord Haruka stood atop the Church steeple and took in the entire town from his perch. He made curious signals with his hands, and my new friends set out to hunt down Church soldier after Church soldier and build piles of their unconscious bodies. These soldiers were not of especially high level, and they had no skills to speak of. They over-relied on their equipment. I could no longer fear such weak foes; I only felt pity for them. The swords they proudly flaunted to cow the townsfolk were really nothing extraordinary. These soldiers were pushovers who simply pretended to be much stronger than they really were so that they could lord it over the commoners. But none of their posturing could intimidate me now. All I did was feel sorry for these poor fools.

On the frontier, even the youngest of babes helped maintain the defenses. When monsters attacked, the frontier folk drove them off, chased after them, and slaughtered every one. Even a child raised in the frontier was far braver and stronger than any of these pitiful adults who thought owning a sword made you

a warrior. And the housewives in the frontier... Why, they were much more terrifying than any monster!

“Great work, everybody,” Lord Haruka said. “That’s all of them, right? Elf Girl’s using her Emotion Sensing to hunt down the last hidden soldiers and spies, but I think you guys got them all, ya know? And my horse ran down anyone who tried to escape and notify the authorities. Yeah, now they’re on the soldier piles too? Yup, and they were all old dudes, so carrying them back to the soldier heaps was no fun! I was hoping for some kind of wonderfully unfortunate teenage-boy accident, like my hands slipping or someone running too fast to stop before crashing into me. They were all old dudes, though, so I kept my hands to myself! If anything, I almost accidentally slipped them a flare to make them go up in flames. Because yeah, I’d really like to burn ‘em?”

“What are you talking about? As far as I’m aware, flares don’t just slip out of people’s hands!”

Fortunately, when the soldiers had arrived in town, all the women and children were made to shelter underground. A few of the menfolk had received light blows, but for the most part, all the townspeople were safe and sound. Yet their homes were ransacked, their valuables stolen, and the town faced a sore lack of everything, even food. The town was in shambles, and I knew the rest of the country would soon follow suit. For all our belief in God, all our choices to side with God...we faced naught but destruction.

Now that the women and children were finally safe to come out, we helped bathe and feed them. As if it was second nature. As if it was the only thing to do. Only in the miraculous frontier would such a kindness be this commonplace. No, miracles like that were uncommon in the Theocracy. Here, the children wept when we treated them to warm baths, fresh suits of clean clothes, and feasts unlike any they had eaten before. Here, firewood was too precious for frequent bathing, and new clothes were an exorbitant luxury. The Church taught us to live in poverty, after all, and every child raised in such destitution wept.

“Won’t God be mad at us?” they asked me, fear evident on their faces.

“Are you sure? Do we not need to give this away to the needy?” they begged, confusion in their eyes.

But as they tucked into the feast, the townsfolk broke out into big, beaming grins. I had come to accept such joy as a matter of course back at the frontier. Yet I had never seen anyone smile like this before—the true smiles of children who’d been scolded and lectured on keeping a humble heart and living modest lives so that they might give to those less fortunate. These children smiled, for they felt a happiness that prayer to God could not grant them. They rejoiced in the same happiness that every child on the frontier shared.

The townsfolk were deeply wary of outsiders, but now they thronged about Lord Haruka and his companions in delight. They had lived their lives in poverty, grave sobriety, and service to God, but Lord Haruka had done what God could not: gracing them with smiles.

“You must have brought us this joy by defeating all the evil monsters in the frontier, didn’t you, Your Excellency?”

“Arianna!” the children cheered. “Hooray for Archbishop Arianna!”

“Come now, everyone. We have more than enough for all to eat their fill. Take more!”

“Thank you, Arianna!”

“Is that truly Her Excellency’s faction? Could it be?”

“What, did you not see them fight earlier? They worked this hard for all the frontier folk, and now they fight for all of us.”

“Hooray!”

No, we did not fight for and win these spellstones ourselves. Instead, we had been trained merely so we could protect ourselves. We didn’t pay for such instruction, nor our bread, our new clothing, or any other need. Lord Haruka’s group trained us all, even when we were nothing but a nuisance to them...and

when we completed each dungeon, they let us keep the spellstone spoils for ourselves.

Next, they treated us to *okonomiyaki* made with the dried bonito flakes and *nori* seaweed of the Beast Nation. Those tastes played a symphony of flavor in my mouth, and I had gobbled down every bit of that piping hot, delicious treat. They then grilled for me something they called an “octopus-like thing” which had a funny, yet still quite tasty flavor. It was very easy to get down, and it proved a hit with both adults and children. The girls were especially interested in the octopus-like thing, but why wouldn’t they be? The heat and taste were sublime.

Poverty? Tell me, what is that again? The Church told us to live in want and need while they built magnificent cathedrals and vied for personal opulence in the name of praising God. But did God truly want His common people to go hungry while those who did nothing feasted on scrumptious food and wore the most resplendent robes? No, for I thought this must be the true meaning of charity: sharing smiles. Sharing laughter together. Sharing good joy and cheer and working hard to pass on your own happiness. *Stealing the laughter from another person’s lips to adorn your own, all the while creating nothing with your own two hands... Well, that must be wrong, surely?* Here in the Theocracy we lived in poverty, yes, but at this moment we also lived in delight. It was the first time that every single person in the city had felt such jubilation.

Once the festivities finally came to an end, the townsfolk informed me of the recent goings-on. Just as Stalker Girl’s clan had reported, the pope’s faction and its assorted sycophants had taken over the Church and thrown those of other sects into prison. Any who tried to oppose the papal faction were arrested or else driven to the farthest reaches of the land, where they now raised armies. Yet these dissidents were divided into splintered parties and showed no sign of coming together into a single force. The king’s faction now resorted to guerilla warfare, sowing chaos across the land, but the pope’s armies were too busy mobilizing to invade the Beast Nation to pay them any mind. War was their aim,

and beyond that, the destruction of the frontier.

Even now, the castle was still under siege and unable to resupply itself with foodstuffs or other provisions. Yet, as if perhaps to thumb their noses at the besiegers, they were hosting a barbecue... *What, pray tell, is a barbecue doing in the Church?*

“Haruka-kun, what did you do now?! Why did you host a barbecue at the Theocracy’s royal palace?”

“Starving the other guy out’s sieging 101, ya know? Right, ’cause if there’s no food, people get hungry, and going on a diet like that’s not good for you, which would piss off Sergeant Billy. Besides, Stalker Girl’s clan sent us the food? Yup, grill and all, and it looks really tasty. If you join in and have to do a one-more set, that’s on you. Yeah, the barbecue didn’t do anything wrong. Besides, it must suck to have to lurk on the outskirts of a barbecue party and not have any. Especially with how tasty the barbecue smells, ya know?”

“Here I thought you were trying to help the people in the palace. But no, you’re just trying to go neener-neener at the besieging Church soldiers!”

“Ooh... Sitting out a barbecue? I wouldn’t want to be in their shoes now, that’s for sure.”

Everyone in the palace seemed to be in good health. They were doing well, by all appearances. Given that we’d lived in humble poverty, I had no doubt that a barbecue in the palace was a first for everyone, but...I suppose that made it all the tastier!

“I asked Stalker Girl’s clan to get some food into the palace, and they have enough food for now. So here’s the question: Do you wanna gatecrash the palace barbecue party or stay to guard the town and jump on the *okonomiyaki* train? There’s a lot to eat, but I know you’ll make it through it all somehow, so feel free to choose whatever. Go nuts?”

“What do you mean, we’ll make it through it all somehow? And how come everything looks so darn tasty?!”

Each option presented pros and cons, but more importantly...this meant it was time for our fellowship to part ways.

“Huh? Nah, I can retreat whenever I want. Plus, logistics are way easier to figure out when there’s less of us. I’ll just keep it up until I wear ’em down enough. The church’s got a huge army that must eat up provisions like nobody’s business. So if we yolk all the food out from under their noses, they’re gonna go hungry. Then they’ll be outta commission. Anyway, I’ve got business to take care of in the cathedral, so I’m gonna go scope that out and see if I can pick up anything that looks nice. Yeah, it’s not like they’ve got an unlimited supply of food, you know?”

“Lord Haruka...” I said. “You know, I am more than just the Archbishop Arianna. I am the Princess Ariel Ann Aryuca, and I have faith that my country can change. While committing acts in the name of our God, Canatia, I fear the Church has lost sight of the true meaning of His teachings. I believe that He gave us the frontier to be our guiding light, and the Church lambasts and commits grave misdeeds against this light. We cannot question if the Church’s way is truly right unless the royal family speaks out against this organization we have sanctioned. Please, Lord Haruka. Take me with you to the palace!”

Oh, I knew already. Oh, I’d seen full well. What point could there be in a faith that robbed little children of their smiles?

“Look, the whole Ariel, Arianna, Ariwhatever thing went way over my head, but you’re saying that you want to go have some barbecue, right? Look, first you gotta protect the town, don’t you? ’Cause there’s a bunch of little kiddos here we gotta keep safe. Okay, so one of them’s a tiny tanuki. Yeah, I don’t know why she’s fighting the kids for *okonomiyaki*. Mature? Her? Pssh, she’s got no *ooh* or *bwom bwom* to speak of. She’s flatter than a kid. She’s perfectly perpendicular to the gro—hey, how did you even hear me from all the way over there? And now you’re glaring at me?! There’s no way you should be able to hear from that far away! You scare me!”

Had I not gone to the frontier, I was sure I would have never learned. No

doubt I would have lived my life in the dark and never questioned a thing. I thought children were to be seen and not heard; I thought adults should be pious. I had no idea that these townsfolk could ever experience such joy. And I had no idea that the priests I had once thought were just as reserved could be so... *Oh, for Goodness's sake! Surely those knives have had enough licking. At this point, they'll end up rusting!*

AFTERWORD

THANKS FOR BUYING THIS BOOK. Shockingly, we've now made it to double-digit volumes. Just as shockingly, here I am writing a tenth afterword. As is custom, please read "afterword" so it's pronounced like "Oh great, it's this idiot again." (lol)

Speaking of custom, I would also like to air my grievances via my so-called "acknowledgements." (You can read that one as "Oh great, it's *these* idiots again.") I strained myself to the breaking point, cutting down the word count only for my editor Y-san to go "Tee-hee! You still have too many pages, silly billy!" They once again had to crunch to fix my fifty million typos in this volume, but that's payback for everything they put me through. Heh!

Additionally, my thanks to Saku Enomaru-sensei for another fantastic cover. Once again, Y-san and I were completely torn about what the name of this book should be and who to slap on the cover. It got so bad we had to call in my editor from Comic Gardo, Hebi-san, to give their two cents. (lol)

Subtractionally, a big thank you to Bibi-sensei for doing the manga version of this series. Whenever I get a copy of the rough drafts, I keep being like "Oh my god!" and "Holy cow, no way!" and "This is super cool!" I may be the original author of this series, but that doesn't mean anything. Really, I'm no help at all. I'm so sorry for everything I put my editors through. (sob)

Multiplicationally, I'd like to thank all my readers. These ten (!!!) volumes wouldn't be here if not for you. I'm amazed that they've put out ten volumes of the first story I ever wrote in a period I often refer to as "my cringe years." Every time it hits me that this is Actually Happening for Some Unfathomable Reason, I feel so grateful I do a little dance for all of you. Really, I do.

And as is now tradition (albeit a lame tradition), my apologies and gratitude to

Oraidou-sama. I am so sorry I say this every single time. So, so sorry! Thank you for your enormous overhaul of edits.

Finally, I'd like to thank the translators who are working at a blistering pace to catch up with me: the Taiwanese translator 徐維星-sama, the English translator Eric Margolis-sama, and the Thai translator whose name I don't know because I can't read Thai (sorry). I apologize deeply because this book is truly a pain in the ass. Thank you very much for all you do.

Along a similar vein, this book is currently in your hands because of the hellish labor I put every one of these people through. I hope you all enjoyed reading it or, if nothing else, found it impressive that a book could go through such rigorous editing and still turn out this awful. Yes, please pretend you didn't see all the typos. (lol)

—SHOJI GOJI



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