

DEFEATING THE DEMON LORD'S A CINCH

TSUKIKAGE

Illustration by bob

IF
YOU'VE
GOT A
RINGER

4





Holy Caster | Amelia Nohman

“I’ll...negotiate with Zolan.
Amelia...
I’ll...wear it.”

Priest | Ares Crown

Scout | Sanya Chatre

Scout | Rabi Chatre



Holy Warrior | Naotsugu Toudou

“It’s a
perfect fit...
So creepy.
What the hell?”

Elementalist | Limis Al Friedia

“You
definitely
won’t
pass for
a man
looking
like
this...”

Swordmaster | Aria Rizas

DEFEATING THE DEMON LORD'S A CINCH

IF
YOU'VE
GOT A
RINGER

VOLUME

4

TSUKIKAGE

Illustration by bob

YEN
ON
New York

Copyright

Defeating the Demon Lord's a Cinch (If You've Got a Ringer), Vol. 4

TSUKIKAGE

Translation by Caleb DeMarais

Cover art by bob

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DARENIDEMO DEKIRU KAGE KARA TASUKERU MAO TOBATSU

Vol. 4

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Part Four

Let's Begin

Humans are fragile. Demons, on the other hand, with their innately robust bodily structure and heightened physical capabilities, possess formidable, mysterious magical power. There is no point in comparing the two.

That is why since time immemorial, humans have harnessed the power of the gods who watch over this world from on high—or the elemental spirits that inhabit it—in order to somehow survive in this frenetic maelstrom.

Humanity builds temples and offers up tributes and prayers to these gods responsible for blessing a hero with their divine protection. These deities and the various elemental spirits are equally essential.

Their very existence bears the same important meaning as Naotsugu Toudou, the hero summoned from another world, bestowed with vast divine protection and innate talents and fated to defeat the Demon Lord.

The trials and tribulations that awaited Holy Warrior Naotsugu Toudou and her party in Golem Valley eclipsed even those they had faced in Yutith's Tomb.

The valley's golem inhabitants possess the highest life force among all monsters in the Kingdom of Ruxe, the governing body that has summoned the Holy Warrior. The Kingdom's royal knights also use this area as their official training grounds against the powerful golems.

Toudou has been hurrying along in her journey with the goal of restoring peace to the Kingdom as quickly as possible. She battled the golems with the intention of leveling up, and at her initial low level, they proved to be truly formidable foes.

Although Toudou and her party felt severely overwhelmed, fate appeared to guide them to the half giant Wurtz Beld, a valiant monk with the Church of Ahz Gried, and Carina Capp, a saintly woman who has kept watch over Golem Valley for decades. Under their tutelage, the party learned how to harness the power that lay dormant within them.

The party saw their talents quickly blossom with the help of their innate abilities and strict hands-on training. At last they were able to drive back the scores of golems that stood in their way along their path to the far reaches of Golem Valley.

It is here where Toudou's party first met a skilled priest and elemental mage named Stephenne Veronide. The daughter of a cardinal, Stephenne thoroughly observed Toudou's party's battle tactics and offered a bit of counsel.

"You must head to Cloudburst, the water capital, and enter a covenant with a grand elemental spirit. It will prove to be a strong asset in your quest to defeat the Demon Lord."

Acting as the voice of God, Stephenne's counsel does not go unheeded, and the party—Naotsugu Toudou, Holy Warrior; Limis Al Friedia, elemental mage; Aria Rizas, sword master; Glacia, glacial plant dragon—decides to head for the water capital, Cloudburst.

Their goal is to enter a covenant with the grand water elemental spirit—a supreme being and essentially a part of nature itself. To accomplish such a feat is a significant achievement even for a typical mage; for Toudou's party, on their quest to defeat the Demon Lord, it is a path they cannot evade.



Prologue

The Wind on the Prairie

A pure-white horse-drawn carriage speeds across the deserted plain.

Shrubs intermittently fill the plain sprawling toward the horizon, yet it's void of a distinct path forward. In this idyllic setting, one can catch a glimpse of the occasional bird-type creature, but given how fast the carriage is traveling, they're not likely to approach.

The canopy of the carriage, its wheels, and the horse pulling it are all as white as the pure driven snow.

This is Grassland Wind, a powerful magic item legend says was created in antiquity by a band of sprites. It's pulled along by horse golems that function on only a small amount of magical energy and never tire. The white canopy contains an enchantment that warps space and time to fit a much larger capacity than its outward appearance would suggest. The carriage can also be shrunk down to fit in the palm of a person's hand.

At the helm of this priceless magical carriage is an androgynous, raven-haired human figure.

Naotsugu Toudou—the Holy Warrior summoned by the most powerful kingdom in all humanity, the Kingdom of Ruxe. She is the budding hero on her quest to defeat the Demon Lord along with her exceptional party members and powerful magical implements, including the holy sword Ex and holy armor Fried.

However, Toudou is currently seated in the carriage driver's seat, operating the reins and yawning profusely.

It's been ten days since the party left Golem Valley, and the scenery they've passed hasn't changed one iota. The Kingdom of Ruxe is massive, and the majority of its lands have not yet been settled.

Golem Valley is a rather remote region itself, but the distance to their next

destination—the water capital Cloudburst—is farther than any they’ve covered between cities so far. The horses pulling the carriage don’t require rest, which reduces the group’s overall travel time. However, even Toudou has reached her limit of taking in the exact same scenery day after day after day.

The sense of excitement she felt from their magnificent surroundings has long been overwritten by sheer boredom. As Toudou lets loose her fifth huge yawn, the canopy of the carriage opens suddenly. Looking back, Toudou sees a brilliant head of blond hair.

Her companion, Limis Al Friedia, pokes just her head out. Toudou can see her own face reflected in Limis’s deep-blue eyes.

“Hey, Nao. I assume nothing’s up?”

Toudou smiles and shrugs. “As you can see, this place is so full of nothing that I’m bored out of my mind...”

One or two days is doable—but after ten whole days, Toudou can’t even manage to stay alert.

“If this goes on much longer, I’m gonna turn into gelatin.”

“We can’t afford to just stop and fight some monsters. Besides, there won’t be a chance of leveling up for us anymore in these parts, will there?”

“Well, yeah, you’re right.”

The open prairies contain a large number of monsters, but they’re drastically weak compared to the ones in Golem Valley. Leveling up here would be a challenge, certainly for Toudou at level 40 but also for Aria and Limis at level 29.

“I wonder if we should’ve gained a few more levels in Golem Valley.”

Golem Valley is one of the most efficient places for gaining levels in the entire Kingdom. Toudou just got used to battling the monsters there, and though she had good reason to move on, she can’t help wishing they could have spent more time in the valley.

“Establishing a covenant with an elemental spirit is more important. It’ll provide you so much more combat strength than simply leveling up. Your mobility will improve, too, so it’s about time you contracted with a spirit, Nao.”

Limis has her pointer finger raised as she explains, but Toudou smiles bitterly.

Limis is right; the Demon Lord in this world is different from the ones Toudou battled in video games before she was summoned here. This one is actively trying to take her life.

Toudou may be well accomplished in magic, but because she hasn't entered into a covenant with an elemental spirit, she can't put those accomplishments to use.

Regardless of efficiency, levels can be gained ad nauseam. Securing battle prowess takes much greater precedence.

Establishing a covenant for Limis is the first order of business in Cloudburst, with Toudou's covenant a close second.

Noticing Toudou's exhausted face, Limis sighs herself and says, "I can definitely see where you're coming from. There's nothing here..."

"Vale Village was also surrounded by grassy plains, but they were nothing like these..."

It's been just a few months since they began their journey. Being together every day, topics of conversation tend to be in short supply.

Although the carriage is spacious, training inside it while moving is impossible. Limis comes out from the canopy and sits next to Toudou. She must be just as bored as Toudou is.

"The water capital, huh...? I wonder what it's like..."

"Me too... I've never been there, but it's got that famous sunken temple at the bottom of the ocean. You used to be able to get to Cloudburst by boat before the Demon Lord set his plans in motion..."

Just as its name, the water capital, suggests, the city of Cloudburst is located along the ocean. Getting there by land via Ruxe territory requires passing through the mountains and can take over ten days. Following the coastal route takes half that time.

However, traveling that route would be highly ill-advised for Toudou and her party; the coast has been in the hands of the Demon Lord for close to ten years,

making it one of the most dangerous locations in the Kingdom.

The majority of ports, throughout not just Ruxe but the world, are currently inoperable. The party applied for boat clearance in Cloudburst but was denied.

“A sunken temple at the bottom of the ocean... I can’t even imagine it...”

“...Well, I guess we’ll know when we get there. Seems like that’s where we need to go to establish a covenant with a water spirit...”

“...Hope we get there soon...”

“So do I... We should have our cardinal directions straight, at least...”

Toudou stares at the horizon in the distance and opens her mouth for another massive yawn.



First Report

On the Journey to the Water Capital

“Come again? You want a boat to Cloudburst?”

“Yes. I have gold and a permit.”

I present the permit issued by the Kingdom of Ruxe that I obtained through the Church. Seeing its imprinted seal, the man’s weatherworn face goes stiff as a board.

The town of Anise was once the greatest port in all of Ruxe, but its former liveliness is nowhere to be seen.

The wharf is deserted, and the old deckhands gathered at the local bar reek of melancholy.

It’s been nearly ten years since the entire sea and its environs fell into the Demon Lord’s hands. Ports all across the world, not only in the Kingdom of Ruxe, are going defunct.

The main reason for this traces back to the arrival of the sea demon Heljarl, one of Demon Lord Kranos’s top brass. Ever since he appeared roughly ten years ago, he’s commanded a formidable army of giant, fearsome sea monsters

that have capsized and sunk a great many ships across the high seas.

Humankind fought back, but even the naval forces of each and every nation were no match for the multitudes of gigantic, ferocious sea monsters who laid waste at Heljarl's command. The humans suffered a catastrophic defeat that has since gone down in history.

The Demon Lord had just advanced his troops forward at that time, and ever since, the ocean has been under his control. The seas close to land are still deemed relatively safe, but there's no chance a boat will go as far as Cloudburst.

The man takes my permit in his hand and checks it. He's the former captain of a ship that sailed to Cloudburst ten years ago, but now, he can barely manage to say with a shudder, "It's the real deal."

"The situation is urgent. I went to great lengths to obtain this permit."

After the horrible losses at sea, the Kingdom of Ruxe's navy restricted all ships from departing for other lands. Regardless of how closely these restrictions are followed, the risk of going out to sea, even for the most audacious, obsessive merchant, limits voyages to destinations within the shortest possible distance from the mainland.

The ex-captain looks at me and the small robed figure directly behind me before his expression turns entirely suspicious.

"We've got an escort vessel, but damn, even with an envoy, this is a tall order. Don't you know what the seas are like these days?"

"I am well aware. I'm going above and beyond to ask you. And I have gold."

I, Ares Crown, have been entrusted with a mission to support Naotsugu Toudou and his party.

I do so from the shadows, sometimes preparing items for them or dealing with potential obstacles before they can cause the party any problems.

In Golem Valley, I managed to defeat a particularly brutal demon that Toudou stood no chance against by the skin of my teeth. And I still need to arrive at their next destination before they do.

So I currently have no other option but to travel by boat to Cloudburst ahead of Toudou and his party, who will be arriving by magical carriage.

The sailors at the wharf gather around when they hear me speak. Thanks to the Demon Lord, they're all bored out of their skulls. Their opportunities to sail the seas are few and far between, and they're pining for a chance to get back on the water. These men surely still know the ropes. They all reek of booze but don't look any worse for wear.

They must be dying to get back out on the open ocean. They're still here, ten whole years after ships started getting decimated. That can mean only one thing.

The old ship captain bores his eyes into me. His gaze is grim, but I see a flicker of indecision.

"...If you've got a permit, then you must have an escort, too, eh?"

"There's this one here and me."

"...Wha—?"

Now he looks completely thrown for a loop, his eyes darting back and forth between me and the small shadowy figure behind me. I can't blame him for being surprised that our envoy consists of just two people.

"You'll be a target if you set out with a full-scale fleet. That said, a single small boat should allow you to pass safely."

The sea demon Heljarl may still have a watchful eye on the water, but he can't sink every single vessel out there. Even with sea monsters at his beck and call, the oceans are too vast for anyone to control completely.

"I have confidence. This permit here is proof of my intent. There's no way I'd be able to acquire one in these times without a proper escort."

Yes, the Kingdom of Ruxe is still restricting maritime traffic. In my case, the Church's top ranks applied for the permit in my stead, so it hasn't been through any official inspections—not that I care.

I look behind me at our newest party member, who silently offers their consent.

The ex-sea captain contorts his fearless mug into a grimace.

The risk is incalculable, but these guys won't be able to resist the chance to sail the open seas again. The Church doesn't have an operable vessel. If this bunch doesn't agree to this, I might be stuck *swimming* to Cloudburst. Then I'll have no chance of even catching up with Toudou, so I'd be forced to take the land route.

It must be a tough question—the ex-captain isn't answering me. He continues grumbling with his arms crossed, eyeing me and the black barbed-metal mace in my hand.

As I wait for his reply, I hear a voice behind me—a young female voice that feels out of place here. Despite her face being covered by the thick hood, I can hear her quite well.

“Boss, these guys are cowards. We'd be better off in a rowboat, just the two of us.”

A rowboat... Hmm... Now there's a thought.

As I silently admire the notion, one of the sailors raises his voice.

“The hell'd you just say?!”

He must have let loose a bit now that he's learned the suspicious character behind me—whose age, gender, and appearance were previously unidentifiable—is actually a young girl.

Even when she's being screamed at, the girl shows no sign of fear. Rather, she continues on, almost like she's making fun of him.

“But am I wrong? You've got paying customers with their own escort and a permit. What more could you want? All you have to do is bring your boat around. If I were you, I'd have already done it.”

“Hey—watch your mouth.”

“...Yes, boss.”

The talking hood returns to silent mode. I'm not here to start a scuffle with a bunch of old deckhands. Although they started encroaching on us, they become discouraged by the diffusion of events and take a few steps back.

I sigh and turn toward the ex-captain.

“Apologies on behalf of my companion. Now, if you’re not willing to supply us with a boat and crew, that’s fine, but I would like to ask...where can we buy a rowboat?”

I will do anything it takes to support the Holy Warrior. That is my job.

“Boss, you’re crazy.”

“You’re one to talk.”

After all that trouble, the ex-captain has provided us with a sailboat. That said, it’s a moderate vessel, but it still floats, and it’s in good condition. We have twelve passengers in total, including the two of us. Our company is made up of all expert seafarers, and they even include an elementalist who can cause the winds to blow when we need a boost in speed.

It must have been some time since a ship last left the port, as people are gathering at the wharfs, staring through squinted eyes at our ship. I head to speak to our captain—Captain Romoro—as he shouts his instructions for departure to the crew. He’s changed his clothes, and he now wears a white hat.

“I’m sorry to rope you into this dangerous request.”

“Hmph... Bit late for that.”

Romoro snorts and shoots me an icy glare. His face indicates a long history of naval military service. He looks toward the crew, busy with preparations, and rubs his beard before continuing.

“I just couldn’t leave behind a priest of the order of Ahz Gried on the brink of committing suicide.”

“I had no intention of suicide...”

“You wanted to take a rowboat out onto open water. They’re one and the same, pal.”

Come to think of it, most of my enemies are land-based. I’ve never been on a boat before.

The captain takes a deep breath and smiles through a bitter chuckle.

“At any rate, we’ve always been prepared to throw ourselves overboard from the very start. It’s just a matter of sooner or later—makes no difference either way.”

“That isn’t exactly ideal for us... Anyway, just leave it up to me. The two of us will obliterate any monsters that appear.”

“R-right.”

I point at the hooded figure next to me, and Captain Romoro nods apprehensively.

She is one of the two mercenaries I spent most of the cash I earned in Golem Valley to hire. She’s still young, but her master, a legendary mercenary, personally signed off on her abilities.

Her role is that of a scout. She’s a professional in surveillance and monster detection and even has battle experience.

At the very least, I’ll get my money’s worth out of her. Even if she turns out to be useless, all I’ll have to do is kill every monster myself.

I look down at the thick khaki hood and ask, “You like fish?”

“If I had to choose, I prefer meat. There aren’t any fish on land, after all...”

“This is a perfect chance for you, then. You’ll eat your fill of them.”

“But I wasn’t hired to catch fish...”

She sounds incredulous, but I can’t detect any trepidation. She has guts—that much I can tell. The average mercenary would have refused the second I said we were headed out on the high seas. I’m expecting great things from her.

“Depending on your performance, I’ll put in a good word with your master when this is all over. It seems like he’s worked you pretty hard. I might even throw in a bonus for you.”

I can make empty promises all day long. Once the Demon Lord is defeated, Creio won’t be able to say no to anything.

The hooded girl tilts her head to the side, and I catch a glimpse of shining silver hair. She must have noticed—she hastily grabs her hood and pulls it down

even farther.

Her appearance draws attention, and her name is supposedly well-known in the Kingdom of Ruxe. I've been instructed not to use her name until we're out of the Kingdom. The sun reflects brilliantly off her perfectly trimmed nails. As she continues to pull down her hood, the supposedly distinguished apprentice mercenary continues.

"...Is this what all priests are like?"

I wonder how Amelia and company are doing as they continue to track Toudou's party?



Two figures sit astride the runner lizard's saddle as it speeds through the vast amber prairie. The one holding the reins is small in stature and wears a reddish-brown robe with a deep hood hiding their expression. Amelia sits behind them, staring ahead across the plains and far off into the horizon with her indigo eyes, her similarly indigo hair fluttering in the fierce wind.

It's already been a week since she and Ares set out on separate paths.

Ares and his companion will visit Cloudburst first and assist Toudou's party.

Amelia and her companion are tailing the group to provide support in case something happens along the way.

She and Ares acted as a team up until the last town they visited, but ever since he added two accomplished mercenaries to his party, they decided to split up. It makes sense for Amelia and Ares, who can both cast holy techniques, to offer support separately. Yet, even though Amelia understands the rhetoric involved, she's not in complete agreement.

Amelia purposely joined Ares in the first place to assist him. By no means is she here to be treated as an errand girl. Not that she would ever even dream of saying this to Ares himself, of course.

The newly joined mercenaries are complete strangers, and she can't get much of a sense of them. In contrast with Amelia's slightly sour mood, the mercenary saddled in front of her sounds borderline delighted.

“My master once told me that a hundred million is...only enough to hire one half a man as a temp, at best.”

The calm murmur indicates that the mercenary is a girl younger than Amelia. She almost sounds sweet, but the average girl could never handle something as wild as a runner lizard.

“I see.”

The hooded girl seems unperturbed by Amelia’s obvious lack of interest and continues. “Then your boss said, ‘If you’re talking half a man, then give me two. That adds up to one.’ But that’s *not how it works*.”

Amelia already knows what’s under the hood. There’s no doubt that this person would have drawn attention in the peaceful capital of the Kingdom of Ruxe. She agreed to keep the girl hidden, but she didn’t think she’d have to remain hidden even outside the Kingdom.

The girl’s figure is dainty, and protruding from her hip is what looks to be a large weapon.

“My master said, ‘Let’s flip a coin.’ Heads meant...me. Tails—Sanya. He said we’d get paid up front and be dispatched until these peculiar circumstances had wrapped up. Told us it was a compromise.”

Runner lizards are actually low-ranking dragons, and weaker enemies won’t come near them. The pair continues speeding across the abandoned prairie at a much quicker pace than Toudou’s party’s carriage. Amelia’s detection magic already has a lock on them.

The female mercenary twitches under her hood. Riding atop a runner lizard is extremely rough going, but her center of gravity has remained solid since the start. Her arms extend from the robe and her thin fingers grip the reins as she whips it once, and lightly, but it still picks up additional speed.

“And then, Amelia, your boss said, ‘Rather than choose, I’ll just take them both.’ My master loves to bet, and he lost, and lost again. Then, poor us—we got sold off at a discount. Unbelievable—what a huge loss.”

§ § §

I really got a good deal. A difficult assignment such as this requires top-tier

personnel. The two mercenaries I was fortunate enough to get a hold of will pay my expectations back a dozen times over—I'm sure of it.

It took a while to detect the demons lying in wait in Golem Valley. I know my way around the battlefield, but on the other hand, my tracking and detection capabilities aren't particularly high. The new members I've recruited are here to bridge that gap.

They're a rare breed of talent—excellent at tracking monsters, capable of defeating the kind of absurdly powerful steel tiger werebeast that I encountered in Golem Valley, and, if it comes to it, they would be able to join the Holy Warrior's party.

The hooded girl strides lithely across the wharf and says to me, "My master said you're a crazy, interesting guy. Told me that unless I want the gods to forsake me, I should faithfully obey your every command. My master's pretty messed up in the head, so he doesn't have a leg to stand on in that respect. He's the type who goes easy on himself and always lays into others, but he was absolutely right in this case. That's why I've decided to treat you as my boss and pledge my loyalty."

All the mercenaries at that bar were the cream of the crop. But this hooded girl's master is a legendary mercenary whose name even I'm familiar with—and I'm not very familiar with the Kingdom of Ruxe.

It's a shame I couldn't hire her master instead. Yet, having two of his direct apprentices join me is still very fortunate. If anything, I need multiple bodies. Chalk it up to my daily grind.

I look toward the wharf to make sure no one is spying on us. You simply can't predict what the demons will throw at you. I confirm that nothing is awry and turn back to my hooded companion.

"Like a pet dog, then?"

"...Exactly, just like a pet dog. I'll even wag my tail and shake your hand. Woof!"

Don't woof at me.

The hooded girl looks proud for some reason, but I'm quick to admonish.

“You should have said you’d act like a hunting dog and rip into your opponent’s windpipe.”

“Of course I will; that much is obvious. I’m trying to give you more bang for your buck than the average mercenary.”

“That means tail wagging and paw shaking?”

“My master’s been telling me to work harder at flattery. It takes people off their guard, and it could lead to higher pay. Woof! But I have a lot of pride, so it’s been an uphill climb.”

All mercenaries are off their rocker. I can’t tell if she’s serious or just messing with me. We continue our vapid chitchat as we climb aboard the ship. Perhaps due to the strong waves, the ship deck lurches more than I expected. I wander around the deck and check its battle positions.

The majority of sea monsters are below the surface. However, since a ship’s hull is quite solid, it’s typically only the really massive undersea monsters that cause it to capsize. At any rate, there’s no use considering what happens *after* the ship’s sunk. All you can do is swim and try to escape.

“Don’t you want to check the rest of the ship?”

The hooded girl shrugs slightly. “I can fight anywhere.”

The sail is raised at the captain’s command; it takes wind, and the vessel rocks gently. The wind is calm, and we slowly distance ourselves from the port. The crew keeps close watch on the ship’s surroundings.

“The cannons have been loaded, but don’t expect much from them. We’re counting on you for protection,” one of the crew members explains. “We also have a mage, but we’ll need to save their magical energy for when it’s really needed.” He’s young, with a rugged beard and sharp gaze. He has a thin build, but his tanned bare arms are bulging with muscle.

“Right, understood. Leave it to us.”

I close my eyes and sense the countless monsters nearby, along with the salty air and rippling waves. For the record, the majority of sea monsters aren’t worth worrying about—they’re harmless. They rarely attacked boats before the

sea demon Heljarl appeared. All there is to watch for is anything that approaches with intent.

The crew member remains silent for a while before curtly grunting, “..... Thanks,” and dashing off quickly.

I should be the one thanking him.

A fish with massive wings jumps above the surface of the water, far in the distance. I give an order to the hooded girl standing next to me.

“Climb the mast—you’re on lookout.”

“Got it... When can I take off this hood? It’s a pain in the ass.”

“Not yet. Wait until we’re farther from land and no longer able to return as easily. Then you can take it off.”

She really should take it off once to show everyone before any combat takes place. If she doesn’t, it will only invite confusion.

“...Understood.”

Her hooded head nods obediently as she approaches the mainmast. It has very few handholds, and instead of following the rope wound around it, she climbs the mast with the same ease as if she were walking on flat ground. I was told she’s level 65 and has all the skills required of a scout. Leaving surveillance up to her ought to be no problem.

I cast my eyes back down, away from the bright, searing sun, and head inside the ship—I need to speak with the captain.

It’s a week to ten days to Cloudburst, I’m told. Traveling by land would take nearly twice as long, which means that we have a bit of leeway, but getting there as safely and as quickly as possible is imperative.

I’ve left the other mercenary with Amelia to tail Toudou and his party, just to be sure. I figure they can meet up with Toudou and feign fortuitous chance if necessary.

I assigned the more serious-natured of the two mercenaries to Amelia. Knowing her, she’ll stay on top of things.

There isn't a cloud in the sky. Our voyage is going exceptionally well, to the point that it's nearly impossible to imagine that the Demon Lord's army has complete control over the oceans. The waves and wind are calm, with no sign of any monsters appearing.

Captain Romoro stares outside through a window in the captain's quarters, squinting.

"Not so much as a single monster... I haven't been on a voyage this peaceful in ages."

"It's because I'm using *Intimidation*. I suppose the sea demon doesn't patrol this area."

Monsters that rely more on their instincts or are of low intellect refuse to come near anything stronger than themselves.

Utilizing the gap in level through *Intimidation* is a necessary tactic for any monster hunter traveling through monster territory. I learned this back when I was part of a monster-hunting party myself.

The captain audibly swallows a lump in his throat and stares at me closely.

"I see... I mean, I've heard stories, but... Although you're a priest, you're... really strong, right?"

"You may leave any monsters to me. I've sent my companion up the mast for surveillance."

"...Got it. We're counting on you."

I leave the captain's quarters.

Intimidation requires intense mental concentration. Keeping it up nonstop for a week is an impossible task.

I look at the cloudless sky and trace with my eyes the sail enveloping the mast. I notice a figure sitting on the handrail of the crow's nest—it's a lookout who's a short distance from my companion, glowering at her.

She must have noticed—her hooded face looks down at me. In an instant, she slides off the crow's nest and starts tumbling through the air. The crew is all dumbstruck. She does several aerial flips before landing on both feet in perfect

form directly in front of me.

As if nothing happened, she raises her voice and asks, “What’s up, boss? No issues on my end.”

“Keep the showmanship to a dull roar and try being friendlier to the crew.”

“But...they’re the opposite of friendly.” She casually gestures up at them.

We are outsiders. She’s no more than a child to the ship’s crew, and if they see her putting on a show from the crow’s nest, they’ll definitely start griping.

“I’ll mention it to the captain. By the way, can you use *Intimidation*?”

“Oh, so that’s why the sea monsters aren’t approaching... Of course I can.”

She can see underwater monsters from the crow’s nest? I’m impressed, but I don’t show it.

I was told she’s *one half a man*, but her master’s appraisal is clearly severe, because she’s a cut above any normal mercenary and highly distinguished.

“How long can you use it for?”

“Hmm. Continuously, maybe three or four hours. Any longer and I’d get exhausted and my combat strength would plummet. I can use it again if I take a break for a couple of hours.”

Her response is immediate and casual. Having a good grasp of one’s own abilities is proof of a first-rate warrior. Being able to maintain *Intimidation* for three or four hours is quite impressive.

“Three or four hours, huh? ...In that case, I need you to use it now. When you’re running on empty, just say the word.”

“...You got it.”

She should be pretty exhausted, but after a moment’s pause, she nods without complaint. I can still maintain my concentration, but I need to get an idea of our new member’s capabilities while we’re still at ease and well within daylight hours. As I dispel my own *Intimidation*, the presence under the hood suddenly expands. The air ripples and the wind blows fiercely.

One sailor is surveying the area from the crow’s nest.

A fish jumps and disappears out of sight with incredible momentum.

She definitely has the capability—she might even be exercising too much *Intimidation*. Truth be told, if she really can keep this up for three or four hours, that is something else.

“I’ll take over the *Intimidation*. Get back to surveillance.”

“...Yes, boss. Leave it to me.”

Her reply is rife with confidence. Hearing it makes me so glad I sold off Stey.

What a wondrous thing, having a companion who isn’t a complete moron.

Stey...your replacement is truly exceptional. You’ve got a long way to go.

As I recall that ditzy sister, now far off like a night star, I offer up a moment of silent prayer.

Cloudburst is a city blessed by the water spirits.

The city itself envelops an entire stretch of coastline. It’s famous for its magnificent views and production of water elemental gems and was once a popular stop-off for many merchants.

Cloudburst is holy ground for elementalists due to the congregation of water elemental spirits there. Nearby, at the bottom of the sea, there is said to be a temple built long ago to honor divine water beings.

Canals run through this relatively well-known city, although it’s highly inaccessible without a boat. I don’t know much about the place myself, seeing as I’m not an elementalist.

“Cloudburst is a city protected by water elemental spirits. Sea monsters can’t just waltz right in. But a port city without boats coming and going serves no purpose.”

Even the Demon Lord can’t so easily meddle with a sentient form of nature. I keep what I’ve just heard from the crew in the back of my mind.

My current goal is strictly to get Limis and Toudou to enter a covenant with a water elemental spirit, with leveling up being secondary.

“But really, a sunken temple...? How do you get inside?”

If it's a sunken temple, I'm assuming it's on the ocean floor. No matter how high your level, it's just not feasible to travel a long distance without breathing altogether...

In response to my naive concern, the sun-scorched crew member looks toward the heavens and screws up his face.

"See, that's something you.....oughta ask about in Cloudburst."

"...So you don't know."

"My work takes place *on* the sea, after all."

He's right—unless you're a mage, there's no way you'd find yourself on the ocean floor. Yet, there has to be an established means for getting down there. I guess I'll have to research further when we reach the water capital. For the time being, I need to focus on keeping an eye on our surroundings and getting this vessel safely into harbor.

Combat on the high seas is starkly different from fighting on land. If the ship sinks, I'll survive, but it'll put the crew's lives at risk.

In that moment, a crack resonates through the air and a sheet of spray erupts from the ocean far in the distance.

I can see a figure leaning out over the crow's nest and drawing a short bow. Looks like the sound I just heard was an arrow being fired. The bow glints ivory white and the string flashes silver.

The ocean surface is stained red. My hooded companion looks down at me and says, "That was a big fish. Bigger than you, boss. But I brought it down."

"...Save your arrows."

"Humph, if we were on land, I'd be able to confirm what I killed."

"...This isn't a playground."

She's definitely skilled...but I think I now understand why her master called her "half a man."

Well...not that it matters to me.

"Ares, I have a message for you from Stey. I'll recite it verbatim... She says,

‘How is Cacao doing? If you ever have any work for me, please let me know.’”

“...Tell her that I don’t know how Cacao is doing, because I can’t see it.”

To be perfectly honest, I can’t even be sure that Cacao is actually following me.

It’s our third day at sea. I finish my regular report to Creio and peer out the window in my ship cabin. Thick clouds fill the sky. The captain rushes into the room with a gruff look on his face. He opens his mouth to speak immediately, and a cold sweat drips from his cheek.

“A storm’s coming.”

“There’s no way we’ll capsize, right?”

“A storm entails monsters. They’ll attack, sneaking in with the wind and rain. ‘Devils of the sea’—that’s what sailors call ‘em. They’ve sunk countless boats. Until the oceans fell to the demons, they were the source of our fear.”

“Can we avoid them?”

The storm is still a ways off. The captain furrows his brow at my question.

“No chance—we’re too slow. They’ll come after us. The only thing we can do is pray we lose the storm as quickly as possible.”

The ocean is a terrifying place... Monsters that attack alongside a storm? It seems *Intimidation* won’t work well enough to keep them at bay.

I grip my mace and stand up. I will leave this vessel in the crew’s hands—I have nothing to offer here.

“Captain, I’ll leave the prayers to you. Send one up for me, too.”

“...*Sigh*. Ain’t that your job?”

The captain heaves an exasperated sigh as I step out of the room. The majority of the mainsail has already been folded up neatly. I suppose that means that trying to escape is pointless. The crew is buzzing around the ship’s deck, preparing for the tempestuous wind and rain.

Lightning flashes from a gap in the clouds. Judging from its speed, there’s no way we’d outrun this storm, even with a mage casting wind magic.

The hooded girl sidles up next to me. Her robe threatens to blow up from the wind and she holds it down, but...something bushy sticks out from under her overcoat. It wags back and forth, like she's going to use it to swab the deck.

She squints at the dark clouds above us, not noticing my gaze. "Boss. This is not a normal storm. The spirits are agitated."

"We could really use a mage at a time like this. Someone capable of blasting this thing far off into the distance..."

I think back to the monster-hunting party I used to belong to and just how stable it was.

"Not to brag, but I'm a deadeye with a bow. I'm good with knives, too. And I was just itching for a good workout right about now."

My hooded companion speaks calmly, but she can't hide her excitement.

Though she may have only a small amount of beast in her, there's no doubt she's got a more feral nature than most humans.

"I see... But you're a scout, aren't you?"

"And you're a priest, right? Boss, weaklings are weak, and the strong remain strong. You can't have your cake and eat it, too. You're too poor for that."

The person I'm employing just called me *poor*.

The deck lurches violently. An unruly wave crashes down, and the hooded girl shakes her heavy, waterlogged silver tail.

A passing crew member catches a glimpse of it. He's dumbfounded, eyes wide as saucers, and he slips on the deck and falls flat on his face.

It's high time...and the timing couldn't be much better. I speak to the hooded girl as she blinks repeatedly.

"Okay. Sanya, prepare for battle—and take off that hood."

§ § §

"The steel tiger werebeast is a natural-born warrior. There are very few in existence, but what sets them apart are their incredible instincts, devotion to the military arts, and innate muscular structure. Mister, any steel tigers deemed

unsuited to the art of war are culled as children. That's why there are no weaklings among the adults."

The small figure cloaked in all black who had promised to lend me mercenaries turned a golden coin over in the palm of their hand as they spoke.

Their voice was androgynous—I couldn't tell whether it belonged to a man or woman. However, I'd recognized their name as soon as they introduced themselves:

Bran Chatre, nicknamed Lightning Fury: one of the most famous mercenaries in all of the Kingdom of Ruxe—a warrior who had inexplicably disappeared from the limelight, current whereabouts unknown.

Some say he went up against the Demon Lord and lost; others say he lost his life rescuing a village. There are all sorts of rumors. I sure hadn't expected to find him belly-up at The Bar, though. Given the tremendous presence I could sense from him, this was no imposter. His voice sounded young, but judging from when he first made a name for himself, he'd have to be past his twenties by now.

Bran continued softly.

"These creatures are just different from the get-go. There's no particular reason...they're so strong. And a girl cute enough to make anyone fall for her, who won't balk in the face of demon foes, and with a strong tolerance for stress... There are very few humans with those requirements who can actually go toe to toe with such beasts."

"In other words, you're not able to meet my demands?"

I was well aware that my request had been unreasonable to begin with. Bran responded to my sigh-filled query.

"No, no, no. I did not say that I cannot meet your demands, Mr. Crown."

"Well, then?"

"It goes without saying that...they are strong. They're not like you or me. See, I've been pondering this inequality for some time now—"

I furrowed my brow at his roundabout manner, and Bran grinned broadly,

noticing my expression.

He flung the coin in his hand toward me. It flickered in the light, seemingly ablaze, before I caught it.

“To make a long story short—if humans cannot defeat these creatures, then you’ll need someone who isn’t purely human. I stepped back from the front lines in order to...produce someone who can attain that which I failed to. If they’re different from the get-go, then we must simply meet them there. Your conditions do not stipulate the mercenary being a *pure* human specimen, do they, Mr. Crown?”

“...Psssh. You’re off your rocker.”

What the hell does he have in mind...?

Of those living in the Kingdom of Ruxe, 90 percent are pure humans. Wurtz Beld, of Golem Valley, is a rare case. Discrimination was rampant up until twenty-some years ago. Things have gotten better today, but differences in culture and biology do make it hard to coexist.

I held the coin up to the light. It must have been specially manufactured—I’d never seen one this large.

“Mr. Crown, if you’re looking to kill a werebeast, then we must produce a werebeast of our own. You’re just in luck, sir. One of Lightning Fury’s apprentices just happens to be available. They’re only half a man, but I’ll give you a discount. Now’s your chance.”

The pure gold coin I held in my hand was engraved with the mark of the wolf.



A white beast howls in the wind and rain.

Short silver hair peeks out from underneath her hood, glistening in the rain, and raindrops bead on her amber cheeks. A fearsome howl erupts like thunder from her lips.

A werebeast’s abilities are proportionate to the amount of bestial blood they possess, and so far, this one’s strong instincts have me shaken up.

The mercenary I’ve hired, Sanya Chatre, is half werebeast, but she differs

from the steel tiger werebeast Felsa—she’s got more human in her genes. The lack of fur covering her body makes her appear almost entirely human. However, the beast-like ears on top of her head and the bushy tail protruding from a slit in the seat of her shorts definitely set her apart from humankind.

But even with the low bestial factor within her genes, her physical prowess and sensory perception are vastly superior compared with a full-blooded human.

Her bare amber limbs are thin and unblemished, and it’s not hard to imagine their explosive, supple power. For trailing, surveillance, and detecting danger—the main roles of a scout—being nimble and small in stature is a huge advantage. Conversely, such size normally denotes a lack of physical strength, but having werebeast blood protects them from weakening.

Bran Chatre is a mercenary whose accomplishments as a scout are well-known. Man or woman, perhaps it’s only natural for a mercenary to choose to teach a werebeast their most intimate tricks of the trade.

Sanya’s sharp, narrow eyes are those of a beast of prey. Her bangs are stuck to her forehead, but she clearly couldn’t care less as she stares intently into the storm. The flicker of light in her eyes shows she’s soaking up this moment with gusto.

Sanya flings off her overcoat and tosses it toward me. The belt wound tightly around her waist holds knives and long, thin black arrows. She doesn’t have the typical werebeast claws, so these are her weapons.

“Boss, wait here.”

It’s now blatantly clear that Sanya is not human, and the crew forgets the dire situation we’re in as they stare agape.

Sanya leaps forward to the ship’s railing, maintaining her footing even as violent waves crash against the ship.

She hardly seems like someone who answers to a boss, and I can’t help myself from asking her, “By the way, can you swim?”

“I can doggy paddle.”

I can't tell if she's being serious. Sanya dashes off toward the bow of the ship in a flash.

Bran Chatre has taught his skills to only a select number of individuals. More specifically, skills in tracking and assassination—the source of the “lightning” and “fury” in Bran's nickname, respectively.

They planned to pass down all his skills to one individual, and yet...half a man ended up fitting the bill.

Both mercenaries I've employed are two or three steps behind me in terms of overall ability. But they might actually eclipse me in certain aspects, or so their master says. Bran is a fairly casual person, and I'm still a bit concerned from what he told me, but at the end of the day, I believe I received exactly what I paid for.

Each movement Sanya makes is unusually quick. Her footsteps don't make a sound, and she's able to act mostly undetected. All the qualities of an assassin.

Her flowing silver hair is the only thing that stands out. From afar, her movements really do look like streaks of lightning.

The ship bounces up and down and the crew members cry out.

“It's a giant squid! We're gonna be ripped in two!!”

In the blink of an eye, a black mass has flung itself out from underwater and across the entire deck of the ship.

It's a tentacle as thick as my abdomen, unnervingly writhing across the deck; I can't see where it's coming from. The undulating tentacle's suction cups, each as large as a human hand, strike a primordial sense of fear deep within me.

I've battled some gigantic monsters on our journey thus far, but this massive squid will likely put them all to shame.

“...You can't be serious.”

I go down to the deck and smash the writhing outstretched tentacle with my mace. It bursts apart, blue-black blood staining the deck, as the dismembered half is swept into the ocean by the waves.

Instantly, a number of new tentacles stretch out and thrash across the deck.

The tentacles themselves are quite weak, and their individual attacks aren't powerful, but there are so many of them. Their movements are also erratic and relatively quick.

One of them winds across the deck and wraps around the leg of a deckhand who is clinging to the ship's edge for dear life to keep from being swallowed by the waves. The large, brawny man is easily suspended in midair, crying out.

I lunge forward in a single bound and annihilate the tentacle. The deckhand falls and crumples on the deck. He's still alive. The damaged tentacle ceases its writhing and slips back into the ocean. The appropriate level for defeating this sea monster is about 60.

"So its body is underwater..."

Choosing a smaller vessel is paying dividends. The ship is about fifty meters from stern to bow; at this size, we can deal with the sea monster no matter where it appears from. The bigger issue is capsizing.

"Stay away from the water! If you get dragged underneath, I have no recourse to save you!"

I focus my mind and concentrate my murderous intent into *Intimidation*. However, the sea monster's legs strung across the ship show no sign of retreat. This beast is either very wild or extremely perceptive. Regardless, it's a pain in my ass.

Sanya shows no sign of hesitation as she goes to work attacking the grotesque creature. She dashes around the unstable ship deck tirelessly, even using the tentacles lashed across it as footholds. She slashes into them with her large knives as they continue to suddenly appear in front of her. The tentacles then withdraw into the ocean as if fleeing her attacks.

Observing her, I realize we're not sunk quite yet. I'm slightly relieved.

Tentacles, huh? They're really not that strong, but if a monster of this scale is being controlled by demons, then it's no surprise the Kingdom's naval forces were obliterated.

Even if the crew is made up of capable warriors, once the ship's destroyed, it's a wrap. Humans aren't made to fight underwater.

The ship lurches suddenly—in an effort to distance us from the sea monster, we must have shifted the rudder. Waves come crashing down on us; my robe is drenched. Watching my footing on the slippery deck, I grip my mace and smash it into the vile appendages one more time. “Boss! Here it comes!” Sanya screams.

The second she warns me, the ship lurches so heavily, I’m convinced it will capsize. A massive form rises from under the ocean’s surface in front of us like a monstrous lighthouse jutting from the sea, its murky brown skin coated in mucus. I can’t distinguish between its head and body.

I can’t see its eyes, either, but this behemoth has clearly recognized our vessel as prey.

One of the crew members launches a harpoon with all his might. The razor-sharp tip scores a direct hit on the beast’s body, but it fails to penetrate and is swept away into the ocean.

“Damn, it’s massive... I don’t know if I can kill it with my mace...”

That said, it’s not like I have any choice. This behemoth will have no problem capsizing us.

A particularly thick tentacle wraps around the boat from right to left at the bow. It could easily smash through the deck. I close in on it and leap forward, prepared to dive into the sea. I aim for the beast’s body and smash into it from the side with my mace.

It feels like I’ve hit something thick and rubbery. The giant squid lets loose an otherworldly screech of pain as its massive body goes flying into the air, and a fountain of ocean water erupts in its wake, raining down on us.

It lands squarely on the ship’s deck. It’s not rock-solid but incredibly stiff. A shock wave from the force of the creature’s landing rocks the ship.

It seems the giant squid is highly resistant to blunt-force attacks—I’ve hit it square on, but it’s not dead. I must be the only priest in existence who’s bashed in a mollusk.

As I wearily reposition myself, lying in wait for the beast to attack again, Sanya suddenly appears next to me and draws her short bow all the way back.

Her bow glints ivory white; it looks like something that belongs in a museum. It's approximately half as long as Sanya is tall, and although it qualifies as a type of short bow, the flexed body and rigid string give it a quiet effervescence. The black metal arrowhead knocked in place appears sinister in comparison with the beautiful bow.

Wind and rain beat into us from the side. Illuminated by the lightning, Sanya's stance is sheer perfection, her silver eyes narrowed and keenly focused.

Werebeasts don't generally use bows, but this serves only as further proof of her tutelage under Bran.

The giant squid's black mass doesn't have any readily discernible weak spots, but Sanya's gaze is fully confident.

"Aim to kill."

"You don't need to tell me!"

With that, Sanya's lacquer-black metal arrow rips through the wind and rain, not straying even one degree as it pierces the giant squid dead center. The arrow was a veritable streak of lightning, and the instant it pierces and sinks deep inside the creature's body, the sky erupts with light.

Lightning descends from the sky, and a clap of thunder erupts with tremendous force. Before I realize what just happened, the sea monster has disappeared from the ocean's surface.

The crew members, most of whom are still hanging on to the ship's railing for dear life, are awestruck.

Sanya lowers her bow and looks at me, the corners of her mouth turned up slightly.

"Should I bill you for the cost of my arrows, boss?"

I wonder how much each one is? Her first-rate combat potential is now evident, but she pierced the squid's thick, rubbery skin and killed it in one shot—these can't be regular arrows. The lightning falling at the exact same time as her shot must have been a coincidence, but...

I begin to furrow my brow, but then I recall how she called me poor, and I

shrug instead.

It doesn't matter—all invoices simply get passed up the ranks anyway.

“Stay on your guard. The storm isn't over yet.”



“You’re sure industrious, boss. Almost like you’re taking a page outta my master’s book.”

Sanya sighs openly. I take it she’s not rude to just me, her boss.

In that instant, a massive figure slowly moves toward us through the thick fog. It’s even more massive than the giant squid, and judging from its shadow, it’s not a living being. One of the crew runs frantically across the deck toward the captain’s quarters, his face white as a sheet, screaming. His reaction is far more intense than when the giant squid appeared just minutes ago.

“Ghost ship! It’s a ghost ship! They hate the living! Shit, we gotta keep away from that thing! It’ll suck our souls right out of our bodies!”

“Thank God Toudou didn’t choose to cross the sea...”

I consider myself relatively fortunate, and yet this is what I’m dealing with. If this is my encounter rate for enemies, I don’t even want to know what Toudou’s unlucky party would end up dealing with. Seriously, it’s a good thing we didn’t come out to sea in a rowboat.

Sizing up the dilapidated ghost ship that appeared in the middle of the storm, Sanya stands, obviously annoyed.

“...Ughhh, I hate the undead...”

“They’re just my specialty...”

The ghost ship is many times larger than our vessel. The hull is riddled with a number of massive cracks; it’s a wonder that it hasn’t sunk, given the shape it’s in. Or, no, perhaps—perhaps it’s already sunk, and it just hasn’t realized?

It’s said wandering souls that perish on the open seas become listless and turn into demonic spirits. They then lure others in and continue to grow more powerful. How pitiful.

It must be something like fate that brought us face-to-face. I might as well purify them all.

As the rainstorm continues to pour down like a waterfall from the heavens, I turn my open palm to face the approaching ship as if drawing it in.



He's...a freak of nature.

Watching the events unfolding before her very eyes, for the first time, Sanya Chatre fully grasps the reason why her master dispatched her to this man.

He had the grit to decide to cross the ocean, even though it's under the Demon Lord's army's control.

He didn't hesitate for even a moment in attacking the giant squid with his mace.

The first time she felt something was off was when he told her how long he could maintain his *Intimidation*. Sanya's own time—three or four hours—is a long interval for any mercenary. Yet, when Ares heard this, he brushed her off and said he would cover any time outside of hers. These weren't the typical words of a priest, who generally doesn't have a scrap of combat ability to speak of.

She thought he was just reckless when he said he was providing support to defeat the Demon Lord, but judging by the scene in front of her, she realizes it's not altogether unfeasible. Sanya is conceited in the sense that she believes she's not just a normal mercenary, but her boss on this mission eclipses her—he's in a different league.

Sanya's estimation of Ares has risen. *In spite of everything, it seems this man's fit to be leader of the pack.* She nods to herself.

"Ohhh... Oh God..."

A single tear falls from the corner of the eye of Captain Romoro, the man who brought this ship out to sea in the first place.

Ghost ships are the most vexing monsters to fight on all the high seas. It appeared in the middle of a storm and is now chasing relentlessly after the vessel. There are many sea monsters to be on the lookout for: giant squid, which ambush ships and drag them down to the ocean depths with their tentacles, or ground sharks, which speed through the water and try to devour everything in sight. What sets a ghost ship apart from these is that it isn't alive. Regular attacks won't work on it.

This was once a regular ship that was sunk and then revived through pure

hatred. Now, it refuses to sink even on the wild, choppy seas, and the innumerable droves of undead crew members lying inside its quarters thirst by the second for new prey.

There are rumors that defeating the ghost ship's captain will destroy the vessel itself, yet no one has been able to verify such claims because there hasn't been a single sailor who's encountered a ghost ship and lived to tell the tale. If one appears, all a person can do is pray the brunt of its attack misses and try to escape.

Romoro was ready to die the moment he heard his crew's screams. There was no time to spare for regret as the terrifying chill of death seeped into his entire being from the feet up.

However, a plume of smoke erupts from the ghost ship, and it starts to pull back as if in retreat.

A single beam of white light illuminates the darkness, even blotting out the glow of the storm's lightning.

In the moment after the captain and crew recoil from the flash, it's all over. Next to the captain, a low-ranking deckhand who was similarly struck dumb by their awful situation rubs his eyes in disbelief. His gaze is fixated on the "harbinger of death."

"Captain, is this...a dream?"

"No—"

Their ship has just two convoys: a rather sketchy small-framed woman dressed in a hooded robe and a priest wielding a massive mace. Without an official permit from the Kingdom, they'd have been laughed out of port.

But now, a monster that normally heralded certain death is vanishing farther and farther into the distance.

It is that moment when the captain finally understands that Ares and Sanya are the most skilled convoys he's ever met in the decades he's spent on the high seas. To his knowledge, they are the first crew members to ever survive a ghost ship encounter.

Though he is momentarily stunned from the impact, the captain soon returns to his senses.

Their vessel is still caught in the storm. Its greatest threat may have retreated, but neither he nor the crew can let their guard down now. Monsters are not their only enemies.

Just as the captain begins to reprimand the low-ranking crew member, still petrified in a dreamlike state, the door to the captain's quarters opens. Ares steps inside from the wind, rain, and raucous din outside. His soaked hair sticks to his face, and he's drenched from his head to his boots, but his expression is perfectly calm.

A girl Captain Romoro has never seen before follows behind him and shuts the door. She has tanned amber-brown skin and silver hair. She has the signs of a werebeast protruding from the top of her head and her rear—most people would be taken aback, but the captain is wholly unperturbed.

Ares makes no mention of her and looks to the captain, speaking like he's making small talk.

"Captain, we need to follow that ship."

".....What?"

Ares whips his finger toward the direction of the ghost ship.

"We let it go, but it has an incredible amount of life force, potentially as much as a high-ranking demon. Do these ghost ships appear regularly on the high seas? How often do you run into one? They seem weak to exorcism, and they're a suitable enemy. I didn't expect it to escape after taking just a bit of damage, though. Shit."

Ares is clearly annoyed and clicks his tongue while the captain answers, stiff as a board.

".....No way in hell... We ain't gonna pursue it."

The werebeast following behind Ares grunts in a huff and says to him, "...See? I tried tellin' you... What'll we do if the ship sinks in a storm because of your recklessness?"

“We’ll doggy paddle.”

§ § §

“...Aren’t you going to have some?”

“I...don’t eat meat.”

The hooded girl answers Amelia’s question and stuffs her cheeks with a cubed chunk of travel rations. The open-air fire crackles. Amelia’s companion hasn’t changed at all, even since they got off the runner lizard.

The girl’s voice is relaxed—not a trace of anxiety. Amelia bites off a strip of the dried meat, expressionless until the strong salty taste causes the corners of her eyes to twitch a bit.

Amelia tends to keep a strict poker face, but the newest member Ares assigned to her does even more so—Amelia has no idea what she’s thinking. And the hood makes her face impossible to read.

Amelia has seen the face of her new companion—Rabi Chatre—only one time. Since then, she’s refused to lower the hood.

Rabi must have noticed Amelia staring at her. As if giving an excuse, she says, “I’m just really shy... It’s not that I don’t want you to see my face, Amelia. If you really want me to, though, I’ll take off the hood...”

“No...it’s fine.”

Rabi seems relieved at Amelia’s response and relaxes her shoulders, slightly squirming underneath the hood. Then she changes the subject.

“At the moment, Toudou and company seem to be doing just fine.”

“You can tell from this distance?”

Toudou’s party has made camp about three kilometers away. They’re within range of Amelia’s detection magic, but even Ares wouldn’t be able to tell what’s going on from this distance.

Amelia’s eyes go wide, and Rabi politely places her hands on her knees before answering.

“My hearing is...better than Sanya’s. That’s probably why your boss placed me

with you. I can detect anything happening around us in an instant.”

“...I see.”

Amelia’s detection magic is first-class and covers a wide area, but it’s not suited for daily use. With a party member at her side who can keep regular watch over their surroundings and excels in sensing danger, the chances of Amelia running into any real trouble are even lower.

Amelia falls silent and Rabi tries to ease her mind.

“Please don’t worry. My job is to protect you. I have confidence in my skills.”

Yet, even if this is the safest choice, traveling separately from Ares is less than ideal in Amelia’s eyes. Not that she could voice this complaint to his face, of course.

“Thankfully, no overly powerful monsters should spawn on the way to Cloudburst. The front lines are far north of here, after all.”

The route Toudou’s party is traveling has not yet been invaded by the Demon Lord’s forces. All that is visible across the expansive plain is sparse vegetation. There aren’t even forests, and the monsters that do inhabit here are limited to small furry animals.

Just as Rabi said, there aren’t any monsters that will attack them on their path.

“If anything, I’m worried about Sanya. Crossing the ocean in this day and age is hardly a sane decision.”

“...If that’s so, then why did you come with me?”

Amelia has sincere doubts about Rabi, whose tone of voice is without a trace of worry.

These two girls Ares hired are supposed to be mercenaries—and mercenaries generally shy away from dangerous missions. Not to mention the journey ahead is a perilous one that is sure to involve inescapable hardships.

Amelia can sense Rabi smiling from within her hooded cloak.

“Picking and choosing missions is for third-rate mercenaries. Taking a simple

job anyone can complete is not for heroes—achieving the impossible is. So says my master. If anything, Amelia, I’m perplexed by how you obey your boss’s every order... But I won’t bother you for the details. Prying into your affairs is not a part of my job.”

§ § §

“I had an idea when my master told me I was gonna cross the ocean...but now I really know why he dispatched me.”

We’ve made it out of the storm by the skin of our teeth, and the ship is peaceful once again.

Sanya stretches her back lithely in her assigned cabin. She’s tossed aside her drenched robe, and her tail, which soaked up water like a sponge, is now completely dry.

“My master loves to play tricks on people. He’s always throwing us headlong into precarious jobs.”

“If you’re upset about something, let’s hear it. Your food, provisions, and pay are equal across the board, regardless of how much fighting we do. I can also cast Heal on you, and depending on how things turn out, you might just get a bonus.”

“I was told that I’ll be fighting a steel tiger werebeast, but I didn’t think I’d be drenched from head to toe in seawater or battling a giant squid or undead. This is a scam.”

“No. I didn’t say anything about fighting a steel tiger werebeast. I only said that I require people who can take one down. Priests do not tell lies. And you didn’t even fight against any undead anyway.”

“AHHHHHHHHH! You tricked meeeeeee!!”

Sanya tears at her hair as she screams. The contract I made was only with her master, though.

There’s no way that someone as experienced as Bran would ever mistake the meaning of my words. This is a crime of conscience.

“Do you want to go home?”

“I’m only joking. If my master found out I ran away, there’s no telling what’d happen to me.”

Sanya furrows her brow at me. It seems she’s not so irresponsible that she’ll abandon her post.

Sanya rubs her tail, now dry of seawater, and makes a show of sighing at me.

“I gotta wash this later...”

“Will it hinder you in combat?”

“...Would you not bathe if it hindered you in combat?”

Bran said she’s a silverwolf. Unlike steel tigers, this breed of werebeast forms packs based on valor. Sanya is mixed-race—silverwolf and human. Aside from her ears, tail, and the color of her hair, she’s the same as a regular person. Her kind primarily leads quiet lives in packs within forests and the deep reaches of mountains; you hardly see them mingling with the human population. I’ve never even fought one myself.

Werebeasts, with their superior physical forms, do not typically wear any armor. This is also true for Sanya, who wears shorts and a bikini-top shirt that exposes her healthy amber skin. I had a hard time asking her to wear the hooded overcoat.

I assigned the other mercenary—Rabi—to Amelia because I knew she wouldn’t know how to handle Sanya.

I decline to answer Sanya’s question and change the subject.

“Has anyone on the ship reacted to your being a werebeast?”

I don’t know how deep werebeast discrimination runs. People might be biased against her even though she’s more human than werebeast.

Sanya lets go of her tail and stares into my soul with her silver eyes.

“Nah. They’re all too busy talking about the crazy priest who wanted to chase after a ghost ship.”

“...”

“You definitely showed me up, boss, definitely. We each leave a different

impact. Compared to you, I'm just a cute set of ears and a magnificent tail, merely a... No, *absolutely* a stunning human being."

"This isn't a damn competition."

I simply got excited because I rarely have a chance to level up myself.

Sanya howls, as if talking to herself.

"But I won't lose next time! I didn't come here to get soaking wet and shoot arrows at a squid. No matter how much battle lust you've got, boss, I don't want you taking my job."

Just who is talking about battle lust here? Don't lump me in with Gregorio.

Sanya puffs out her chest, full of pride. I have something to say myself.

"Yeah, I know. But make no mistake, this is just the opening act. The real adventure begins once we actually arrive at Cloudburst. Just settle down for now, and before long, you'll have more than your fill of demons."

"...Excuse me? I'm a scout. Combat's not my main occupation, y'know."

"Yeah, well, I'm a priest."

"Lies."

"..."

"Total bullshit."

"..."

If I'm not a priest, then *what am I*? I don't wield a mace just because I enjoy it or anything.

Not to mention, I've employed these two mercenaries to take care of battle for me. I never want to fight a steel tiger ever again.

Sanya has clearly misjudged me already. I tap her on the shoulder.

"Your bow skills are exquisite. I'm counting on you."

"...Mm. I'll do all I can."

Sanya must not be used to compliments. She ignores most of what I've just said to her and nods meekly.

Taking down that giant squid in the middle of a storm with a single shot to its weak spot was truly incredible, but steel tigers aren't defeated so easily. Because she's half human, her physical prowess is far less than a pure-blooded werebeast. She doesn't carry any other weapons except the bow and knives, either. Maybe she has a secret skill I don't yet know about?

I vacillate on whether to ask her. A mercenary's life is only as good as the hand they hold. They should never reveal their hand so easily, nor should it ever be pried into. Not to mention, Sanya doesn't have close ties to the priesthood like Stey does.

As I look at Sanya, who's started to tweak her bow, a noise erupts outside.

"Hey! A pack of ocean serpents is coming closer! Dammit! Just when we thought we were shit outta luck running into a ghost ship, we've now got these things to deal with! And all on the same day, in this massive ocean!"

"Call the convoys! Now!"

Hurried footsteps approach the cabin. This must be a greater number of monsters than when the storm hit. Being on the ocean makes being on land look like a cakewalk in comparison.

Sanya lets out a small sigh before standing up. She shoulders her freshly tweaked bow and begins to stretch. I furrow my brow and ask, just to check, "Sanya, has anyone ever told you you're bad luck?"

"Eh? Don't blame this on me. It's all you, boss."

"No way. I'm confident in my own decent amount of luck. You're the grim reaper here."

Sanya looks up at me, completely incredulous.

"Cloudburst, ho!"

Hearing the lookout's cry, Captain Romoro clenches his fist and exhales sharply.

This voyage kept everyone on their toes the entire time. The crew who worked so hard to operate the ship let out a collective shout of joy.

Past the wide expanse outside the window, a cityscape is visible near the

horizon.

It's unlikely that any massive monsters will attack at this distance from the shore.

There wasn't a single day of peace during our eleven-day voyage. We ended up getting attacked by one massive beast or another on a daily basis.

It started with the giant squid, the ghost ship, and the ocean serpents. Then came a behemoth turtle several sizes larger than our ship, some flying sharks, and finally, a massive bird so huge that it practically blocked out the sun. It felt like we were getting lashed by a storm for over half the trip. There's a good chance I wouldn't have been able to protect the ship by myself.

Hearing the crew's shouts of joy, Sanya—whose expression had been growing stiffer by the day—finally sighs in relief.

Even for someone who's been under Bran's intense tutelage, the constant swaying and lurching of the ship, the frigid winds, and having to protect the weak crew members have all taken a palpable toll on Sanya.

"...I did not imagine our everyday combat would be this arduous. There are too many monsters resistant to *Intimidation* out there."

Watching the brave crew members who had summoned the gumption to traverse the sea in this perilous day and age succumb to exhaustion and keel over one by one was a true nightmare. If I didn't cast Heal to cure them immediately, we would have run out of capable sailors to operate the ship.

Captain Romoro remained alert and gave orders until the last moment. He replies to me with visible shock, "...You're right. This voyage was exceptionally rough. A total disaster, the absolute worst experience I've ever had in all my years as a sailor. It's a miracle we've arrived in one piece."

"Thank God... So this was the absolute worst experience. It can't get any worse?"

"...Worse than this? Only thing I can imagine is running into the sea demon himself."

The captain screws up his face in a grimace. If this is rock bottom, that means

I've overcome the worst the ocean can muster. I didn't gain any levels, but I definitely gained experience. The ocean no longer scares me.

In the end, Sanya must be the one who brought all this calamity upon us—she's bad luck, no doubt.

She must be able to tell what I'm thinking—she casts a miffed gaze my way.

When I brought Sanya onto the ship, I expected trouble to break out between the crew and her, but it turned out that we were so busy going from one battle to the next that there wasn't a chance for anything to happen. That may have been our only silver lining.

"...I'm just gonna say it—you're the actual grim reaper here, boss."

"No use in bickering about it now. We need to be thankful we're here alive."

"...I've had my fill of the ocean for a while."

"Don't worry—we're done with the high seas. Next, we head to the ocean floor."

That's where the temple is located, after all.

I speak without a trace of jest, but Sanya looks like she's just witnessed the apocalypse unfold before her.

"...I'm gonna get some air."

Sanya plods out of sight. We've only just reached Cloudburst, but she's really had a hell of a time already. Seeing her leave with her tail sagging limply, Captain Romoro seems to have sympathy.

"That girl is a mercenary, right? She looks young—you better take proper care of her."

"...Yeah."

You're damn right. I've been looking for personnel for ages. I won't let her out of my sight.

Sanya is standing all by her lonesome at the bow of the ship. Given how melancholy she's coming across, it's no surprise that the crew members aren't speaking to her. They're all casting intermittent glances her way, but none of

them approach her.

“Rabi should’ve joined *you*, boss.”

“...”

“Even if you’re supposedly the strong one, bringing me here was a mistake. You’re messed up in the head—no matter how dangerous the ocean’s supposed to be, that was too many damn monsters. You’re nuts. You’re a swindler. I brought a hundred arrows with me and I’ve only got ten left.”

Sanya is at her wits’ end. As she swings her tail from side to side slowly, standing petrified, I pat her slender shoulder in consolation.

This girl is a mercenary. If she wants to escape, she can do so with ease. I have to keep her here.

“Sanya... Even without arrows, you have your knives, right?”

“Boss... Is that all you have to say?”

“Your arrows will be covered as an expense.”

“No. No, not that, boss. That’s a given. You’re totally heartless.”

Let’s not forget that hiring you was a private expense in the first place...

Sanya’s a lot more sensitive than I expected. I thought she had real valor. Now I’m concerned.

Her eyes downcast, Sanya doesn’t look particularly noble or strong. That impudence I saw when she first joined us has been washed away by the ocean. The high seas are terrifying, indeed.

“Sanya. Listen to me carefully. Compared with your predecessor, you are infinitely more accomplished.”

At least Sanya isn’t a total ditz and doesn’t fall on her ass. Her predecessor may have more mental fortitude, though.

Sanya blinks and looks up at me. Her eyes are a deeper silver than her hair, and tears fill them.

“I’ll tack some extra onto your pay and tell your master about your accomplishments here. So please lend me your skills for just a while longer.”

A while longer—yes, until Toudou defeats the Demon Lord, so maybe another three years?

I can no longer afford to support Toudou with just Amelia and myself. If it had been Amelia on board the ship with me, I don't think our stamina would have lasted.

As I lower my head solemnly, Sanya responds, bewildered, "...D-did I really do a good job? Better than my predecessor?"

"Yes."

Her predecessor was a real piece of work, after all. Compared to her, Sanya is void of any eccentricities and is easy to work with. She's simpler somehow. Some of the light returns to her eyes.

"Don't worry. Even the captain said this was the worst voyage he'd ever been on, right?"

"Y-yeah, he did."

"It was a bit rough—but it won't be as bad going forward."

Of course, I'm not going to tell her that she's a bad omen or anything like that. All's well that ends well.

Despite my consolation, Sanya suddenly looks reproachful.

"A *bit* rough? Did you say 'a bit'? I'll be blunt—I really don't think we're gonna mesh that well."

Yes, a bit. Sea monsters are massive, and being forced into the disadvantageous position of fighting from a ship's deck is a huge pain, but they weren't exactly fearsome enemies. Thanks to our sterling efforts in driving them back, we didn't even have any deaths.

Having an extra set of hands really does make a huge difference after all. Eleven days would be far too long to work without sleep or rest. It was worth hiring Sanya for that reason alone.

I look far in the distance toward the cityscape of Cloudburst before continuing.

“Without you, Sanya, I would have been forced to come to Cloudburst in a rowboat.”

“That doesn’t sound like a joke...”

It’s no joke. Back when I didn’t put any stock in the power of sea monsters, I would have probably done it.

Or, wait... Maybe if I was alone, without Sanya and her awful luck, the monsters wouldn’t have spawned like crazy?

Sanya is giving me the cold shoulder. I make a pained face and say, “It would be disappointing... Hugely disappointing, really, but if you don’t want to go forward, we can terminate your contract right here and now. Of course, that means you would have to pay me back... I’ll talk it over with Bran.”

There’s no way she’ll agree to it.

I droop my head dejectedly and Sanya swallows a lump in her throat before her lips move.

“...N-no—”

Hearing her speak, I snap my head to attention.

“Oh really? That’s a relief. Well then, let’s get back to the captain; everyone must be worried about us.”

“Wha...? W-wait— Huh?”

Sanya is thoroughly confused. I put my hand on her back and push her forward. Sanya is one of Bran’s disciples. If word was to get out that this legendary mercenary’s apprentice gave up after just ten days of work, I’d see the repercussions when looking for additional backup in the future.

Tripping over her feet as she walks forward, Sanya looks absolutely incredulous.

“Hang on... Did you just trick me?”

“Perish the thought. Okay, let’s go! The ocean isn’t your specialty, right? Once we meet up with Amelia and Rabi, everything will get easier.”

The color returns to Sanya’s face. She clenches her fists and pricks up her

ears.

“Y-yeah, you’re probably right! Once Rabi’s here...dealing with the ocean’ll be a piece of cake!”

“Your master told me that the two of you together are even stronger than he is.”

This is mostly lip service. Even with werebeast blood coursing through their veins, there’s no way two teenage girls could surpass the likes of a legendary mercenary known in every corner of the Kingdom.

“Yeah, that’s right. Hey, boss, how long did you say it’ll take Rabi and Amelia to get here?”

The lip service worked—Sanya is now completely recovered from her malaise. She must really miss her companion, Rabi. Now I recall that silverwolves form packs in the wild. Even though she’s half human, Sanya might have retained a part of this trait.

“They’re progressing just fine, without any particular incident. They told me yesterday that they were close to reaching a small village in the mountains. Once they pass through there, it’s a straight shot to Cloudburst. They’ll be here in a week to ten days, I’m sure.”

It’s extremely fortunate that nothing has gone wrong with Toudou and his party. That said, they manage to get themselves into trouble no matter what they do...

Sanya’s eyes are ablaze as she whispers, like a young maiden in love, “I hope Rabi gets here soon...”

“We’ll gather information on the temple until they arrive.”

“Okay. I’m good at that sort of thing, y’know.”

Looking toward the quickly approaching harbor, the silverwolf girl laughs, beaming with joy.



The small village that Toudou and party have arrived at lies quietly at the top of a narrow mountain path. It’s a mere footnote on the map they received from

the Kingdom.

They climb the path, driving back the occasional monsters that appear, and after arriving at the village just before sunset, they are met by a number of annoyed-looking villagers.

There are multiple routes that lead to Cloudburst, but avoiding the mountains makes for an extremely long detour. Toudou and company chose the narrow path they're on now because it's supposedly the shortest.

This small, self-sustaining village doesn't appear to get many merchants visiting it.

The party is asked a number of questions at the entrance to the village before stepping safely inside. After moving through there and down the mountain pass, it will just be a few more days to Cloudburst.

"...I wonder if something happened here?"

"It didn't seem like they were questioning us just because we're outsiders, that's for sure."

Toudou's expression grows stern as the villagers exchange hushed murmurings and furtive glances in the party's direction. It's not a particularly welcoming crowd.

Limis senses their rude, contemptuous looks and glowers right back.

"We should pass on through without stopping, don't you think?"

"Hmm. The sun's already going down..."

Toudou looks up at the pale-pink sky. Regardless of how strong the monsters in this area are, she would like to avoid descending the rugged mountain path in the dark.

"But this place...doesn't seem to have an inn, does it?" Limis notes as she checks out the few austere homes that line the village.

Yutith's Tomb, one of their previous destinations, also had a nearby small village—Purif—but it was nothing like this. The towns in Golem Valley were also small but still active with an influx of mercenaries.

Nothing about this desolate village indicates activity. In fact, it looks like it's about to rot away into obscurity before their very eyes.

Aria shrugs and mumbles, "...There doesn't even appear to be a church..."

The Church of Ahz Gried is highly involved in the daily lives of its people. Toudou always thought that even the smallest village had at least one house of worship, but she can't see a building adorned with the cross scale—the symbol of the Church—anywhere here. Without a church present, they can't level up or receive medical treatment in the form of holy techniques. They can't cast a prism to keep away any legions of darkness, either.

"How do the villagers even manage without a single church...?" Toudou wonders.

"...Who knows? ...I mean, it's a tiny little village, after all...," Limis chimes in briefly, almost like she's making an excuse.

Taking up the rear is a little girl with shining emerald hair—Glacia. She silently returns the villagers' empty stares. One of the villagers can't stand the tension of her wordless gaze and looks away.

The party quickly surveys the entire village, but they find only fields and crude homes—nary a shop in sight. They circle their environs and eventually come to a stop in front of an estate that's much larger than the rest of the houses.

"It doesn't seem like they have room for us. Maybe we're better off camping outside?"

"There are a number of exclusive villages, after all...and yet—there's something about the way the villagers are staring at us..."

Aria frowns, clearly perturbed, and in that moment, she hears a voice from behind.

"Goodness... What have we here? Travelers—what a rarity. You've certainly come at an awful time of year..."

Aria instinctively reaches for her sword on her waist in response. She'd let her guard down from being inside a village.

The speaker is an elderly man. He's bent at the waist and his skin is worn and

withered. His hands grip a gray cane, and his clothing is just as modest as that of the other villagers, but his sorrowful, cloudy eyes impart a sense of mysterious power.

He's completely undisturbed by Aria reaching for her sword. The group makes no effort to hide their wariness, and the old man speaks in a gruff rasp.

"My apologies. I'm...the village headman. You must have traveled long and far to come here... I'm sure you were shocked. However—there's a reason for all this. Please forgive us."

"A...reason...?" Toudou hesitantly repeats.

The village headman's expression shifts, and he hesitates before explaining: The god of a nearby mountain periodically demands a sacrifice, and as a result, the village has lost its former vigor.

"On the third night after the full moon, we must provide a young maiden as a sacrifice, or the god says it will destroy our village..."

The old man's eyes burn brightly, like a wild animal's. The incomprehensible emotion churning within them causes Toudou to shudder.

Is it despair? Anger? Sorrow? Or is it delight? She can't read him at all.

"Three days after the full moon—tomorrow, right?"

Limis furrows her brow and gazes up to the sky, now fully past sunset.

§ § §

"This village seems suspicious. There are all kinds of evil thoughts coursing through it."

"...Yes, you're right."

The strange squawking of a nearby bird can be heard off in the distance.

Getting too close to the village will put them at risk of being noticed by Toudou, according to Rabi's assertion. Therefore, Amelia and Rabi have made camp near a watering hole approximately one kilometer away.

The runner lizard made quick work of the narrow mountain path and rests on its haunches, exercising *Intimidation* on any nearby monsters.

The moon shines brightly. Amelia munches on a piece of dried meat, which she's rather sick of by now. Their conversation turns to the small village that Toudou and her party have stopped at.

"Any village without a church is usually not a good sign. All decent villages have priests assigned to them."

Rabi Chatre continues her bitter assessment casually. However, Amelia largely agrees.

The Church exists to lift people's spirits, and it also provides a certain utility. The lack of a church building doesn't come without a definite reason.

For example, any knowledge of the village's existence by the God of Order's followers would cause issues.

Rabi is speaking much faster than usual. Her shadow is cast sharply on the ground from the campfire light.

"Any god who demands a sacrifice is up to no good, best labeled an evil god."

"I've heard that intelligent monsters sometimes pretend to be gods in order to attract prey..."

"There don't appear to be any particularly strong monsters dwelling nearby."

Rabi puts her silken-gloved hand to her face and strains her ears against the night. Just as she said, there haven't been any monsters that have come to attack them and the runner lizard along this mountain path.

"Bandits have also been known to impersonate gods, but only complete imbeciles are fooled by them."

As Rabi speaks, Amelia stops and ponders. The path they've traveled is a sad, decrepit trail that not even itinerant traders would traverse. It's the sort of place that bandits would choose to lure in prey.

Rabi shrugs and looks up. Her face is covered by a thick cloth mask, and only her deep ruby-red eyes are visible underneath.

"Even if it was a god, they'd have to be incredibly foolish to meddle in something like this."

“ ... ”

“That’s what shocks me about people who go looking for trouble. I came here with you because your boss looks crazy and is clearly terrifying, but I should have left this up to Sanya. No matter how good my hearing is, I can’t stop anyone from throwing themselves into danger.”

“...Don’t say that—you’re supposed to be protecting me.”

Amelia sighs. Ares said that Rabi is the diligent type, but just how, exactly?

Rabi quickly takes back her words.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I’ll tell him directly when I have the chance.”

“Should we go to the village? Ares told us to meet with the party directly if necessary, after all—”

If Toudou is going to take on a favor for this creepy village, Amelia and Rabi will have no problem pretending to have run into them by chance. If they all get together, it should be possible to guide Toudou and company in a safe direction.

Glacia, the girl Ares snuck into Toudou’s party, has not proven a very accomplished spy.

Rabi stands up suddenly. Her figure, smaller than even Amelia’s, would be taken for a mere child’s if she wasn’t wearing her suspicious hood. She’s only about as tall as Limis, too.

Rabi pats the dust off her coat as she stands, saying, “No. As your escort, I cannot allow us to dive headlong into the face of danger. Personally, I’m opposed to it. I’m timid. Moreover...it’s not the time to panic just yet.”

“ ... ”

Amelia was told that Rabi has an exceptional ability to perceive danger, and she did get that feeling a number of times on their way here. However, isn’t this another matter altogether? Amelia is incredulous as she speaks to Rabi, who’s now turned away from the campfire.

“...Where are you going?”

“I’m going to gather some flowers and whatever else I find. There aren’t any dangerous monsters nearby, but you just stay right here, okay?”

Soft beams of moonlight illuminate the path. With a cheerless expression, Rabi runs through the sparse tree line. Her footfalls are light, and she hardly makes a sound.

Her hood, worn low, twitches back and forth. Rabi’s sense of hearing is vastly superior to a human’s; she can distinguish between the wind and the murmuring of a stream, and even with a loud bird’s cry mixed in, she’s easily able to ascertain what’s happening up at the mountain’s peak, where this god supposedly dwells.

“I got stuck with such an annoying job...”

Sanya, who is currently accompanying Ares, and Rabi are a team. They’ve always been paired together on any of their master’s assignments, and it’s rare for them to be working separately. Of course, they wanted to work together this time as well, but their boss wouldn’t let that happen.

Rabi is particularly perceptive when it comes to other people’s strengths. Unlike Sanya, who has to actually come into contact with someone first, Rabi can quickly tell who she can and can’t cross. Most people are easily appeased, but this time, their client could not be defied. It’s a rare case. When he said they’d be split up, she had no choice but to accept it.

The sharp gaze he gave her the first time they met flashes across Rabi’s mind, and she shakes her head to block it out. The only thing she should be thinking about and focusing on now is accomplishing the mission assigned to her.

Truth be told, compared to Sanya’s mission on the ocean, Rabi’s duties should be a cinch. It’s a simple escort job. She’s not exactly fond of these kinds of missions, but as long as she’s able to flee any danger, then it’ll be easy.

The water capital is still quite far away, but it’s not a dangerous stretch of land. The Holy Warrior should be able to cross it, and it’s unlikely that any troublesome monsters will appear.

“Oof... I didn’t expect the Holy Warrior to get himself wrapped up in this kind of trouble... I really miscalculated.”

Rabi stops near the mountain's peak. A cold wind blows abruptly, and Rabi gathers the sleeves of her overcoat, shivering.

In a moment, all falls silent. It's as if the world around her is holding its breath—there are no birds chirping, no beasts growling.

A sure sign that something is amiss. Maybe this is a high-level monster's territory, or someone's casted a prism.

The villagers were behaving oddly—there's no doubt that something inhabits the peak.

Rabi is a pacifist. In truth, she didn't even want to leave her village.

However, she has to complete her mission. She's been entrusted with protecting Toudou's party and Amelia. She learned about them earlier: The Holy Warrior's party is made up of only low-level members, and Amelia is a priest. Among the entire group, Rabi has the highest life force—even as half a man—thanks to her master's tutelage.

Even if she's assigned as an escort, she has a responsibility to assess her opponent thoroughly. That's one of a scout's most important functions, after all.

She rubs her hands together, wrapped in thin white gloves, and breathes deeply to calm her senses. She whispers in a shaky voice, "...There's something...here."

It's not her mind playing tricks on her. She hides in the shadow of a tree and holds her breath.

An icy shiver runs down her spine. Her innately timid nature—the ability to sense danger—is setting off alarm bells in her head. She quells the feeling rising up inside her and strains her ears.

Rabi is different from Sanya in that her sense of smell is not so fine-tuned. Her eyesight isn't that good, either. Rabi has faith in her ears and her ears alone.

She twitches her ears from within her hood in order to pick up any sounds. Rabi is petite. Compared with Sanya, she's much lighter and lacks muscle. She also doesn't carry anything like a bow and arrows. Her only option for defeating

monsters above a certain level is to ambush them.

Just then, something brushes against the toe of Rabi's boot. She furrows her brow and bends over to inspect it. It's white and hard. Almost like...some kind of bone.

Rabi quivers like a leaf. Then she realizes:

—*There's no sound.*

Even honing her auditory faculties, she can't read the presence of the monster that's supposed to have made the peak its stronghold.

Rabi clutches at her chest to quell the sound of her accelerating heartbeat. Her field of vision is shrouded in a dark void.

She looks up at the sky in sheer amazement. The moon, which was emitting a soft light until moments ago, has disappeared.

—*Wait, no. It hasn't disappeared.*

Rabi's eyes fly open in astonishment as an enormous black mass descends upon her, blocking out the light of the moon.

§ § §

The party climbs the mountain path under the glaring sun.

Toudou takes the lead, keeping her sword drawn and remaining on the lookout for monsters, while Limis follows behind with her staff.

"Hey, are you sure about this?"

A wasp monster the size of a small dog buzzes through the air, and Toudou cleaves it in half before answering, "...Well, it's on the way, after all."

Their goal is the mountain god dwelling on the peak that's demanding a young maiden as a human sacrifice. This is something that Toudou simply cannot overlook.

Toudou has fallen into the good graces of so many people since coming to this world. The villagers they all just met aren't necessarily one such example, and they didn't exactly receive a warm welcome, but still, she can't just ignore something like this.

Recalling the villagers' pallid faces, Toudou heaves a small sigh.

"Any god that demands a sacrifice...isn't a god at all."

"Well, even if it is, it's an evil god, no doubt."

"There's no way a god exists in a place like this. Garnet's been quiet, after all..."

Limis looks at Garnet, perched on her shoulder. Gods are vastly different entities from human beings, naturally. They have a colossal presence. If the being that's demanding a sacrifice is truly a god, then Garnet should be throwing a huge fit right about now.

At the moment, Garnet looks quite bored as its tongue slithers in and out of its mouth.

Glacia prods at the path with a stick she picked up along the way, looking highly curious about her surroundings.

The path to the summit is much better maintained than the path that led to the village, likely from all the trips up to offer sacrifices.

As they approach the peak, the air around them grows more and more silent. The cries of various insects and bird monsters are nowhere to be heard. Only the wailing wind remains.

Aria stops abruptly and surveys their surroundings, furrowing her brow.

"...It appears that we're not alone..."

The shiver running down her spine is definitely a sign that this is the territory of a powerful being.

Limis grips her staff in one hand, alert and ready to cast a spell at a moment's notice.

The summit is still a long way off. Toudou draws the holy sword Ex and looks at the path stretching up ahead. Aria adds, "I don't think it's some kind of god. That much would show in the terrain. I believe it's a small, cunning goblin of sorts. The villagers may have looked off for whatever reason, but I think their story was true."

“A goblin...huh...?”

Most of the monsters that Toudou has slain so far have been incapable of understanding human language.

Toudou retrieves her shield from her magical storage implement and grips it at the ready.

The only monster Toudou’s ever encountered that really possessed any sort of intelligence was the demon she saw in the Great Forest of the Vale.

Toudou may be much stronger than she was back then, but she’s not entirely sure she’s capable of defeating a demon of that ilk.

The party approaches the summit. Toudou narrows her eyes.

“...I can smell blood.”

“...You’re right.”

Aria nods and turns her steely gaze to the mountain peak. The path has only sparse trees, leaving nowhere for any creatures to hide. That means they can’t, either, but the chances of being hit with an ambush are low.

Thirty-three—that’s the number of people the village headman said have been offered up for sacrifice over the past ten or so years. In that time, many mercenaries passing through have summited the peak to eradicate the evil god, but none of them have returned.

Toudou shivers as she ruminates over this information, but it’s not out of fear—it’s excitement.

There is nothing that the holy sword Ex can’t cleave through. Limis’s flame magic has burned all kinds of monsters to a crisp, and even Aria made it through the battles they faced in Golem Valley.

Their chance of victory aside, Toudou could not refuse the village headman’s request. Because she, Naotsugu Toudou, is the hero.

A crudely fashioned stone altar lies at the peak, built by hewing stones together and stacking them haphazardly. Its facade is riddled with cracks, and had they not been told there was an altar at the peak, they might have never noticed it.

The mountain isn't very tall, but with nothing around to block their view, they're greeted by a resplendent scene stretching far below.

The party approaches the altar, the front of which is covered in dark-red stains. It doesn't impart any degree of sanctity.

Toudou has visited a number of churches in her life, and they all had a particular atmosphere about them, as if all traces of filth had been wiped clean.

She looks away from the altar and checks her surroundings. Aria is standing just behind her, guarding her blind spots. Limis raps her staff against the front of the altar and says hoarsely, "There's...nothing here."

The moment Toudou goes to answer, she notices a black figure passing through the trees. Just as she's about to cry out, Aria appears to have noticed it as well, and her expression turns grim.

"An ursine. I wonder what it's doing so close to human civilization..."

As Aria speaks, the black figure in Toudou's field of vision begins to take shape.

The dark mass she had been seeing was its back, blanketed by an umbral coat of fur. Now, it stands up slowly and locks its two dimly gleaming golden eyes on Toudou.

The figure moves languidly as Toudou rasps, "...A bear?"

"It's a monster," Aria explains hastily. "Nao, use caution. They are formidable. And this smell of blood—"

The ursine stands tall on both its haunches directly in front of Toudou.

The smell of blood intensifies. The creature's thick black fur made it look like some great enigma. Once it stands up, it closely resembles the bears that Toudou is familiar with, the only difference being how stable this monster appears to be on its two hind legs. Long bladelike claws extend from both of its front paws.

The ursine starts dashing forward. Its swift two-legged gait makes it look just like a human. It closes the gap between them in an instant, and as Toudou recoils at its unexpected behavior, the bear goes to strike her without emitting

so much as a roar. Aria steps in quickly to block its claws with her blade.

Aria's magical sword Lightning Howl and the bear's lacquer-black claws clash, sending sparks flying. The bear's claws slide along the blade, producing a horrible screeching noise.

Toudou is left momentarily petrified from the scene, and Aria pushes back against the bear's claws with all her might as she shouts, "Nao! Ursines are high-level monsters! Stay alert!!"

The beast swings down its other paw. Aria's warning snaps Toudou back to her senses and she blocks the swipe with her shield. The weighty impact rushes through her arm, and her thoughts finally catch up to the action.

The bear is nearly three meters tall. It stares down at Toudou with its emotionless golden eyes.

"Flame Lance."

Limis's spell launches toward the bear. The bear sidesteps the deep-crimson lance and avoids the attack. The magic lance rockets through the air and impales the trees behind, scorching them to cinders.

"It avoided a *spell*?!"

Toudou's breath is ragged. She's shocked by what just transpired, but she still steps in to deliver a diagonal slash attack. The ursine receives her blow with its claws.

Toudou feels slight resistance from the blow, but the holy sword Ex slices right through the bear's jet-black claws. The tip of her sword grazes the beast's right arm, and it howls in surprise.

The monster holds its right arm as if protecting it, almost humanlike, and stomps on the ground furiously. Stones that had landed nearby now fly through the air, and Toudou blocks them reflexively with her shield. The bear is well outside of her sword's attack range. Roughly ten meters away from them, the monster examines Toudou and her party with palpable rage in its eyes.

Toudou can feel intelligence in that gaze, and she shudders with fear. She didn't expect the giant bear to stand on two legs, much less behave like an

accomplished warrior. She's completely shaken up.

"What...is that thing...?"

"It's a type of monster endemic to Ruxe's northern regions. They're highly intelligent and have bladelike claws, and they'll attack anyone who enters their territory. These monsters are very closely related to demons."

"Very closely related...to demons?"

Aria circles around the black beast and alters her stance. Toudou swallows a lump in her throat—the ursine's expression is fierce, serious. She speaks again without taking her eyes off the beast.

"Is this...what's demanding the sacrifice?"

"That's a question of just how intelligent it is... However, it is possible. At the very least, there's no way any of the villagers could attempt to take it down. Even the average mercenary wouldn't likely—"

This is the first time Aria has actually fought one, but their fearsome nature is well-known among the nation's military. Ursines inhabit the mountains, so it's exceptionally rare to see one on the prairies. However, encountering one of these monsters here almost certainly leads to an immediate order for its quick defeat. Even though Aria has leveled up recently, this is not the sort of monster she should be fighting one-on-one.

Toudou could possibly take it down in one blow with a sneak attack from the holy sword Ex, but this bear is already on the defensive.

However, that doesn't mean they're completely out of luck. They are four members strong, after all.

Aria expertly positions herself in front of Limis in order to prevent any attacks from landing on her, even haphazardly.

A monster this intelligent will assess the difference in ability between itself and its opponent. However, this particular ursine is highly agitated and breathing raggedly. Although the claws on its right paw have been sliced in half, it shows no sign of fleeing.

This creature is teeming with pure wrath. Bloodlust fills the air and Aria is

frozen stiff.

The monstrous bear rushes forward with unbelievable speed for its size.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

Toudou instantly rushes to close the gap and howls at the monster as its claws come slashing down.

§ § §

The city of Cloudburst is unlike any place I’ve been to before.

Its development is readily defined by one characteristic: the massive canal running throughout the city.

In keeping with its name, the “water capital,” the canal and the bizarre, complex waterways that branch off it are full of countless boats coming and going. It’s much faster to charter a boat than travel by land here.

Most of the people who pass through are elementalists, since this is a sort of holy ground for them. They are all high-level mages who are skilled enough that they can be particular about the spirits they form covenants with, and so long as they’re not an anomaly like Limis, they can likely employ the services of elemental spirits other than water types. The fact that the city hasn’t gone to ruin despite the lack of any ships entering its port is perhaps a testament to the efforts of the mages who travel here.

“I’ve surveyed the area briefly, but there isn’t anything to be concerned about.”

As I walk around Cloudburst, I hear a voice from behind me. I wasn’t particularly on my guard, and yet I didn’t expect her at all. Her concealment skills are highly formidable.

The owner of the voice—Sanya—sidles up beside me.

She’s already lowered her hood; her silvery wolf ears twitch back and forth, surveying our environs.

“I see... What about werebeasts?”

“Werebeast mages are extremely rare, so they’d stick out. None here. I don’t detect any followers of darkness or any kind of hostile presence. I can’t detect

the sunken temple whatsoever, either.”

“What about any other disturbances?”

“There are plenty of those in this day and age. I don’t sense anything particularly off.”

We haven’t been in the city for very long, but Sanya appears to have ascertained our surroundings quite thoroughly.

A talented scout’s work looks like magic to the uninitiated. She was able to locate me without my having told her of my whereabouts, and she even gave me a report on her findings—truly incredible.

Sanya points to her nose and casually tells me, “Demons and anyone affiliated with the Demon Lord give off a particular scent. It stings the nostrils. That scent is nowhere in this city. We’re safe for now.”

All I can smell is the sea... I can only imagine how easy things would have been in Golem Valley with her around.

“Anything else?”

“I wouldn’t be able to detect if someone affiliated with the Demon Lord had their memory wiped from a potion or spell. I think we can eliminate that possibility, though.”

“You’re probably right.”

Cloudburst is not a famous city. Its importance falls far short of Golem Valley’s.

I wouldn’t waste my efforts on this place, even if I were the Demon Lord.

“Keep me up to speed if any anomalies pop up.”

“Yes, boss.”

Sanya responds with complete confidence. According to Bran, the mercenaries I hired amount to only half a man each, so I imagine that Sanya isn’t distinguished in the realm of combat.

I’m seriously looking forward to seeing what the full-fledged scout Rabi has in the way of surveying skills.

“Also, boss, when will Rabi and the others get here?”

“Toudou’s party has taken a pit stop, so...”

Per Amelia’s report, it looks like Toudou and company have undertaken the task of defeating some kind of suspicious mountain deity. I’m not particularly worried, since she mentioned that Rabi claims to not have detected the presence of any strong monsters, but it all depends how things transpire.

“Once they settle their current affair and make it through the mountains, they should be here in ten days.”

“So not long, then,” Sanya answers promptly.

I have some lingering concerns about Amelia and Rabi’s combined combat skills, but Sanya must trust them. I can’t help myself from being so worried—maybe I should take a page out of Sanya’s book.

“It all depends on just what sort of mountain god they’re dealing with. They might be forced to descend the mountain and take a different path.”

Sanya swishes her tail and looks puzzled.

“Hmm, well, it’ll only be a beast creature or, at worst, a demon, right? And Rabi won’t be the one fighting it.”

“A beast creature is one thing, but they’ll definitely struggle with a demon...”

Even a half-breed werebeast doesn’t have much of an advantage against a demon.

In reality, Sanya may stand a better chance, but Rabi doesn’t have a fraction of the stamina or strength in her blood that Sanya does as a silverwolf.

That said, it’s not like I’m actually expecting Rabi to fight.

Sanya blinks at me for a couple of seconds in response and shakes her head before saying something unexpected.

“No, Rabi won’t have any problems. She’s stronger than I am anyway. What do you think the ‘fury’ in ‘Lightning Fury’ stands for, boss?”

§ § §

This enemy is formidable. Toudou lets go of all her previous inclinations and

slashes her sword down on the beast.

She hesitated on her first attack. But even now that Toudou has repositioned herself to face her opponent head-on, it's still very strong.

The air resonates with the black beast's howls and Toudou's ragged breaths. The bear must have sensed the difference in this attack—it now aims a swipe of its claws at the hilt of the holy sword Ex. Toudou parries the blow with her blade, feeling the bear's incredible power reverberate through it, and takes a step back.

She's quite fortunate that she managed to cleave the claws of its right paw in half with her first attack. And she's lucky to outnumber it.

"I'll guard Limis!"

Just as she said, Aria puts herself in front of Limis. She aims her sword at the beast's eyes to divert its attention. Limis squeezes her eyes shut and recites a brief incantation.

The bear's manic gaze shifts from Toudou, to Aria, to Limis. Its expression is muddled with animosity and intelligence. Then it hones in on Toudou and brings its injured right paw crashing down.

In that moment, Glacia, who had been circling behind the beast, leaps into the air. She grips the blunt weapon that's nearly the size of her entire body—a war hammer even Toudou would have trouble wielding—and swings it swiftly, bringing it down in front of her.

The ursine notices the attack at the last second and turns to evade, but it's too late—Glacia's war hammer smashes it into the ground beneath.

Flesh and bone audibly creak. The ursine bellows in retaliation, and in the same moment, Limis's spell incantation is complete.

Having silently taken note, Toudou and Aria step back. The bear's eyes are racked with pain as they fixate on Limis. Innumerable balls of fire rise around her. She brings down her staff with force and chants the spell's name.

"Rapid Flame."

The flames shoot forward like bullets in pursuit of the beast, which has

already started to retreat. The spell's impact hits the ursine directly in its jaw.

A dull thud. The giant beast flies through the air from the impact, but the attack isn't over yet. The remaining flame projectiles floating around Limis all rain down upon the bear in succession. They strike its arms, legs, face—a perpetual firestorm.

The impact of the flame bullets, which would instantly incinerate a low-level enemy, sends the bear tumbling across the ground. The flames subside, and the air reeks—the bear's fur is singed. But the black bear still writhes.

Limis gasps when she realizes that the ursine has repelled each and every one of her flame bullets.

“...!”

“Limis, follow it up!”

It's been damaged but not mortally.

As Aria screams, she approaches the downed bear. Toudou rushes forward in tandem and steps in to attack from the side. Limis prepares another incantation, this time planning to fully incinerate the bear.

The ursine stands up sluggishly and howls, shuddering. Its vile cry rips through the air but Toudou shrugs it off, completely fired up. This howl is nothing compared to what she saw in Golem Valley.

The bear twists its body to avoid Toudou's diagonal sword slash, but this time, she manages to just barely puncture its hide. The bear contorts its face as black blood sprays through the air. Toudou steps back and Aria jumps in. Her fluid strike flashes like lightning, but the bear catches it with its claws.

This creature is superior in speed and physical strength. Yet, no matter how strong the opponent, constantly fending off blows will leave an opening. As the bear tries to retreat, Glacia is lying in wait, swinging her war hammer as if it were just a twig.

In that breath, Limis finishes another incantation.

“Flame Sword.”

She brings the massive red-hot flame blade directly down on the bear's head.

The party immediately surrounds the ursine, and it crashes to the ground in front of Toudou like it's just lost its balance. Its black fur is charred and riddled with scars; fresh blood stains the ground.

Toudou lowers her holy sword, flecked with blood and viscera. She pants raggedly, recalling the battle as she looks down at the lifeless bear that didn't even manage to let loose a death knell.

Beholding the long, sharp claws splayed out on the ground, she whispers, voice trembling.

"What a horrid beast..."

"You were lucky to rob it of its right claws with your first attack. Those things are so sharp that they can be forged into blades themselves," Aria responds, her expression still stiff. This was a monster far more formidable than any of them could have imagined.

Had Toudou not been able to damage it with her first attack, they might not have gotten off so easily.

"I thought it was just a normal bear..."

"Right—because it looks like one. Ursines killed a lot of people before they became more commonly known."

"...Well, this sure is a weight off our shoulders, then."

Limis hasn't cast any spells in a blue moon, and as she stumbles a bit, she picks up the claws of the fallen bear. The long, bloodied talons give her the creeps; they look like the blades of some sort of cursed sword.

"If this is ursine territory, then there probably aren't any other monsters around... At least, I can't imagine anything more powerful inhabiting this place."

"Let's take the body and return to the village."

Toudou touches the beast's corpse, still warm, and deposits it into her magic-item storage.

She takes a look around, but there isn't a trace of any human sacrifices—only the ursine's blood and remnants of the battle.

“...Yes, let’s head back. We need to report this.”

“...Right.”

Toudou stares at the small altar for some time before nodding at Aria’s prompting.

The moment the party returns, they notice a change in the atmosphere back at the village. However, it’s not a good change.

The mood was dark when they first visited the village, but now, upon returning, it’s even grimmer.

The villagers’ eyes go wide as they pass Toudou and her party. They look genuinely shocked.

“Did something happen?” she wonders aloud.

“...Let’s pay the headman a visit. He should be waiting for us there,” replies Aria.

The party hurries to the headman’s house. If they’re not quick, they might not be in time to stop the preparations for the sacrifice.

They arrive at last at the headman’s residence at the end of the village. It’s a small abode—hardly enough to be called an estate.

The villagers have surrounded the house from a distance, peering over as if here to observe the situation.

When Toudou looks toward them, they collectively cast their gazes to the ground. Their behavior is suspicious, but in a different way from when they first visited.

The thick door opens as soon as they knock on it. Peering through the gap is a young girl the party has never seen before, probably around the same age as Limis, but her dark-brown hair and alabaster-white skin belie the fact that she’s just a village girl. Her eyes are red, like rubies, but it’s a different part of her that attracts more attention.

It’s her ears, which droop from the sides of her head—clearly not human. The girl isn’t bothered by Toudou’s gaze and beams at her before turning back around. Her long skirt, extending below her knees, rustles gently.

“Gramps! Toudou’s back!”

“Gramps...?”

At her call, the village headman appears from the rear of the house. His appearance hasn’t changed from when he first explained the conditions of the sacrifice to Toudou, but his eyes are shockingly lifeless. He looks at Toudou suspiciously for a little while before quickly jerking his head up.

Before the headman begins speaking, the young girl takes Toudou by the arm and leads her into the house. It’s just the headman, the young girl, Toudou, and her party inside.

The sun is high in the sky. If they hurry, they should still be able to descend the mountain today.

“Toudou, we are eternally grateful to you. It was...my turn to head up to the peak today...”

“Not at all... I only did what I could.”

“Ideally, I would like to offer you some form of thanks... But there’s nothing in this village...”

“The ursine’s body will fetch a high price as materials. You don’t need to worry,” Aria answers. She’s been staring at the headman, who still looks unwell, for some time.

The young girl must have noticed Aria staring. She would have been the next to be sacrificed. The headman’s young relative slaps him on the shoulder. He looks terrified, his whole body shuddering.

“Hey, Gramps! Tell them ‘Thank you,’ too!”

“...I-indeed. We are deeply indebted to you.”

Toudou watches the two of them doubtfully, but the young girl’s sweet smile wins her over. She must be very thankful—after all, she was the one set to be sacrificed.

“Well then, we’re actually in quite a hurry, so...”

“Yes. I pray for a successful journey for you and your party.” The young girl

folds her hands and fingers together in prayer as she responds.

The group leaves the village and heads down the mountain path.

Toudou recalls their experience as she cuts down the monsters that stand in their way.

“...What a weird place,” she grumbles.

“...Yes, I agree...”

The village was small, but it left them feeling more uncomfortable than any other place the party had visited before.

Limis, who’s been quiet so far, lets out a sigh of relief. The image of the young girl, bound for sacrifice, is burned into her memory.

“...She was a werebeast, that girl.”

“Yes, it’s certainly rare to see one in a place like that.”

She had droopy, downturned ears and a cheery expression that was out of character for that particular village.

Werebeasts are not the target of any specific discrimination according to the Kingdom of Ruxe’s laws.

That said, they don’t face direct discrimination, but they are quite rare to behold. There’s also the fact that many of them have sided with the Demon Lord’s army.

The party didn’t expect to see a werebeast, a rarity even in the royal capital, all the way in this far-flung place.

“She said she was a relative of the village headman... But seriously, what a rarity. She must be mixed race somewhere down the line.”

“They didn’t even look anything alike.”

From age alone, they looked like grandfather and granddaughter, but the physical resemblance just wasn’t there.

Amelia must have been thinking the same thing—she nods emphatically.

“She has to be a mixed-blood wererabbit. Out of all the werebeast breeds,

they have the smallest number under the Demon Lord's control."

"Wow, really?"

"They're mostly of timid spirit, and they dislike conflict. Which is why they're not quick to side with the Demon Lord, nor with humankind..."

"Also... They're known for their stunning appearance and as symbols of peace," Limis chimes in.

Hearing this, Toudou recalls the young girl. Her slender frame and innocent smile couldn't be more removed from conflict, that's for sure.

Surely she must be considered a heretic back in that village. That could have easily been the reason she was next up for sacrifice.

Toudou continues to ponder this for some time before saying in the cheeriest tone she can muster, "...In that case, we need to hurry on ahead for her sake, too."

"Once we're through the mountains, we can use the carriage. That won't leave long until we arrive at Cloudburst."

Toudou takes one last look behind her: the cloudless sky, the towering mountains.

Not even a glimpse of the village is visible.

§ § §

Rabi Chatre waits for Toudou to disappear from view completely before letting out a sigh.

"I can't stand any of this!"

"Eep...!"

The village headman yelps and falls over, then looks at the villagers now surrounding Rabi. A number of them have their bows aimed at her.

But it's futile. She may not be very physically capable, but she's not so weak that an amateur's arrow would ever pierce her.

Rabi sneers, something she never did when pretending to be the young girl for sacrifice, and spits out her words.

“This village is pathetic. Using a monster like that... Is this what they mean by ‘The older, the wiser’?”

“N-no... I...”

“I knew all along. There are barely any children here, yes? Who would dare to suggest sacrificing a young girl?”

The headman has no answer. There’s nothing he can say to Rabi, who killed the same kind of beast that has murdered so many mercenaries looking to get their revenge and then dragged its massive head back to the village. The face of the creature that died without knowing just what hit it is burned into the back of the headman’s mind.

The fact that Rabi doesn’t even look strong at all is the most terrifying part.

Amelia, who was surveying the village, returns and states matter-of-factly, “I found an underground storehouse. Inside are what I believe to be the personal effects of those sacrificed.”

Rabi nods in understanding and leans toward the headman, locking eyes with him.

An ursine is a ferocious magical beast, but they have no practice that demands human sacrifice, nor are they inherently malicious.

The one that attacked Rabi in the middle of the night was three times the size of the one she left behind for Toudou to fight, and it was the same breed. The fact that the entire sacrifice story was a bluff is now obvious.

Otherwise, why else would they mention it to anyone who visited their village?

“Well, I had a pretty good idea of what was going on when there weren’t any personal items left behind in the ursine’s den.”

A mercenary’s equipment is valuable. You could easily build an estate or two off a single item, depending on the type. Mercenaries always carry weapons and often precious stones, which don’t even take up much space. That alone is reason enough for people to prey upon one another. There’s nary a mercenary weaker than the average villager, but if there are any powerful beasts around

that can finish the job, that's an entirely different story.

To add it all up, there's no way that a monster demanding sacrifices from a village just happened to be lying in wait on the Holy Warrior's path. Human malice is far more prevalent in comparison.

Rabi's questioning is quite simple, and the village headman replies, trembling, "P-please forgive me. It was just a spur-of-the-moment decision..."

She puts her index finger to her mouth, contemplating.

"...Certainly...the truly culpable one here is the magical beast, and under the law of the Kingdom, we can't quite charge them with any crimes."

In reality, a traveler getting lost on their path is a daily occurrence. Without any witnesses, this incident would never have come to light.

There's a glint in the village headman's eyes as Rabi explains. He lowers his head down to the ground in supplication, a pitiful expression on his face.

"Y-yes, that's right! I beg of you. I'll give you everything we collected. Somehow...please forgive us this time..."

Rabi looks pensive for a few moments before finally grinning.

"Hmmm..... No."

"...Wha—?!"

The village headman is dumbfounded. His head cocks unnaturally on its axis before tumbling to the ground. A few seconds later, almost like a delayed reaction, blood gushes forth from his neck.

Suddenly, Rabi is holding a nearly foot-long hatchet in her hand.

His disembodied head rolls on the ground. Amelia grimaces as she looks on in astonishment.

"You certainly didn't...hesitate."

"Recovering the victims' personal effects is a given—the dead have no use for them. These people will harbor grudges, so I'll have to cut our losses. Unlike Sanya, I'm timid, so I don't intend to leave even a scrap behind for fear of what the future might bring. Even if...these people aren't particularly strong."

Rabi left the smaller ursine behind to gauge the Holy Warrior's abilities, and also because she knew that Toudou might stay in this area for an unforeseeable amount of time if he couldn't find anything.

Rabi knows her own weaknesses. She's far weaker than Sanya in terms of physical strength and intuition. Sanya's strong; that's what makes her and Rabi different. Rabi has to be stealthy in order to survive. She has to leverage her lovable appearance and tremble like the weakling she is in order to throw her enemy off their guard. In other words, the "fury" in "Lightning Fury" means an absolute assassin.

The crowd cries out, and an arrow flies toward her. Its aim is way off, but Rabi smashes it to bits with her hatchet regardless, then flies at her next trembling prey.

Now that she's shown them who she is, she can't leave a single witness behind.





Second Report

On the Advance Preparations in Cloudburst

“Goddammit, Bran, giving me the exact opposite impression... What the hell was that bastard thinking?”

Sanya is slightly apologetic as she says, “I’m sorry. It’s just...that’s the kind of person my master is.”

Bran originally told me that Sanya is a combat specialist and Rabi is better at scouting.

Who would expect that a wererabbit, a famously pacifist race, would be stronger than a silverwolf? This is a sham!

Sanya must be used to it. She stretches her back lithely and says, “I mean, who cares? Everything went just fine. Rabi’s always had a tendency to hide things about herself, besides.”

“Even from her employer?”

“Yeah, ’cause she might get betrayed otherwise, y’know? Not that we think you would betray us, of course.”

Sanya doesn't look like she's joking. She's likely had such an experience.

As have I. Part of a mercenary's job is putting their life on the line.

For now, I decide not to complain any further. There's nothing wrong with Rabi being strong, and now that I know, I can consider it for her next assignment. Now is not the time to be grumbling.

I follow Sanya's lead through the city. We pass the port at a swift, confident clip and end up on the edge of town.

The dusky coastline is riddled with sand and pebbles. A small shrine is visible farther down the coast.

Sanya has already finished surveying for abnormalities as well as a preliminary check on things, and she explains to me, "The underwater temple in Cloudburst wasn't built recently. It was created by elementalists long ago."

"It's tiny."

"That's only the entrance. The actual temple lies on the ocean floor. That said, reaching it is no walk in the park."

"Perhaps, but establishing a covenant with a high-ranking elemental spirit is not an easy task to begin with."

Such elemental spirits themselves are rare to begin with. Any mage who manages to establish a covenant with one is considered the best of the best—that's truly how profound these elemental spirits are.

Sanya shakes her head in disagreement and twitches her tail.

"No, that's incorrect. Reaching the temple is the real hurdle, but at the same time, it's not forbidden to enter or anything. By the way, I should ask... Boss, can you cast elemental spells?"

"...No."

In that moment, I realize what she's getting at. I might have made a huge mistake.

Sanya furrows her brow. Her brawny bare arms obviously don't belong to a mage.

“I figured. And neither can I, nor Rabi, of course.”

“So you’re saying...that elemental spells are required to reach the sunken temple?”

“Not just any elemental spells. You have to be underwater for a long time, which requires a particularly powerful spirit covenant. Crazy, right? You need to be in a covenant with a high-ranking water spirit in order to enter a covenant with another high-ranking water spirit.”

So what the hell are we supposed to do? In that case, we have no shot, and neither do Limis or the others, for that matter.

After all, we’ve traveled all the way here because of the party’s distinct lack of a water elemental covenant.

A certain mega-ditz pops into my head, and I brush it off. I’m utterly lacking in useful personnel yet again.

In any case, we enter the austere shrine. It’s filled with a number of mages and guards, who glance toward us for a moment before quickly losing interest and looking away. The security here is laxer than I expected.

Upon entering, the first thing that catches my eye is a still pool of water. At approximately ten meters in each direction, it looks like a massive bathtub. The clear water reveals a staircase heading down into the ocean’s depths. It’s completely submerged.

...Unreal. *This* is the entrance?

Sanya looks perplexed. I stare into the pool for a moment, pondering.

“...Sanya, how long can you hold your breath?”

“I really don’t think you should be depending on me for every last thing, boss.”

Amelia is a mage for all intents and purposes, but she can’t cast elemental spells. Learning them at this point in time would be a tall order for her.

“Could we drain all the water? No, I guess not...”

“I can’t believe you’d even suggest it. You’re the nuttiest person I’ve ever

worked for, boss.”

“Shit, if only I could use magic...”

An elderly male mage looks at me suspiciously for a moment but quickly turns his gaze back to the pool.

He peers intensely and recites an incantation before slowly descending the staircase. His entire body is covered in a pocket of air; his magic allows him to repel the water. This must definitely be the way to enter the sunken temple.

“What do you think about hiring a mage?”

I serve essentially no purpose here. Sanya quickly shakes her head at me.

“Nope. Boss, that’ll never work. I actually looked into it a bit, but no one will go along with such a request.”

“And why’s that?”

“It’ll exhaust your magical energy reserves. That kind of job puts a huge burden on a mage, and mages who can continually cast that spell on a large group of people essentially don’t exist. If they run out of magical energy on the ocean floor, we’ll all die, and even if there was a mage who could pull it off, anyone of that level doesn’t need the gold you’d offer.”

She’s right—mages tend to prefer pursuing various mysteries over monetary wealth. Guess we really don’t have a shot at this.

Do I seriously need to get that ditz over here? ...No, leaving fate in her hands would be absolutely ludicrous.

I’ve half given up when Sanya taps me on the shoulder and mentions somewhat cheerfully, “But then I looked into it a little more, and there was one other possibility. It’s not perfect, and there are problems involved, but...what d’you think?”

“Not perfect...and with problems involved,” she says. My life is riddled with problems—what’s the harm in tacking on one or two more?

“...Spit it out.”

“It’s a magic item, boss. There’s a magic item that allows non-mage amateurs

to swim to the bottom of the sea.”

“...That’s convenient. So what are the problems?”

I’ve never heard of a magic item made especially for going underwater, but this is the water capital, after all.

Sanya glances over at a young female mage who is just about to step into the pool.

My eyes fly open at her unexpected appearance. She’s not dressed like a traditional mage—she’s wearing a swimsuit. It’s pretty damn skimpy, too; if it weren’t for the staff she’s holding, I never would have guessed she’s a mage. She notices my gaze and stares at me, glowering, before turning away and silently entering the pool. It doesn’t look like she used any actual magic, and yet she still heads underwater without incident.

That must be the magic item—a swimsuit, which doesn’t interfere with movement underwater, like regular clothing would.

Seeing it firsthand, I suddenly feel immensely hopeful.

Sanya looks back to me and sighs briefly before mentioning, “The item’s manufacturer is more than a little eccentric, from what I’m told. Apparently, he’s really stubborn.”

“Leave it to me. I’m an expert in persuasion.”

Sanya stares at me blankly before cracking a huge smile, like she’s just heard the funniest joke ever.

§ § §

The blade flashes at the speed of light. Amelia can’t even determine the moment it flew from its sheath.

The head of a wolf, nearly as large as a bull, tumbles onto the ground. Soon after, its body crumples to the earth.

Rabi lowers her hatchet after delivering the blow. It’s not even bloodstained, and she returns it to its sheath on her waist.

Her baggy sleeves hide her arms entirely. No one would be able to anticipate the sheer combat strength within her slender outstretched arm. Truthfully, if

Rabi was to attack Amelia, she wouldn't even know what was coming until the split second before her death.

Rabi's movements are so quick and accurate that they are second nature to her.

The wolf's head lies on the ground, its neck vertebrae fully visible from the clean cut.

Rabi pays it no mind and hops up onto the runner lizard's back.

They've come down from the mountain, and a barren wilderness stretches to the horizon on the prairie around them. Toudou is visible far in the distance.

Amelia is convinced this is all a sham. Up until this point in their journey together, Rabi didn't show a single sign of this kind of power. She chose to flee from all the monsters they encountered before, but ever since decimating the entire village, she is no longer pretending to hide her abilities.

There isn't a speck of blood on her person or even her blade. She likely doesn't have a scent on her, either; every monster on these plains sees Rabi as prey and goes to attack her, but they don't even have a chance to scream in the throes of death before they're slaughtered.

"...You're quite strong, Rabi."

Rabi answers, unconcerned, "I'm simply exploiting their blind spots."

Her carefree tone belies the fact that she just razed an entire village to the ground for exploiting travelers for human sacrifice, all without leaving a shred of evidence behind.

Rabi's unaffected demeanor terrifies Amelia, and she can't suppress a shudder of fear.

Amelia was prepared for a few victims here and there, and it's not entirely uncommon to hear of entire villages getting annihilated.

Even if Amelia and Rabi hadn't been the ones to expose their secrets, the village headman and his conspirators would have faced retribution sooner or later.

That said, the way Rabi massacred those villagers—as if she were mowing

down some weeds—was not normal.

Rabi keeps her eyes fixed on the road ahead and says, “I’m weak. If I hesitate, I will die. My master taught me this.”

“...Perhaps you should stop being a mercenary, then?”

“I needed a way to protect myself. Half-blood wererabbits...fetch a high price, more so than humans or elves. My own particular bestial gene expression, the makeup of my blood, is especially valuable.”

“...”

Rabi speaks with pure emotion. Amelia shuts her mouth at “*fetch a high price.*”

Although not the case in the Kingdom of Ruxe, it is well-known that the wererabbits—a rare species—are highly valuable.

Rabi is exceptionally beautiful. Her skin is so clear it’s almost transparent, practically showing her veins, and her eyes shine like jewels. That guarantees she’ll fetch a fine price.

Amelia is sullen and falls silent, and Rabi quickly adds, “Not to mention, if I didn’t become a mercenary...whose heads would I chop off? I’d turn to a life of crime.”

Ares, save me! This girl is a murderer!

Amelia furrows her brow and holds her head in her hands, sighing deeply.

The journey is going well. After passing through the mountains, it’s a straight shot to Cloudburst.

“Yes, everything is going fine here. We’ll arrive in a few more days.”

Cloudburst is located within the country of Ruselfo. It’s not nearly as well aged as the Kingdom of Ruxe, but its location surrounded by mountains and sea has left it unexposed to the relentless march of the Demon Lord’s army. It is a peaceful country.

The monsters they encountered along the way weren’t part of the Demon Lord’s army, nor were they powerful enough to be worth mentioning.

Amelia gives her report before her superior's reply comes in from Cloudburst, still far away.

"I see. Well done. I'm really glad you aren't having any trouble."

"Have you had any issues on your end?"

Ares sounds tired. After a brief pause, he continues.

"...We're currently occupied with trying to find a way to access the sunken temple. It's a trivial issue, but... Amelia, I might as well ask. Can you cast elemental spells?"

"...No, I can't. Picking them up in such a short amount of time would likely be quite difficult."

"That's what I thought... Don't worry about it. Even if you could, it wouldn't make a difference with the kind of rut Toudou and his party are in. I'll figure something out. Somehow."

"Did anything happen?"

"They need a magic item in order to get to the temple, and the manufacturer is some dumbass old fart."

"Dumbass...old...?"

Ares isn't actually that upset, but his voice is listless. Rabi glances at Amelia as she stokes the campfire.

"Well, at any rate, you don't need to worry about us. Just focus on getting yourself here safely, Amelia."

".....Understood. But about this magic item... What is it called? I might have heard of it..."

"...It's called mermaid armor—"

The transmission cuts off abruptly. Amelia goes over the words in her head and blinks repeatedly.

Rabi has her hood pulled low over her face, as usual, and looks up at Amelia, asking sweetly, "Did something happen?"

"...No. Everything is as it should be."

She hesitates for a moment before looking back at Rabi dejectedly.

§ § §

The only magic-item manufacturer in all of Cloudburst is an old man about half my height.

He's short and rotund, with curly reddish-brown hair, brown eyes, and a beard.

His physical stature would indicate dwarf heritage. Dwarfs are a race generally known for their deft handiwork and steadfastness, and they often work jobs that require smithing skills. This fellow, however, is wearing a gaudy patterned shirt and gives off an oddly flippant air. His shop's appearance isn't particularly dignified, either, what with its name emblazoned on a huge sign in yellow paint. From the outside, it doesn't look like the kind of place that sells valuable magic items.

"Sorry—come again?"

"Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck... Yer outta luck, sir! I don't sell my magic items to men!"

The old man's laugh is creepy, and he's talking way louder than necessary. His lascivious gaze peeps at Sanya's bare thighs; she must already know what he's like, as she smiles wearily.

I suddenly feel a sharp pain in my stomach for the first time in a while.

"And why is that?"

"Yer askin' me why?! I got into the magic-item trade to help pretty laaaaaadies!! Just lookit this beautiful mermaid armor! Still gonna keep on with yer blatherin'? Huh? Or d'you think yer gonna wear it? Yeh wanna defile my grand masterpiece?! Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck—"

He slams the counter repeatedly and brings a scrap of cloth out from behind it, again with the repulsive laughter. Locked in his grip is a light-blue bikini. The bikini itself is the magic item? Good God.

That's strange... Here I thought we were on a quest to vanquish the Demon Lord... Maybe this is all a dream?

The creation of magic items is a professional artisan trade. It requires

knowledge, experience, and skill. There are far fewer artisans who have all three of these in spades than there are blacksmiths and mages in the world.

Some magic items can be mass-produced thanks to advancements in technology, but it's extremely rare to find a skilled artisan capable of crafting an original magic item.

Any town with just one of these people is highly fortunate; that's just how unique the art of manufacturing magic items is.

The magic-item craftsman Zolan Sola, as he calls himself, is invaluable personnel, no matter what can be said of his personality.

His face is now red from excitement as he puts one leg up on the counter, waving the bikini up and down and leaning his body forward. This dwarf looks absolutely hammered.

"What's that? You wanna know why the bottom don't got any fins?! All the better to see that sexy ass 'n' thiiiiiiiighs!!"

"Nobody asked!!"

What a maniac. Why are all the talented people such weirdos?

At that, I realize why the shop is void of any other customers besides the two of us in spite of its cache of rare magic items. I wouldn't be here, either, if I didn't have a Demon Lord to defeat.

Yet the fate of the world depends on my actions. If I give up just because this old man is a bit touched in the head, then the world will surely fall into ruin. I take a deep breath and look at Zolan. *It's okay, I tell myself. I'm a customer. Just a customer.*

Thankfully, Toudou's party is almost entirely girls. I really didn't think his skirt-chaser streak would produce real-life results, but here we are. The only problems are Toudou and myself. Worst-case scenario, I don't have to go underwater. I'll just send someone to tail them.

But it will be more than unfortunate if Toudou can't travel to the sunken temple. It's too good of a chance to further boost his combat skills.

I calm my breath and place both hands on the counter. With one leg still

hoisted up, Zolan furrows his brow.

“Well then, does this so-called ‘mermaid armor’ work even if a man wears it?”

“?!?!?”

“The hell?! Boss?!”

Sanya is practically shrieking. Zolan’s face goes stiff like he’s frozen.

The mermaid armor, which looks like nothing but a regular old bikini, falls from his hands.

“Listen, make no mistake. I have no intention of wearing it. I’m asking just in case—just for reference.”

“Ha...ha-ha-ha, I th-thought so, boss.”

“Y-yer...yer serious, ain’tcha? Ain’tcha...?”

Zolan’s thick lips tremble as he lowers his leg from the counter. Am I serious? Well, I’m not out to vanquish the Demon Lord just for kicks, but even I have a sense of pride. I won’t be wearing a bikini.

...But really, the design of this mermaid armor is abysmal to begin with.

“You... What’s yer name?”

“Ares. Ares Crown.”

Zolan closes his eyes and repeats my name. When he reopens them, I can see a faint, pathetic light within.

“Ares... I know where yer comin’ from. But please...I need ya to understand, this item’s fer women only.”

Why is this turning into me getting lectured?

Sanya backs away from me, thoroughly creeped out. No, dammit, no—I have no intention of wearing that thing! Toudou’s the one who’ll be wearing this. Don’t worry—he’ll do it. He’s the hero, after all.

Zolan’s eyes well up as he continues to falter. What a huge difference from how he was acting just moments ago.

“Listen now, Ares. There ain’t any male mermaids out there. After all, they’d

be *mermen*, see? They might sound similar, but they really ain't."

Zolan grips my sleeve, trembling, his eyes bloodshot. Goddamn, he's desperate.

"Ya got it, Ares? You listenin'?! Mermaid armor plays tricks on the ocean! Real mermaids have divine protection from the sea; that's why they can't drown on its floor. Mermaid armor is created in order to allow girls to be temporarily mistaken as mermaids. Ya got that?! I'll say it again! Even with mermaid armor on, men can't become mermaaaaaaids!!"

"Yeah, I got it. I understand. But what about an androgynous-looking man?"

"Ya don't understand a goddamn thing! Come to yer senses, Ares! Ya can't ever become a mermaid!"

I said I'm not going to wear the damn thing!

Zolan's gaze shifts to Sanya behind me. The perverted look he had earlier has dissipated.

"O-oh, that's right, Ares! This lady here can become a mermaid—I'm sure of it! Once ya see her in it, you'll definitely come back to yer senses!!"

"Huh? Me? Um..."

Sanya looks down at the bikini on the floor. She seems to be on the fence about it, but since her job is to follow Toudou, she'll be wearing it, unless she can find another option.

However, Sanya has a tail. Does that matter?

"The chest is...baggy."

"Y-you don't say..."

"And my tail's all...scrunched up."

It doesn't seem like this is working at all.

Sanya comes out from the back room of the shop, looking the same as before, and slams the bikini on the counter. Zolan narrows his eyes at the forceful gesture before meeting her furious gaze.

"Th-that's too bad... I don't got any smaller sizes."

“Grrr... You’re lucky I’m not Rabi. Your head would roll.”

Don’t get reckless now, Sanya...

Sanya sulks and retreats behind me. She’s far from well endowed, but the perverted old geezer obviously has high expectations.

“By the way, will the item still have the same effect even if it doesn’t fit?”

“...Boss. I’m just letting you know—there’s no way I’m wearing that!”

“Yeah, I know. But if you stuff your tail in, it should work, right?”

“...You’re lucky I’m not Rabi. Your head would roll.”

Again with the reckless talk.

Zolan cheerfully takes the mermaid armor and puts it away behind the counter.

This might sound ridiculous, but it must take a lot of work to alter the size of a magic item like the mermaid armor.

Not to mention, we’ll need up to seven sets—for Amelia, Sanya, and Rabi, as well as Aria, Limis, Glacia...and Toudou.

Even if all seven of them don’t need to go down to the ocean floor, we’ll definitely need multiples. If the smallest size available is still too big for Sanya, I have no faith that it will fit Limis, Rabi, or Glacia properly.

Why the hell am I taking this so seriously?

“How many sets do you have on hand?”

“...Three. If ya order ’em custom-made, it’ll take at least ten days to make an additional set.”

Ten days... How the hell can it take ten days to make a bikini? Oh, right...it’s a *magic* bikini.

Zolan looks at me and grins slyly.

“Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck! Should ya be wonderin’, it’s ’cause I create each ’n’ every set with painstaking effort...”

“...”

“Acquiring the necessary materials is no small task. Otherwise, I’d be able to make the item quickly, but I’d hafta take the risk of goin’ underwater.”

Great, now he’s talking about materials. Toudou will be here in ten days or less. I’d like to have all the equipment ready by then, if possible.

I have no idea what kinds of materials are required, but I do know a thing or two about taking risks. Zolan is looking up at me with the same sly grin.

“Maybe it’s ’cause of how dangerous things are these days, but I’ve been losin’ a lotta customers. Whaddaya think? If you can provide the materials, I’ll give ya a discount.”

“That reminds me—what’s the original price for one set?” asks Sanya.

This whole situation is so absurd, I’d completely forgotten to check the price.

Zolan crosses his arms exaggeratedly and bares his teeth, saying, “Hyuck-hyuck! C’mon now—it ain’t all that much. It’s got a refined design and handy features, all for the price of just ten million lux.”

“Right. Sanya, we’re going after those materials.”

“Huh? Um, okay.”

As if I’m paying one-tenth the cost of Stey for a single item we’re only using locally.

Having received a list from Zolan, we head out to search for the materials.

It seems that “mermaid armor” is just a name, and the materials are largely sourced from aquatic organisms.

Sanya moves nimbly and confidently, unbothered by the stares her ears and tail receive as we proceed through Cloudburst. She seems to have the entire city map in her head already, too. I really got a steal on this girl.

We head for the city’s outskirts along a channel for large ships. Sanya doesn’t stop for even a moment as she says to me, “Hey, boss, wanna hear something funny?”

“...Hmm?”

“That dwarf Zolan Sola... He’s married. And get this—his wife is drop-dead

gorgeous. She was in the back room.”

“...The guy’s a married man, and yet here we are risking our lives for this bullshit?”

Sanya spins around on a dime, her silver hair gleaming brightly as it reflects the light. The metallic sheen of her fur is further proof of her silverwolf heritage. Our conversation is mere small talk, but her tone is remarkably serious.

“And she’s an elf. I bet Zolan makes the base elements for his items and she imbues them with magic. And judging from the theory that Zolan explained, it’s not just regular magic, either. It’s something more powerful, more arcane. Dwarfs are skilled with their hands, but they lack any significant magical disposition. Zolan is definitely gifted, but the mermaid armor is likely a joint effort.”

Aha... I guess the tale of the miraculously intelligent yet perverted dwarf was too good to be true.

Sanya smiles, content with her findings, as I nod. Her tail is wagging back and forth, a sign of her good mood.

“Elves and dwarfs hate each other. Elves live in the forests, and the majority of dwarfs live in the realm of fire—deep in the mountains—and don’t come out. Ordinarily, the two groups would never even collaborate on work like this, but Zolan’s made it happen.”

“...Don’t tell me you’re onto something here!”

Sanya’s eyes go wide as dinner plates. Bull’s-eye.

She stares at me and brings her hands to her face like she’s just gotten a whiff of something foul.

Then she looks up with a piercing gaze so sharp it’s hard to believe she was so exhausted on our journey here.

“Boss, magic-item crafters are valuable. He says his name is Zolan, but he’s gotta be some kind of an evil genius. It’s too bizarre for someone like him to be out here in the sticks. If his personality wasn’t such garbage, there’s no way the

nobility or other mercenaries would've let him leave Ruxe."

"He didn't seem like he was acting, though."

"It's not an issue of whether he's acting or not."

There aren't many people who can actually use magic items, let alone create or appraise them. I sent the necklace I discovered in the Devil-Faced Knight's hidden chamber back in Yutith's Tomb, along with the golden amulet I found in Golem Valley after defeating Felsa, over to the Church headquarters for examination. The results are still pending.

I wonder if I could manage to negotiate with Zolan to appraise the items, particularly the golden amulet that belonged to members of the Demon Lord's army. Any information on it could prove time sensitive.

Sanya stares at me intently. She's not a ditz or a moron or anything... Maybe if Stey was entrusted to Bran, she'd make something of herself, too...

"That was a pretty funny story."

"Glad to hear it. I'll look forward to that bonus."

Sanya crosses her arms and smiles boldly.

We've passed outside Cloudburst's city limits and walk along the coast for twenty-plus minutes before arriving at a small inlet.

"Hey, can you swim?"

"I already told you, I can doggy paddle."

This place must be a well-kept secret—there's no one around. The water is clear, and if I focus my eyes, I can see monsters swimming underneath.

Sanya stretches her limbs like she's preparing for a swim. She's wearing a dark, thin shirt and shorts. A number of knives hang from her belt. I guess she won't be using her bow—she's taking this seriously.

Her tan arms stretch through the air lithely as she looks back at me.

"Speaking of which, boss, can you swim?"

"Well enough that I considered swimming my way to Cloudburst at first."

“...”

Sanya falls silent and turns away from me. Most things can be learned simply by raising your level.

I lightly swing my mace and inspect it. I won't remove my priest's robe—it might get stolen. The same goes for my mace.

We'll be adding underwater combat training to today's regimen. At my high level, I should be able to move underwater with the same ease as on land with a bit of practice. I'm sure I won't be able to augment the natural limit of my lung capacity, however...

Sanya plops down and starts doing the splits, effortlessly touching the ground with her entire torso. Her chest is pressed flat and sand sticks to her cheek. Impressive. Sanya looks up at me while maintaining the same position.

“Boss, let's have a contest. Whoever collects the most materials wins.”

“What for?”

“Do you need a reason for everything? 'Cause it'll be fun!”

Nothing in her serious gaze indicates *fun*.

That reminds me—silverwolves are the same as normal wolves in that they form packs. A recognized individual becomes the pack leader, and they descend on opposing groups of monsters and other enemies as one. Supposedly, the leader is determined through a one-on-one contest.

Sanya may only be half werebeast, but as long as she's of mixed race, she might have the same instincts somewhere within her, too.

Very well—I'll play along for the first time in a while. Sanya is eagerly waiting for an answer. I sigh as I give her my response.

“But I'm a priest, and you're a scout with a special set of skills. It's unfair.”

“I've never learned how to catch fish, though... So what d'you wanna do, boss?”

She should already know.

“If you lose, you will receive an arbitrary penalty. If I lose, nothing.”

“Pen...al...ty? ...Just what do you intend to do to me?”

Sanya looks extremely dubious. She stands up and brushes off the sand stuck to her chest and stomach.

I look down at her, staring intensely, and give it to her straight: “A cash-back penalty.”

“...You’re really stingy, boss.”

I’m working on a tight budget here!

At my provocation, Sanya looks woeful for a split second before getting a grip on herself and replying, “All right. If I lose, I’ll forfeit my share of our wages. But don’t you dare go easy on me!”

“Of course not. Don’t forget what you just said.”

I have no reason to say no—losing won’t cost me a thing.

We lay down precise ground rules. There are a number of different materials we need to collect, and they vary in degree of difficulty to obtain. We allocate a different number of points to each material depending on that difficulty. Whoever gets the most points wins.

I watch Sanya as she continues to talk excitedly. From her expression, she clearly doesn’t think she has a chance of losing.

After we finish discussing the details, Sanya asks me, “By the way, boss—think you’ll win?”

“I have doubts.”

Facing off against Stey would be a different story. Sanya is elite in both gathering information and in her physical abilities.

I don’t know a thing about the materials we’re going to collect, but Sanya probably does. Even at my high level, I don’t stand a chance in a regular competition.

Taking all this into consideration, I shrug and say, “But I also don’t intend to lose.”

“...That’s what I thought.”

Sanya licks her lips and takes out a coin. It's the same gold coin that Bran used, engraved with the mark of the wolf.

"I'll flip this coin, and when it hits the ground, we start."

"Okay, got it."

Sanya tosses the coin high into the air with an effortless flick of her thumb. The finely polished gold dazzles, shining in the sunlight as it falls. The muscles on Sanya's slender limbs are taut, ready to spring into action.

Obeying the rules, I wait for the exact moment the coin sticks into the sandy beach and swing my mace high in the air toward Sanya. Her eyes bulge out of their sockets, and my perfectly timed mace swing cuts through the air.

My mace doesn't even graze Sanya and smashes into the ground, kicking up sand that scatters and lands in my hair.

"Wh-what the hell was that for...?!"

In the blink of an eye, Sanya kicked off the ground and evaded my blow before landing a few meters away. She raises her voice, trembling.

Her initial velocity was incredible. I slowly lift up my mace. Sanya's entire body is stiff.

I had no intention of killing her, but I also didn't hold back. I can't help myself from letting loose a wondrous sigh.

"There's nothing in the rules about not attacking each other."

"...That's messed up."

"You evaded it expertly."

As I admire her feat, Sanya takes a few light steps toward me. She still has some leeway, yet she's stiff as a board, terrified.

"...Rabi and my master come at me without warning, too. And didn't you do something like that when you made a bet with my master, boss?"

So this wasn't the first time for her, huh...? That would definitely give her a better chance of evading. I instinctively click my tongue.

She's been taught well. I'd expect this sort of thing from Bran, but Rabi, too,

huh?

“Your master’s...an oddball, that one.”

“I guarantee Rabi won’t want to hear you say that. Later!”

Even with the sandy beach’s unsteady footing, Sanya takes off with astounding velocity and performs an incredible swan dive straight into the ocean.

She evaded my first blow—which she wasn’t expecting—so landing a second one will be impossible. Bran really screwed me over with that discount.

“...Damn... Well, no matter. Time to get down to gathering these materials.”

I’ve already paid Bran for Sanya’s services. Whether I’ll get my money’s worth is questionable, but as long as she performs the requisite work, then it doesn’t matter. I’ll consider myself lucky to have been shown just how much I can depend on her.

The final result is a complete blowout.

“Boss, you’re tough, but you’re too slow.”

Sanya surfaced only once the sun had gone down, after the time limit we’d set. Maybe she was trying to be vigilant with me, or perhaps she was too busy actually obtaining the materials, because she didn’t come up for a breather even once.

Sanya drags a huge net behind her as she comes up to the beach and shakes her whole body wildly, sending the water droplets from her hair and tail flying. She really looks like a dog. Her breathing is slightly ragged as I reply in amazement, “No, I’m not that slow. You’re just fast.”

“Yeah, right... Ugh.”

Sanya scowls, looking somehow embarrassed. Maybe she just realized how immature she can be at times?

You simply can’t compare someone with mixed werebeast heritage against a regular human. They’re just too fundamentally different.

The sheer amount of materials caught in Sanya’s net makes it easy to tell

who's won without even counting them up.

Sanya must be thinking the same thing—she turns away from her net and looks up at me.

“Hey, boss, why didn't you try to get in my way? ...I mean, like you did in the beginning.”

“Because getting in your way would hinder obtaining all the materials we need.”

“Speak for yourself!”

It hurts to miss out on pinning a cash-back penalty on Sanya, but I'd have had my priorities screwed up if I'd focused on that instead.

Sanya's net is filled with what we need to craft the magic item, including starfish and shellfish, sparkling brilliantly, and some translucent seaweed.

I scoured the ocean for these but hardly found any. They're harder to look for than I imagined.

I glance down at the gigantic squid I struggled to drag all the way back here and can't find a single word to say.

Sanya childishly puffs up her cheeks at me.

“You said you wouldn't go easy on me...”

“I didn't...”

“Then why the hell'd you catch a giant squid?!”

Well, it attacked me when I was underwater, so...

The giant squid I fought was leagues stronger than the one we fought on the sea. They're a lot quicker than I am and can move through the water freely and easily. On top of that, I can't even breathe down there, and my own body is much more encumbered underwater.

“You'd have to go pretty far out to sea to even find one of these things!”

How the hell should I know that? It just appeared out of nowhere.

I didn't stray that far into open waters... It must have been a squid lost at sea.

Sanya has come out on top of our competition, and yet she looks disgruntled. I guess if I was competing to collect the most materials and my opponent spent all their time battling a giant squid, I might be, too. I think for a moment before checking with Sanya. “We still need more materials, right?”

“...? Uh, yeah, we can’t possibly gather them all in one day...”

Finishing on a sour note like this is pretty upsetting for me. Proper business affairs should always be conducted with mutual respect.

I swing my arm in a large, sweeping circle. From today’s experience, I now know how to move underwater and how long I can hold my breath for.

“In that case, tomorrow will be round two. You better be ready.”

Sanya stares blankly for a moment before her eyes completely light up. She clenches both fists and gets to her feet.

“Hmph! Now we’re talkin’!”

Sanya seems like a sore loser in my book, but then again, I am a first-rank member of Out Crusade.

I won’t lose so easily with my pride on the line. I was simply a bit unlucky today.

But in the end, I still lost every single one of our competitions.

Sanya’s expression is now clearly void of any trace of sulking. Instead, she’s furrowing her brow and shooting me a quizzical look.

The radiant beach is now overflowing with bizarre, grotesque creatures.

“Hey, boss, I’m not tryin’ to rag on you or anything, but honest question here — How the hell do you keep capturing this many giant monsters?”

“I’m not doing it on purpose! I just fought back when they attacked me! That’s all!”

Sanya looks suspicious as she pokes at a massive snakelike creature with indigo-colored skin. It’s covered in slime, one cloudy eye gazing toward the heavens.

“Geez, you shouldn’t even run into a sea serpent unless you go way out to

sea...”

“...It was a lost sea serpent, obviously.”

“Boss, you said the same thing yesterday and the day before and the day before that, ever since we started this competition—you know that, right?”

I turn my face away from Sanya’s piercing gaze. I swear on the God of Order that I searched for the materials in earnest every single day, but the monsters just kept appearing, even though I didn’t ask for them. And when monsters attack, I have no choice but to fight back.

At least I’m now, as a result, completely used to fighting underwater. That alone isn’t anything to complain about, but...

“Maybe I’m just a bit...unlucky after all?”

“Psh... Unbelievable, boss. Maybe the grim reaper’s taken a liking to you?”

Sanya sighs deeply. Today, like the other days, Sanya’s net shines with bounty. Just as I’ve learned to fight underwater, Sanya has become increasingly adept at gathering the materials, and today is her greatest haul yet.

I’ve been giving this my absolute all, but it’s not even close. I bet I could still beat her in a fistfight, though.

Sanya’s shoulders are sagging, and her tail is drooping, downhearted.

“...Well, at least we probably have all the materials now... I guess our competition is over. I don’t get it. I beat you, but I’m not happy one bit.”

Thank God I hired her.



Silverwolves are a breed of werebeast that forms packs.

Sanya Chatre’s distant ancestors originally inhabited the forests of the farthest northern reaches of the continent, which are frozen over with ice and snow all year round. In this severe climate, where innumerable varieties of monsters and spirits run rampant, even silverwolves, with their exceptional physical prowess, must form controlled packs in order to survive. Today, they’ve left the harsh forest environment and scattered across the world, and their bloodline has faded, but the traits engraved into their DNA have not.

Sanya stands alone in the inn's courtyard.

Her sharp silver eyes are focused on the small practice targets scattered throughout.

The silverwolves are a blessed breed. Sanya's flesh, bones, muscles, and skin all look like a normal human's, but they are vastly superior.

Her ears and tail—signs of her mixed blood—are extremely perceptive. The depth of her faculties far eclipses those of any human.

On the other hand, Sanya lacks the typical silverwolf's claws and fangs, which are powerful weapons. The array of knives—both throwing knives and close-range blades—lining her belt, along with custom-made arrows for her bow, are there to supplement this shortcoming.

Sanya is a first-rate warrior, but she's just shy of elite status. There are her innate physical gifts, exceptional sensory perception and balance, and near-perfect accuracy with her bow and knives; she's skilled in close combat and could likely take down most any opponent. However, the chances of her taking down a steel tiger head-on and winning are highly dubious.

Scratch that—it's far more likely that she would lose. That's just how it is for a "half a man," after all.

Sanya has confidence in her strength and skills, yet she doesn't overestimate herself. She's far stronger than a human, but she's had her confidence shattered on multiple occasions. She still remembers vividly the first month of her training under Bran—a cute wererabbit with floppy ears nearly killed her during a sparring session.

Sanya inhales, tensing then relaxing. She moves her hand as if to release an arrow from a taut bowstring, but instead, she removes a knife from her belt and throws it in one sweeping motion. Even if someone had been watching nearby, they likely wouldn't have been able to determine the moment it was thrown, given how swift it was. The small knife pierces the target with perfect aim.

"Hn..."

Sanya takes in a few short breaths one after the other and releases another knife. It practically dances from Sanya's hand and travels straight into the small

target about thirty centimeters in diameter. Bull's-eye. If her knives weren't even able to accurately hit these motionless targets, why would she bother using them in actual combat?

Next, Sanya gets moving. Kicking off the ground, she bounces around the tight quarters of the courtyard like a flash of lightning. The walls, trees, and various small objects within are no different from the ground for her. She launches knives as she flies through the air, taking care not to hit the ones already stuck in the targets, and still lands hit after direct hit. Each dull *thud* of the blades hitting their targets only sharpens her concentration further.

Sanya is still growing. Her arms and legs will get longer, and she'll grow in size, too. If her chest gets bigger, her center of gravity will be thrown off. As her senses become more refined, her equilibrium will naturally change, too. Sanya's current routine involves making sure that any shifts in her sensory perception are corrected through these daily fundamental exercises. Each small step forward will make her stronger.

Sanya slowly picks up speed. She pours her entire consciousness into the routine and focuses her senses.

In that moment, a small gleaming object enters her field of vision. Sanya tosses a knife at it almost reflexively.

"Ha—"

Her knife flies straight as an arrow and pierces the object—a coin rotating and falling through the air, dead center. The coin falls to the ground, split in half, and Sanya hears someone praising her.

"That was well done."

"*Huff...huff...* Don't mess with me!"

The manly voice belongs to Sanya's current boss, who has entered the courtyard without a sound.

Ares Crown. A crusader with hair a duller silver than Sanya's and deep-green eyes. He's still young, but the fatigue creased around his eyes gives him a sense of maturity.

A warrior of God who annihilates anything that opposes Ahz Gried, the God of Order. Sanya heard stories of powerful combatants within the Church from her master.

Yet, there are certain things that must be seen with one's own eyes in order to understand. Her current boss is more monstrous than she could have ever imagined.

That's why Sanya is so worked up. Just watching someone so powerful kicks her instincts into high gear.

Ares picks up the perfectly halved coin and puts it into his pocket.

"I've handed the materials over to Zolan. Creating the magic item won't take too long, but there's one problem."

"...And what's that?"

Sanya calms her breath as she asks. Her terrifyingly powerful boss puts his palm to his forehead, looking solemn.

"He doesn't know...what size to make."

"..."

"This isn't a joke, Sanya. We need everyone's measurements. In order for him to prepare the mermaid armor, he'll need the party's bust and hip sizes. Oh, he doesn't need yours, though. Zolan has a magic item that lets him know bust size just from looking, apparently. I don't know when he used it, but he already knew yours."

"...This sounds real rough for you."

"Amelia and the others will arrive in Cloudburst in three days if all goes accordingly. It's not like we can't afford to wait that long, but... Sanya, do you know Rabi's and Amelia's bust sizes?"

"Why the hell would I know?! Just what kinda person do you think I am, boss?!"

Sanya and Rabi are fellow apprentices, and she's met Amelia once, but she doesn't have some sort of perverted ability that lets her know someone's bust size just from looking. A scout needs keen observational skills but not like this.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Ares slumps his shoulders. Sanya is slightly entertained by this and offers a suggestion in jest. “...Amelia sends you daily communications, right? Maybe *you* should ask her.”

“I tried... She hung up on me.”

“Yikes.”

“I didn’t even have a chance to explain why. Shit. I should have told her the reason first.”

“You can be real weird sometimes, boss.”

Ares is trying to be sensible, but he’s instead coming off as downright strange. Flabbergasted, Sanya gives him a warning.

“Just so you know, you really shouldn’t say that kind of stuff around Rabi. She’ll have your head on a silver platter.”

“...I’ll bear that in mind.”

Rabi has many proclivities and tends to act in extremes. For example, she’s killed at least five clients, from what Sanya knows. Several of them had it coming as far as Sanya is concerned, but that’s really beside the point.

Ares must have had low expectations to begin with. He retrieves Sanya’s knives one by one and hands them back to her. Feeling his enormous, tranquil life force at close range, Sanya swallows a lump in her throat quietly enough that he doesn’t hear her.

“Let’s have a chat about what we’re going to do from here. Sorry, but your personal training will have to wait.”

“...Understood.”

Three more days until Rabi arrives, Sanya thinks as she nods.

Sanya’s body is raring to go. That half-hearted material-gathering contest did nothing to quell her urges after all.

At some point, she and Ares will have to go toe to toe for real in order to determine who’s stronger.

“Boss, let’s have a sparring match. Loser gets a cash penalty!”

“Sure—later.”

§ § §

“I thought up a good idea while we were gathering the materials...”

“A good idea?”

Back at Zolan’s shop, I tell Sanya about a thought that occurred to me as we wait for the mermaid armor to be created.

“If I start to drown, I can just heal any damage using holy techniques. I’m resilient and high level. If I just keep on healing myself whenever I come close to dying, I should be able to survive underwater for a long time...I think.”

“...I only just kinda realized something, but, boss, are you an idiot?”

Sanya looks at me like I’m a lunatic. It’s not the kind of look you give your superior.

“Well...yer quite a remarkable man, ain’tcha?” Zolan interjects as he hammers away behind the counter.

Toudou and his party will be here before long. The swimsuits seem to be coming along, and we managed to gather all the materials he asked for. I have no idea what exactly fish heads are used for in the process...but I won’t dig deep on that one.

“See? It makes sense.”

“I was bein’ facetious. Look—it’s all ready.”

Zolan sounds dejected and pushes the blue cloth our way.

Sanya takes it and stretches it out, furrowing her brow.

Just what part of making a bikini involves hammering? ...I have my suspicions, but first and foremost—

“Isn’t this a bit too skimpy?”

“I had to skimp on the materials.”

“...And it’s got a hole in the rear.”

“Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck-hyuck... It’s fer yer tail! Mermaid armor doesn’t usually have one, but...”

“...Yeah, because mermaids don’t have tails. Will this really work?”

We’ve already come this far, but I realize something—Isn’t there a problem with pretending to be mermaids in the first place?

Zolan answers my simplistic question calmly and without hesitation.

“Yes, it will. ’Cause it’s so cute! She’s gonna look just like a real mermaid, no doubt.”

“...I-is this really going to work?!”

Sanya feels the same way I do, apparently. However, Zolan doesn’t appear to be joking.

“C’mon, hurry up ’n’ try the thing on! C’mon now!”

“Huh...? Ew, no way. Why the hell should I try it on here?”

Sanya is clearly not having it. I don’t blame her.

“’Cause the artisan’s gotta check to see if it fits, of coooooourse!”

Zolan is screaming. Good lord, settle down. I seriously don’t get this guy.

“Okay, fine...”

The hell is fine about this?! ...I’m disgusted, but then Zolan adds in a muffled tone, “I’ll throw in a discount.”

“Sanya...go and try it on. That’s an order.”

“What?! Seriously?!”

I’ve said it multiple times by now, but I have only a limited budget to work with here. I’ll take any discount I can get.

Dejected, Sanya looks at me desperately as she disappears into the back room.

What’s the big deal? It’s not like I’m asking for the moon here.

“I think I’ve finally come to understand ya a li’l better now.”

Zolan grins at me. Whatever—just bring the cost down a bit.

I look around the shop while I wait. It's largely empty and feels more like a workshop than a storefront.

"By the way, do you sell magic items other than mermaid armor here?"

As I ask, Zolan's grinning face gives a little twitch and his eyes bulge. Yet, by the time he opens his mouth to reply, his expression is completely normal.

"Not currently."

Not currently, huh? There must be a reason. It's none of my business, but... should I press the issue?

I don't want Zolan to hate me—he's a valuable resource. I hem and haw for a moment before deciding to leave it be.

"Are you well versed in all magic items?"

"...Just who d'ya think yer talkin' to? 'Course I know almost everything about 'em."

I see definite conviction on Zolan's face. Learning more from him could prove worthwhile.



Deep underground in the Church of Ahz Gried headquarters lies a room behind many, many layers of doors that is protected by the holy knights.

The doors are made of mythril, and encompassing them are powerful prisms cast by priests specializing in prism magic. The doors repel all sorts of spells, including teleportation spells, as well as physical attacks. Behind them is the safest room in the entire world.

This room contains one of the Church's mainstays, the Laboratory for Mysteries and Magic Items, where various secrets and magic implements from across time and culture are investigated and uncovered.

A man removes a gold key from his chest pocket and puts it into the keyhole. It makes a loud noise as the lock clacks and the doors swing open.

"Well, well, well... Your Excellency. Thank you for coming all this way."

The elderly man greeting His Eminence Creio Amen has white hair nearly trailing down to the floor and wears a black robe unlike that of a mage. He narrows his eyes and smiles insolently at Creio.

Magic research is crucial in the fight against demon kind. Within the organization of the Church, magic learners called holy casters belong to the Magical Coordination Department. They're placed in respective divisions, often starting out as communications operators, but anyone who possesses special abilities is called up from their position and assigned to the research and development of magic items.

This facility is where the transmission devices dispatched to crusaders and certain towns' churches originate.

The laboratory itself is incredibly well organized, with innumerable glass cases arranged on shelves. It certainly looks more like a research facility than a house of worship.

Creio glances toward the researchers busily attending to their tasks before turning back to the laboratory's director, Bartholomew Ramires.

"Have you made any discoveries?"

The researchers' present directive is to analyze a magic item that a demon possessed in Golem Valley.

Magic items are different from magic itself in that they are of greater use to humans than demons.

This is generally because magic items are used to compensate for an innate lack of skill, and as such, demons have no use for them.

However, the two golden amulets that were recovered in Golem Valley have turned this common knowledge on its head.

Bartholomew answers as he strokes the head of his cane.

"Hmm. Well, they were created to evade detection, that much we know for sure."

"...Both of them?"

"Yes, they are the same item."

Creio furrows his brow.

Anti-detection magic items are rare but not unheard of. However, finding two of the exact same item is a different story.

Only a portion of mass-produced magic items are relevant for everyday life. If there's no demand, they simply won't be made. The same goes for magic items used in battle, and items used only in specific situations are usually one-of-a-kind.

"It seems they were created just recently. Someone may be passing them along to the demon army."

"Do you know where they were created?"

Creio bites his lip. He's had a bad feeling about this from the start—the current incarnation of the Demon Lord is extremely cunning in his methods. Magic items are used by the weak to supplement their handicaps. Demons generally never use items that humanity creates—until now.

Bartholomew sighs quietly and shakes his head.

"Most magic items have their manufacturer's seal engraved into them, but these amulets do not. I have nothing to tell you."

"...Perhaps that can't be helped. It's a pity we couldn't capture the items' users themselves."

Creio heard they had been formidable foes. Steel tigers are particularly well-known for their military prowess. The end result was much more preferable than Ares being defeated, but Creio can't help wishing they could have caught the werebeast and forced information out of it.

Demons are strong enough to begin with. It will prove extremely vexing if someone is distributing magic items to them.

"That said, the item is what it is. There are a limited number of people capable of creating this...even among humans."

"So if we leave no stone unturned, we'll be able to find them, yes?"

"If not...then it will cause us no end of trouble."

“...Understood. We’ll begin the investigation. Please continue to keep me updated.”

The Demon Lord Kranos—an enemy of God, hell-bent on destroying humanity and ruling the world. He has yet to show his true colors.

§ § §

“Good work, Amelia. I take it nothing happened along the way?”

“...Everything is as I’ve reported. We hit a few snags, but they were nothing we couldn’t handle.”

Amelia and Rabi arrived in the water capital about an hour after Toudou and his party did.

This is the first time Amelia and I have worked separately from each other, but the results are excellent. Hiring additional mercenaries was definitely worth it.

A small figure hops off the runner lizard after Amelia, her hood drawn low, as usual.

Rabi Chatre. Sanya bounds toward her, smiling from ear to ear. Her tail is wagging nonstop.

“Rabi! I’m so glad you arrived safely!”

“...Phew.”

Rabi stands just a short distance away and sighs with exhaustion before looking at me.

Her ruby eyes are the only part of her exposed to the outside air. Her voice is quiet and void of emotion but still sweet, nonetheless.

“Boss, the mission is complete.”

“Ah, yes, thank you. Take a load off for now.”

Rabi’s arm squirms underneath her thick robe. She probably has her hand on the blade at her waist.

I’ve already heard from Amelia about what happened at the mountain village, and Sanya’s told me about Rabi’s raw power. We’ll be working alongside her for

the foreseeable future. We need to allocate her assassin skills appropriately.

But that can wait until later. Right now, we should be glad that all our party members are fully present.

Preparations are in order; Toudou's party should have received their guidelines and map of the sunken temple from the Church.

"Oh, that's right. Sanya, before you take a rest, show Amelia and Rabi to Zolan's shop. He needs to take their measurements."

"Okay, boss."

"Oh, is that the perv— Um, peculiar magic-item creator you mentioned in our communications?"

Amelia looks a bit perturbed. I don't entirely blame her.

There are just a few too many "peculiar" folk in this world. It doesn't help that most of them are extremely talented.

"I'll only say this once: Don't piss off Zolan. We still need his help."

"...Are you planning on offing him when it's all said and done?"

...I never said such a thing. Just who do you think I am?

It's been a while since I last heard Amelia's typical nonsense, but I ignore it and continue.

"The materials and payment have already been taken care of. Sanya has checked the magic item's functionality, too."

I've had Sanya swim down to the sunken temple once already. I'm not sure exactly how the item operates, but it definitely performs as advertised. Bizarre.

"Oh, by the way—what about yours, Ares?" Amelia asks as if she's just remembered. Did I not tell her already?

In the end, I was unable to procure male mermaid armor. I don't know if Zolan can't actually make it or if he just didn't want to, but it was a lost cause. Pushing through with holy techniques will be my last resort.

"Unfortunately, I'll be holding down the fort on this one. And that goes for Toudou, too."

If Limis can enter a covenant with a water elemental spirit, her combat skills will expand significantly. We have no choice but to move forward step-by-step.

The small shrine above the surface is just the entrance to the sunken temple—the majority of it lies on the ocean floor.

I asked Sanya to swim down there and test the functionality of the magic item and also to survey the area. The results were superb.

It's very difficult to maneuver any sort of close-range combat underwater. In terms of basic tactics, it's best to use long-range attacks on aquatic enemies from land. However, the mermaid armor allows one to move just as they would aboveground.

This magic item is useful only in certain situations, but it's powerful. With just a few adjustments, it would be perfect.

"It was so gorgeous down there... I got soaking wet, but that's a given in a bikini."

"That sounds...exciting."

At the inn, we sit around a large table to discuss strategy.

Sanya's impressions of her trip underwater aren't particularly useful, and Amelia looks unimpressed.

Sanya's tone is light as she tells us that the sunken temple is teeming with aquatic monsters. That means Toudou's party will have to fight their way through them in our search for a water spirit.

Without the mermaid armor, Limis wouldn't have a shot at forming a water spirit covenant.

Amelia must be exhausted from taking her measurements—she looks beat. Rabi is also quiet, refusing to say a word.

By "taking measurements," their sizes were actually gauged instantaneously using a magic item, so everything with Zolan should have gone quickly.

If Amelia is tired from such a simple ordeal, it proves only one thing—that geezer is a real piece of work.

Sanya seems to be the only one unbothered by him as she continues to explain.

“The monsters aren’t really that strong. Your movements are different, since you’re swimming, but that’s really it. For mages, it’s particularly simple, but even for those used to close-range combat like you or me or Rabi, their moves are easy to read.”

I’m not a specialist in close combat. And originally, only mages were supposed to be able to travel to the sunken temple. It seems it’s true that Zolan changed things after all.

Since Sanya managed to survey the area alone and come back unscathed, I’m not concerned about her combat abilities.

“Aside from myself, I plan to have the three of you assist Limis. Is there anything else?”

“The mermaid armor doesn’t work if worn underneath clothing,” Sanya adds, having just remembered something. “Rabi and I will be able to avoid any trouble, but if any monsters go after Amelia, she could be in danger.”

I hadn’t heard this yet.

“Huh, the armor is useless if you wear it under your clothing... I wonder why?”

“Cause mermaids don’t wear clothes, I guess. Boss, you think I just went down there without considering that beforehand?”

“I mean, your outfit’s fairly skimpy to begin with.”

Every time Sanya opens her mouth, I’m constantly reminded that she seems to think I have absolutely zero knowledge of Zolan’s exploits.

“In that case, it’d be awkward if I wore the mermaid armor myself, right?”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“Say something!”

All three of them avert their eyes. But appearance aside, defense is crucial.

Even Amelia's mage robe offers some resistance. Not being able to wear any armor could prove a major disadvantage.

On that note, even if Toudou could hide it, I doubt he would head down to the sunken temple wearing a woman's bikini. That is far beyond the realm of a hero's responsibility. That said, if he actually did it, I would be willing to forgive him for everything so far.

Amelia pipes up to change the subject.

"What are you trying to say? That we have to fight in just a swimsuit?"

"Thank God Stey isn't here. So you'll do it, yes?"

"Urgh..... This is so unfair."

Amelia collapses onto the table limply. She's still beat from Golem Valley.

In any case, she's not a combat specialist, and Sanya and Rabi are scouts. Their job is based on evasion.

Toudou's party is pretty much in the same boat. There's always a silver lining—nothing to worry about, from what I can tell.

"By the way, Ares, if you can't come down to the sunken temple with us, then what will you be doing the whole time?"

"R and R."

"..."

"...I'm joking. I have no shortage of things to take care of."

Wipe that look off your face.

I've been too focused on Toudou and his party, and I've neglected to get a grasp on what's happening in other countries. The Church's upper ranks seem concerned, but I'm the closest to the Demon Lord this time around. It's been on only two occasions, but I have come face-to-face with the Demon Lord's underlings; I've been close enough to touch them. I may have something to offer.

"That will be all. Everyone, get to work on your respective preparations. Any questions?"

Amelia raises her hand slightly.

“I’ve never been to the ocean. I’m a terrible swimmer. To be honest, I’m a bit terrified of the sea.”

Rabi’s hand shoots into the air.

“Boss, I have a question. Perhaps I shouldn’t complain before I actually see the thing, and I didn’t say anything because I planned on wearing something over it, but in all honesty, I am way too embarrassed to fight in my underwear.”

Sanya’s eyes are all agleam.

“Okay, that makes me the most capable one, right? So I’m second in command. Amelia, go buy me some bread!”

Dammit. Why does it always come to this?

I look at the clock on the wall and then back to my confused yet dependable team.

“Okay, okay, okay! Let’s figure this all out, one at a time.”

§ § §

Toudou is clutching the large box she’s been handed and looks back at her party members.

“Y’know, I’ve always felt this way, but...the Church really has incredible foresight, don’t they?”

“...They’re a massive organization, after all. Their influence extends beyond national borders,” replies Aria.

“I know we gave them a report, but this is quick work, don’t you think? I mean, all the churches I’m familiar with were just save points.”

“Save points...?”

Leaving the Great Forest of the Vale aside, the party received a map and items at the church in Purif, and in Golem Valley, they were given training and information on the monsters that spawn there. Of course, Toudou is the hero summoned by the Church in secret. It’s only natural that she has their support, but still, this amount of foresight is downright incredible.

“How did they manage to survey the entire area before we even arrived...? We got here so quickly, too.”

“The Church possesses a number of technologies...,” Aria says in hushed tones. “The hero-summoning itself is one of their proprietary rituals, and there’s even a rumor that they have a division responsible for capturing mages and craftspeople who have invented dangerous magic.”

“Huh... Well, Gregorio is supposedly a priest, so it’s really not that hard to believe.”

Toudou scowls as she brings Gregorio to mind.

The party reaches the inn and investigates the contents of the box. It includes instructions on how to acquire a water elemental spirit, along with a map and information on nearby monsters—all the necessary guidelines for the water capital.

According to their guidelines, the water spirits exist in a temple at the bottom of the ocean floor. Toudou has been to a number of places since coming to this world and acquired a wealth of experience, but she’s never been to the bottom of the sea. She has no idea where to start.

“A sunken temple, huh? This really takes the whole ‘fantasy’ thing to the extreme...”

“I was expecting this, but it’ll probably be hard for Garnet to fight down there.”

Limis looks at Garnet, whose eyes bulge in its head from agitation.

Elementalists are easily influenced by their environs. A high-ranking spirit such as Garnet can still cast magic in a place filled with oppositional elemental spirits, but its power will be decreased.

Toudou traces the words on a piece of paper as she continues to read aloud.

“To enter it...you need a magic item, it says. ‘Mermaid armor’?”

“...I’ve never heard of such a thing. Have you, Aria?”

“...Armor as in a set of armor, yes? That’s hard to imagine. If you haven’t heard of it, Limis, then it must not be a very well-known magic item...”

Limis and Aria look toward each other and then to Glacia, but it's impossible to tell if she's listening or not—she's being her usual sullen self. Her sunken eyes gaze around the room aimlessly.

Toudou senses a bad omen but figures there's no use in dwelling on it. She nods to herself and looks up.

“Let's go check it out. It says that once we get our measurements done, it'll take some time to create the armor, so we should get that done right away... It also says it's already been paid for. They really think of everything, don't they?”

Toudou's ill omen takes shape quickly.

“Wha...? Whaaa—? *This* is mermaid armor?! Wh-what about this counts as 'armor'?!”

Limis's shrill voice pierces through the small shop. Her eyes are wide as saucers, and in front of her, the owner of the magic-item shop, a dwarf calling himself Zolan, jabs his finger at a small piece of white cloth. It seems he's been in this situation before.

“Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck... No need to worry! With this groundbreaking armor o' mine, even someone with yer kinda figure can make a fine mermaid!”

“A-and just what is that supposed to mean?!”

“H-hold on, Limis, hold on. Calm down.”

Limis is screaming, red in the face and halfway over the counter of the shop. Aria grabs her by the arms to restrain her. Limis's gaze turns to Aria's chest for a moment before becoming completely serious. But she immediately starts to flail her arms and complain.

“There's no way we'll fight in that thing! In what world do mages and sword masters battle in swimsuits?!”

“It's not a swimsuit. It's *mermaid armor*.”

“Grrr... Same difference!”

“Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck... But ya won't be able to manage underwater without it, will ya now?”

“...”

It's true that Limis has no idea how to reach the sunken temple, nor has she ever even heard of a way to get down there. A water-based elementalist might have some work-around, but she's in this fix precisely because she doesn't have a water elemental spirit.

Limis stares miserably at the piece of cloth on the counter. She shouldn't be complaining about one or two pieces of equipment at this point...perhaps. Aria puts her hand on Limis's shoulder and steps forward.

“Are you certain that it works?”

“Loads o' people have used it with success.”

“...Are there any non-swimsuit types...?”

“No.”

Zolan doesn't waver in his response. The party huddles in a corner of the shop to talk it over.

“This is...unbelievable... It's absolutely insane,” Limis grumbles.

“But this information came directly from the Church, so it's gotta be accurate. If there was another way, they'd have suggested it to us.”

In combat, defense is just as important as your weapon—some monsters even require switching up your defensive equipment.

A mage's robe is buffed by magic. Cloth armor isn't inherently weaker than metal armor, but the piece of cloth Zolan has on display doesn't seem to offer a high amount of defense.

“Aria, you don't have any magical energy to begin with, right? Will it still work for you...?” asks Toudou.

“...Magic items consume magical energy, so it probably won't.”

Aria heaves a sigh. She's working with a handicap of zero magical energy, so even a magic item that uses only a trace amount won't work for her.

Zolan smiles ear to ear as he waits for them to answer.

“Listen, it's already been prepared for us. What if we looked for another

option and took this just for now? Not to mention, we don't even know anything about its usability."

"...What...? What am I gonna do? It'll be a dead giveaway for me."

Toudou looks dead serious. No matter how good she is at pretending to be a man, the second she removes her clothes, all bets are off.

"W-well, yes, that's true... For the measurements, you could have him make a men's size and just wear your armor over it?"

"...What's the deal with this hero business anyway? I thought I was brought here to defeat the Demon Lord..."

Toudou knew she'd face trials, but she didn't anticipate worrying herself over something so stupid.

A thousand-yard stare crosses Toudou's face as she imagines herself in the mermaid armor. Aria has nothing to say back.



Sea monsters can only exercise their full power underwater. That alone is the reason why port cities are still able to function even now that the seas have fallen into the Demon Lord's hands—most sea monsters can't come on land.

Cloudburst also has a port. As such, it faces the sea, but its defenses are nearly perfect.

The port is equipped with a ballista used to fight off giant squid, sea serpents, and other such massive sea creatures, and there is a regular cadre of knights stationed in case of an attack by mermen or other monsters able to come on land. The waterways have metal grates installed in them to prevent monsters from invading the city. So long as these grates aren't attacked from the ground above, they will not falter.

Toudou's present goal is to establish a covenant with an elemental spirit. Sanya and Rabi are strong, no doubt, but their magical knowledge is negligible.

Amelia is a mage to the extent that she can cast healing magic, so she will need to join this underwater quest.

It doesn't matter if she can't swim...because she'll be using the mermaid

armor.

The beach where Sanya and I gathered materials is completely devoid of people yet again. It used to be a popular swimming destination, from what I gather, but given how active the monsters have been lately, the gorgeous ocean and beach simply extend as far as the eye can see.

Amelia follows behind me and squints as she takes in the sea for the first time.

“I wanted to try swimming.”

“Once we defeat the Demon Lord, you can.”

Sanya is carrying a large backpack and calls out to me. Her amber skin and silver hair stand out, and her largely exposed look—even without the mermaid armor on—is in stark contrast to Rabi, who’s covered from head to toe in a robe behind her.

“Boss, I’ve got a great idea.”

“What’s that?”

“A way to enter the ocean without the mermaid armor!”

I’d wanted Amelia to experience going underwater as well, but unfortunately, her mermaid armor isn’t ready yet. I tried to get her to wear Sanya’s, but the bust was too small, and she couldn’t fit. I only wanted Amelia to get her first glimpse of the ocean today, but Sanya continues, sounding confident.

“Amelia, if you start to suffocate, you can just cast healing magic on yourself. It’ll be really tough, but you should be able to manage until your holy energy runs out. Give it a try!”

“...Ares, her idea is crazy. She’s essentially telling me to die. Are you still so sure about choosing her for the job?”

“...”

Sanya is looking at me, clearly entertained. That was my bad, wasn’t it?

As we walk slowly along the coast, something pokes its head out of the water farther out to sea. Its form is visible from between the waves for a moment

before picking up speed and approaching us.

Its slimy head resembles that of a fish, and deep-blue scales cover its four humanlike limbs, but it's not a demi-human—this is a type of monster unusual among sea-dwelling creatures in that it is able to walk on land.

Sanya casually pulls a knife from her waist with a practiced hand.

"It's a merman. They're pretty rare. It's 'cause you killed all the giant monsters, boss."

"My apologies."

The merman climbs onto the beach and looks our way, not a shred of intelligence present in his gaze. He stands up and staggers before running toward us at full speed.

Mermen can survive on land, but it's simply that—survival. Their combat strength is paltry out of the water. They have strong arms, but their webbed feet are not made for running on land. In spite of all this, the merman doesn't show any sign of hesitation or fear as he approaches.

One reason that mermen are classified as monsters is their low intelligence—far lower than other beings classified as demi-humans. They aren't capable of speech and largely behave according to instinct. Mermen have high fertility rates, hearty appetites, and will attack anything that moves. Anyone with the slightest capacity for fighting on land would not consider these monsters enemies.

The merman is unarmed and outnumbered. You would think he'd be more alert for other monsters in the area.

His feet slap along the ground as he struggles to run toward us, and Sanya launches a knife at him.

The merman doesn't even try to evade the knife and takes it directly in the head. He falls down and goes motionless.

"I wonder what that was about..."

"No idea. I'm sure they're tougher in the ocean. They can be dangerous when they appear in large numbers underwater, so be careful. They've even been

known to sink ships.”

“No way I’m losing to any mermen, no matter how many appear.”

“Giant monsters can’t enter the sunken temple, right? So I suppose this merman right here is probably the biggest size?”

From what Sanya’s gathered, the halls of the sunken temple aren’t that spacious.

An aquatic monster’s size is generally proportionate to its strength, which means nothing dangerous should appear down there.

Sanya pulls out the knife and green blood gushes forth. Gazing at the bloody blade, she says, “I think you’re right. Maybe they’d be more of a threat if they were just a bit smarter.”

“The sunken temple is basically a dungeon. You can’t just walk straight through—it’s got paths leading every which way.”

The map that Sanya has created of the sunken temple is vastly more detailed than our current one.

We’re making final preparations at the inn. Sanya’s eyes are ablaze as she speaks.

Amelia adds, “...That’s the sort of thing that elemental spirits like—places that make it easy to gather energy, right?”

“The temple is massive. Creating this map was a challenge, but the biggest issue at hand is that we don’t know where our destination is. There’s a magic circle deep inside the temple, so I assume it’s there, but I can’t even see elemental spirits, much less detect them.”

“Detecting elemental spirits requires a different capacity from casting magic... High-ranking spirits are incredibly strong, but they have to establish an affinity with you before you can even see them.”

Amelia isn’t an elemental, and no one in our group is an expert on elemental spirits. Having Stey here might have been a different story, but that would have caused a whole litany of other problems.

“Let’s leave the spirit covenant up to Limis. We’ll stay behind the scenes...and

keep the location under control. Let's finish this up as quickly as possible and move on to the next town."

We have no use for places ill-suited for leveling up. Meeting the skilled craftsman Zolan was a definite bonus, but that could just be a result of the Holy Warrior's good fortune.

Sanya balls up her fists as she says, "I like working behind the scenes. I'm in." She's become a lot more docile since I kicked her ass in a sparring match.

Just then, Rabi, who's been quiet so far, raises her hand.

"Boss. I—"

Rabi's abilities are already a guarantee. We're going to need her combat skills at some point.

She said she'd be too embarrassed to fight in a bikini, but Sanya already told me why she's acting so ridiculous. Simply put, it all comes down to *instinct*, I'm told. Being of mixed wererabbit lineage doesn't sound easy.

"Only the women will head down to the sunken temple. Toudou won't see you. Are you still embarrassed?"

"....."

"I'm not asking you to prance around half-naked forever. I know about your race's peculiarities. It'll only be for a little while."

Rabi's hood twitches and her ruby-red eyes go wide.

Rabi stays frozen that way for about a minute before she asks diffidently, her voice hoarse and unable to hide her shock:

".....Wh-where did you get that information?"

"From her."

"Hey—boss! I told you it was a secret!" yells Sanya, flustered.

Rabi looks toward her fellow apprentice with a gaze so icy, it gives me goose bumps.

I double-checked to see if it was true, but it's on Sanya for letting the information slip so easily. Sanya attempts to slink away, but Rabi easily grabs

her by the tail with a skilled hand—I doubt this is the first time she’s done it.

“Rabi, wait! It’s only natural that I’d disclose that information to our boss! He won’t exploit it!”

Sanya tries desperately to convince Rabi, who isn’t even looking at her anymore.

“Boss, do you mind if I borrow Sanya for a moment?”

“Don’t kill her. I still have a use for Sanya.”

“...?! But I didn’t do anything wrong, right?!”

“...I’ll use my own discretion.”

Leaving those venomous words hanging in the air, Rabi drags Sanya out of the room by her tail. The biggest issue when working in a group is human relations. Without the right modifications, there are likely to be some outbursts.

Amelia silently watches them leave and checks that they’re both out of sight before asking me, “...Did something happen?”

“I kicked Sanya’s ass in a sparring match and she’s been really loyal ever since. It’s instinctual.”

Having werebeast blood isn’t strictly an advantage, in both Rabi’s and Sanya’s cases.

Sanya is so skilled in combat that it’s hard to believe she’s only a scout, but we’re just not very compatible.

Amelia sighs, obviously astonished.

“Ares, do you always make a habit of doing things that way?”

“If necessary, yes. If not, then no. In this case, I was simply heeding Sanya’s request.”

And I was right in doing so. No organization will flourish if its subordinates have disdain for their leaders.

I’ve managed to set things straight before getting to our main objective. This will make for a quality report to Creio.

“By the way, what are the peculiarities of Rabi’s race...?” Amelia asks.

I could tell her, but Rabi and I don’t know each other yet. If she considered me to be someone who would expose her secret at this juncture, that would only come back to haunt me. I pretend to hem and haw for a moment before looking up at Amelia.

“It’s a secret.”

Amelia and Rabi. I’m trying to imagine what it was like with just the two of them together, but I seriously can’t fathom it.

I visit Zolan’s shop again to get his impressions of Toudou and his party.

Zolan looks up from pounding away with his hammer behind the counter and grins when he sees me.

The shop hardly has any items for sale, as always. How does this guy make a living?

“Well? How’d it go?”

“Hyuck-hyuck, they cut a fine figure, the lot of ’em.”

Zolan gives me a thumbs-up. That’s not what I asked, but it looks like the magic-item creation is going well, regardless.

The dwarf wipes the sweat from his brow and sets down his hammer. I can see the scales of one of the fish I caught on his worktable. What’s the point of hammering those?

“Been a long time since I had an order this big. My arms are killin’ me.”

“Good news for you.”

“Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck, not to worry. I’m gonna make the sexiest damn bikinis you’ll ever lay eyes on!”

That was really never the point. Nobody asked for a sexy bikini. I better make sure of that, though.

“You’re talking about the mermaid armor, yes?”

“Yep, that’s the one.”

“...”

Is this guy really all there? ...Well, I won't be the one wearing it anyway.

Now that we've confirmed the armor does what it's supposed to, I need to make a compromise.

“Did you finish taking Toudou's and his party's measurements?”

“Course I did. I've got these skeleton glasses, after all. And there's more than enough material for their suits. It's gonna be the most magnificent mermaid armor yet!”

Zolan is brimming with confidence. What a stupid way to use this kind of technology.

Plus, he mentioned something I can't just ignore—a magic item that measures size by sight?

“These skeleton glasses... They don't allow you to see through clothing, do they?”

“Like hell they don't. They just measure size. But I know what ya mean. If only my wife would let me make 'em able to see through clothes...”

Zolan looks genuinely sad. So there *is* someone stopping him. Maybe if he had three wives, he'd actually be a normal craftsman.

I think I've seen enough; I'm exhausted. Nevertheless, Zolan continues, having just remembered something.

“Oh, that's right. There's just one problem.”

“...”

It must be Toudou. We've been covering up the fact that he's a man, but I'm sure Zolan noticed.

He looks pretty androgynous, so I thought we might just be able to pull the wool over Zolan's eyes...

Maybe I can convince him. We gathered the materials and have paid cash, so perhaps Zolan will make one for men just this once?

As I open my mouth to speak, Zolan's mouth stretches into a wide grin and he

makes a completely unanticipated remark.

“There seems to be one member who’s got zero magical energy—the sword master. Big tits, blue hair. That one.”

I’d forgotten about that. The mermaid armor might be ridiculous, but it is a magic item, after all. Without magical energy, it won’t function.

However, if Aria and Toudou can’t travel underwater, that means Limis and Glacia will have to tackle the sunken temple alone—a tall order. Glacia is strong enough, but I can’t imagine she would be able to protect Limis on her own.

This new problem brings a frown to my face, but Zolan grins even wider and thumps his chest.

“Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck! Don’t make that face. I know exactly what yer thinkin’. Leave it up to me.”

“...”

“I’ve developed a new type of mermaid armor that collects magical energy! If ya imbue it with magical energy beforehand, even someone lacking any themselves can wear it, no problem! But ya gotta make sure the girl with the huuuuuuge tits wears it! Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck—”

...Maybe he is a genius?

It doesn’t matter; I really couldn’t care less. I mean, that does help, but it’s just... How the hell does he create something like that off the cuff?! And what’s the deal with acting like we’re close pals? Did I do something to deserve this?

Zolan is beyond elated, but I can’t come up with an adequate response. I decide to double-check instead.

“Any other problems?”

“They’re all total knockouts. Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck... You’ll get your three sets of armor, no sweat.”

It seems that Toudou slipped by him somehow. This is such bullshit.

Well, I doubt that Toudou expects to receive a bikini, but that’s on the back burner for now.

“I see... Then I’ll leave this in your hands... Three sets?”

“Ah, one was a size I had in stock, so I already gave it to ’em.”

“...Very well. I’ll be waiting for the rest, then.”

“You got it!”

I watch Zolan as he picks up his hammer and starts pounding again before I leave the magic-item shop.

He had a set in stock? Well, that was a waste of our materials, but it’s not as if there are any tricks to determining a person’s size before meeting them. Chalk it up to a loss.

That evening, I learn something even more shocking through Glacia.

“Toudou is going to wear the mermaid armor?”

“Y-yes... The set he already received from Zolan...”

Amelia’s voice quavers. She’s trying to remain calm but can’t hide her discomposure.

Sanya and Rabi hold their breath as they listen.

So the suit Zolan had in stock was for Toudou...?!

Toudou is a man. How could his “size” be in stock?

It’s on me for pushing the issue, but I didn’t think it would actually work. If Toudou was alone, that would be one thing, but he has his companions with him. Companions who are girls his age. And he’s going to put on a bikini in front of them? This is nothing short of perversion.

What a fix... This is completely unexpected. I’ve underestimated Toudou’s dedication to defeating the Demon Lord.

The man knows no shame. He really does have the qualities of a hero.

I resign myself to this fact. For the first time, I feel deep respect for Toudou—and shame in myself.

I close my eyes and think. Amelia doesn’t say anything, nor does Sanya or Rabi. They’re all keeping their mouths shut as if waiting for my thoughts to

settle.

I ponder for a good thirty minutes before finally opening my eyes.

Fighting against a monstrosity is easy. I'm used to risking my life. However, resigning myself to the road ahead has taken time.

This may just mark the difference between heroes and common folk. Damn, heroes are insane.

"I'll...negotiate with Zolan. Amelia... I'll...wear the suit."

"?!"

Amelia's face freezes in place. But my conviction remains strong.

This is a matter of sheer willpower. What are shame and honor worth anyway?

§ § §

"It's a perfect fit... So creepy. What the hell?"

Toudou mumbles, her face twitching as she tries on the mermaid armor—the bikini—that she received from Zolan.

Naotsugu Toudou is a girl. She has a masculine name, and ever since arriving in this world, she's hidden her gender at the Kingdom's discretion, but she always lived life as a girl before being summoned to Ruxe. She has no reason to hesitate to wear a bikini. However, she never actually took any measurements at the shop, and even though she's been pretending to be male, she was given a bikini that fits her perfectly. That's just downright creepy.

Aria looks Toudou over from head to toe after she finishes changing into the armor and furrows her brow.

"You definitely won't pass for a man looking like this..."

"...Mm..."

"Your hair is getting long, too."

Toudou brushes aside her bangs, which now hang down to her eyes. She's not sure if she should be elated or dejected, and her face shows it.

Looking in the mirror, she can't see the light-blue mermaid armor as anything

but a bikini. Her breasts, which are usually constricted by a tight cloth wrapping, are now fully liberated. Seeing them, Limis is astonished and turns away.

If she heads to the beach in this getup, she'll be turning heads for certain.

Of course, she has no intention of walking around like this. She has no idea who might be watching her, wherever she goes.

Toudou adjusts the swimsuit's shoulder straps and sighs.

"...Guess I'll just have to wear my armor over it."

"...Will it fit?"

"...It's just one extra layer of cloth, so I think so. I'm gonna take a quick dip in the ocean to test it out."

The other members' armor isn't ready yet, but a quick test run should be fine.

Aria and Limis nod worriedly.

"...My armor...is so tight..."

"Why are your boobs getting so big when mine won't grow at all...?"

Limis mumbles to herself as the party practically drags her along to the beach near the entrance to the sunken temple.

The cobalt-blue ocean stretches as far as the eye can see. Toudou is dumbfounded by the view. She's heard that powerful monsters dwell under the sea, but looking from the outside, she can hardly believe it.

"Nao, please be careful."

"Yeah, I know."

Toudou checks the fit on her armor as she stretches her arms and legs, almost like she's doing a warm-up.

It's impossible to tell from the outside, but Toudou has now equipped the mermaid armor in place of her underwear. The holy armor Fried is extremely light, so even if the mermaid armor happens to not function properly, she shouldn't need to worry about drowning.

The beach is completely abandoned. As she tests the sand underneath her

feet, Toudou looks back at Aria and the others.

“This is just a test, so I’ll come right back.”

“Monsters could appear. If something happens, give us a signal right away. I can swim well enough.”

“Got it.”

Toudou is also an accomplished swimmer. She checks the holy sword Ex hanging from her waist and nods to herself.

Then, as her companions watch on, Toudou steps into the ocean.

So this is...mermaid armor, huh?

It functions tremendously well. Keeping her eyes wide open, Toudou steps carefully out into the sea, step-by-step, as sunlight pierces the water’s surface. A cool sensation envelops her entire body, but she’s able to keep her eyes open, and her breath comes easily.

She opens her hands to check and see what her movements are like. There is very little resistance, to the point where she quickly forgets she’s underwater.

A number of different creatures lie within the sea’s murky depths. Toudou is still close to the beach, but she already sees fish and crabs as big as she is prowling the ocean floor. Thankfully, they don’t seem to have any interest in Toudou as she explores.

Walking through the ocean is an odd sensation. Toudou watches as a three-meter-long fish with a blank look on its face swims past, and she lets out a gasp. Even as she exhales, no air escapes her mouth.

“So the ocean...also has monsters? The scale of this world is massive.”

Yet, she met a demi-dragon in the Great Forest of the Vale, and the underground tomb was full of skeletons. Toudou has faced off against monsters that didn’t even exist back in her home world. A big fish isn’t going to scare her.

Convincing herself as much, she unsheathes the holy sword Ex in one clean movement.

The silvery blade shines in her dim surroundings. A number of fish and giant

crabs draw closer to the light.

Toudou takes a few practice slashes. Even under the ocean, the holy sword Ex is light as a feather.

They're probably not afraid of the sword itself, but the fish and crabs that drew closer scatter and flee.

Toudou checks her form a few times. She feels equally as sharp as she would on land.

She should be able to fight underwater just as well as she does anywhere else.

After checking her blade's performance thoroughly, she puts it back in its hilt. Everyone is probably worried about her, and she's satisfied with her trial run. Time to head back.

Just as she turns on her heel, Toudou catches sight of something odd: a squirming mass of shadowy figures slightly ahead of her through the murky sea. Squinting, she can see their silhouettes—monsters.

They have the head of a fish and short, stubby legs covered in blue scales that emit an eerie glow. The arms sprouting out from their sides hold long, thin weapons. These must be the mermen that were detailed in the information provided by the Church.

They're not supposed to be very strong monsters, but this is a peculiarly large number of them in one place. Even from this distance, Toudou can see over ten mermen.

What the heck? Why are there so many of them?

Over one hundred meters separate the mermen and Toudou. They haven't noticed her yet.

Toudou takes one step toward them before realizing that the entire group is focused on one spot.

"...?!"

Just ahead of them is a single merman. But he's different from the rest.

First off, he's a different size and color. Different weapon, too. And the eyes—they're not the same, either.

The average merman is about one and a half meters tall, but this one is a whole head taller. The others have dark-blue scales, but this one has scales black as iron.

Despite the large gap between them, he swivels his giant head around and locates Toudou on the dimly lit ocean floor. She can see his eyes flashing deep red, even from where she stands. He has a golden fin growing from his back.

Toudou instinctively retreats a step from his commanding presence. Even with the distance between them, she can feel his seething vigor.

Judging from her past experiences in battle, Toudou is convinced—this merman is...powerful. He could be more powerful than any monsters she's battled so far.

"A merman...king?"

There's no chance he could have actually heard her, but at Toudou's words, the merman suddenly brandishes his weapon.

From where she stands, Toudou can practically feel the shock wave from the attack. The mermen groveling in fear nearby are cast asunder like scraps of shredded paper. The rest try to escape but are immediately smashed into the ocean floor.

Though she can't hear the black-colored merman's voice, she can still feel his terrifying fury from afar.

—I need to get out of here.

Toudou suddenly realizes she must escape and instinctively makes a beeline for the shore.

This was only a test run of the magic item's functionality. Her companions aren't close by. She needs to avoid combat to the extent possible.

Toudou stomps on the ocean floor as she runs with abandon. She doesn't even have time to think about drawing her sword.

Thankfully, nothing is pursuing her. Her vision is flooded with light as she

returns to dry land. She doesn't stop running until she sees her companions. Finally, she collapses onto the sand.

Limis and Aria dash over to Toudou, worried by her unusual appearance.

"Wh-what's wrong, Nao?! Did the mermaid armor—?"

"*Pant, pant...* There was s-something down there..."

"...Something...? What was it?"

Aria gives Toudou her hand. She takes it gratefully and looks out toward the sea.

It looks the same as when they first arrived, still as beautiful and serene, without any sign of trouble.

Toudou wipes her mouth with her sleeve and sputters. Her heart is hammering in her chest.

She's trying hard to stay calm, but her voice is shaking uncontrollably.

"Their boss... The merman boss."

"Boss?"

"Yeah, he was horrible. Easily the most terrifying monster I've ever seen. That thing was pure evil."

Toudou is brave. No matter what monsters have appeared thus far, she's always faced them with valor. Aria and Limis are shocked to hear something so unexpected coming out of their hero's mouth.

"What kind of...monster was it?"

"There shouldn't be any monsters that strong unless you go out to the open sea—"

Limis attempts to stifle her anxiety. Aria looks grim.

"He didn't even hesitate...to kill his own kind. And... Oh yeah. He had a different weapon than they did—he had a mace."

§ § §

"Pffft— Boss, that is *epic*! What even is that thing?!"

“Hell if I know!”

I wait for Toudou to disappear before coming back up onto the beach. Sanya is cackling like a hyena and slaps me on the back.

My armor’s rough, lifelike black scales are coated in a special metal alloy—far more rugged than any normal suit. The mouth contains a full set of teeth, each like individual knives, and it gives the armor a sort of intimidating air beyond the scope of mere decoration. The golden fin sprouting from its back is made from that of a sea serpent and has the effect of frightening off sea monsters.

It has one eye on each side of the head that shines a bright, bloody crimson. Unfortunately, because they’re in a different position from human eyes, they’re simply decorations. Instead, the wearer can see out of the mouth.



The only disadvantage is that it's not a simple substitute for mermaid armor—it's an entire set of armor and can't be easily worn or removed alone. Once it's been equipped, the outer attachments need to be removed by a second party before the entire thing can be taken off.

Merman armor—that's the name of this bizarrely imposing piece of equipment. I'm already sick of it.

"I love how you look in it, Ares," says Amelia with narrowed eyes as I remove the fish-head part of the armor.

Next, Rabi chimes in, and I can't tell if she's being serious or stirring up shit.

"Boss, you won't have anything to feel embarrassed about in that outfit. If anything, you might get attacked by accident—"

Sanya is still laughing.

I manage to remove my legs from the bottom half of the merman armor—a painstaking ordeal, thanks in part to the fact that I'm wearing my robe underneath. That said, I should probably be grateful the wearer doesn't have to be completely naked under it like with the mermaid armor. That would be even more of a hassle.

The merman armor is dripping wet and smells like raw fish. The fact that it's completely airtight is my only savior.

The top half of the armor lies in the sand, casting a gaping, vacant gaze my way.

"I'm going to go speak with Zolan... Sanya, clean this up, will you?"

"Um, boss?! This won't fit in my bag! Are you telling me to carry it all the way back?"

This merman armor is definitely the kind of thing I was looking for: a magic item that allows me to move around in the ocean. But it's not exactly what I was expecting.

—*"I was deeply moved by yer passion."*

When I requested a male version of the mermaid armor from Zolan, he

responded as if he was speaking to one of his own brethren, eyes narrowed.

—“Until now, I’ve only made mermaid armor for the ladies to wear. I was happy just havin’ ’em wear my creations. But perhaps I’ve been mistaken all this time.”

His voice was filled with emotion. It was all just complete bullshit from a crazy old geezer, but I listened in silence and nodded along.

So long as I could get what I wanted, I’d listen to his griping.

—“You’re right, Ares Crown. I knew it all along, but I’d never met a man of conviction such as yerself, and so I was mistaken. I was foolin’ myself. Just like ya said...I wanna see ’em, too—the beautiful ladies, wearing my mermaid armor! Under the sea!”

Oh shit. This guy’s all mixed up; I’m just not getting through to him.

I’d all but given up when Zolan began to scream with delight.

“That’s why I changed my mind. As a result, I’ve created this! Ares, spare yourself from throwing away yer dignity! I got just the thing fer you in yer quest to become a mermaid! Please take it now! It’s my ultimate masterpiece, only one of its kind in the entire world—something every young man has been eagerly waiting for... Behold, merman armooooorrr!!”

And that’s how I became a merman.

Not that I chose this method, but in what world does a priest provide support for the hero dressed as a merman?!

The armor covers my entire body, allowing me to protect my identity, but when Toudou looked my way when we were underwater, he seemed like he was face-to-face with a monster. I’m not Rabi, but even I would’ve made the same mistake in Toudou’s shoes.

I storm into Zolan’s shop and he greets me with a smile stretching from ear to ear.

Somehow, against the odds, Zolan now seems to think of me—in my merman armor—as a fellow pervert who wants to chase after Amelia and the others in their bikinis. Did any of my behavior give him that impression when we spoke?

“What’s the matter, Ares? Somethin’ wrong with the merman armor?”

“Yeah. The way it looks.”

“Heh... Pretty cool, right?”

Zolan contorts his lips in a crooked smile. Is this the kind of thing he’s into? I at least wanted it to look a bit more humanlike.

However, that’s not the topic at hand today. I do wish he would improve the armor’s appearance as well as the method for putting it on and taking it off, but that’s for a different time.

I recall what Toudou looked like during our encounter on the ocean floor. I was some distance away, but he didn’t appear to be struggling. He must have been wearing the mermaid armor.

“I’ve seen Toudou underwater. It appears the mermaid armor still functions even with armor worn over it...”

I have to make sure, just for the record. Zolan didn’t seem to be lying. In any case, telling us that mermaid armor loses all functionality if worn underneath armor is the top kind of lie that would quickly be exposed. Zolan wouldn’t do something so meaningless.

Zolan’s expression is stern. He scowls and crosses his arms, closing his eyes in thought for a few minutes.

When he opens them again, the energy that had been filling the room just before has completely dissipated.

“...It’s just a theory, but Toudou’s armor’s gotta be custom-made. No one understands the properties of mermaid armor better than I do. There hasn’t been a single example of it working when worn under clothing or armor.”

Zolan’s tone is dark, and he sighs deeply.

Toudou’s armor, the holy armor Fried, was obtained by a previous Holy Warrior, just like his holy sword Ex. It’s the hardest armor in this world, and only the Holy Warrior can equip it. It is a veritable gift from God. It stands to reason that it has previously unidentified powers.

This is a blessing in disguise. I don’t want to see Mermaid Toudou, and if he

can wear his armor, that only increases his safety.

It's possible that Toudou decided to wear the mermaid armor because he knew he could equip his armor over the top.

However, as I convince myself that this is all probable, Zolan continues in his dark tone.

"Ya've got every right to be angry, Ares."

"No, as long as I know the reason why, then it's fine."

"My apologies. Yeh went so far as to disguise yerself as a monster just so ya could get a glimpse of some mermaids... Just dreadful!"

"?????"

This old fart has truly lost it. I'm not dressed up like a monster to go ogle a bunch of mermaids! Anyway, Toudou having to wear a bikini is the real tragedy here. At least make another suit of merman armor for Toudou..... Can't the hero be dressed as a merman, too?!

"Just...leave it to me! I swear on my life that I, Zolan, magic-item creator, will render that armor useless! We can't establish a precedent!"

Zolan bangs on the counter and lets out a pained howl.

Why is he getting so worked up about this of all things? This is perfectly fine. It's far more convenient if Toudou can wear his armor.

I decide to let Zolan's espousing go. I don't give a shit, and there's something else I want to ask.

"One more thing—when I had the merman armor on, a group of mermen gathered around...and they were worshipping me..."

Back at the inn, Amelia—who was preparing materials to submit to the Church's headquarters—looks up and asks me, "How did it go?"

"As expected..."

Merman armor was made to deceive everyone and everything. It will even fool mermen themselves.

And Zolan was proud of this. This world is pure madness.

It's certainly a benefit that merman armor allows one to move through the water. However, the side effect of luring monsters toward the wearer is a different story altogether. If that ends up affecting Toudou and his party, it'll defeat the whole purpose.

"Boss, we should be sufficient in terms of protection," says Rabi, her hood pulled way down over her face, as always. "Judging from the information we've gathered in Cloudburst and Sanya's experience going underwater, there won't be any seriously tough monsters. The appropriate level to defeat them might be around thirty, at most. The sunken temple is complex, and the ocean's greatest threats, gigantic monster types, can't even enter—not without destroying any of the structure itself, that is."

"There is a chance you won't be able to wear any armor. Are you still confident?"

"...I've always worn just a single layer of clothing. The same goes for Sanya."

She has a point. Sanya is tough as nails, and if Rabi—who's supposedly even tougher—comes along, there should be no problems in terms of combat strength.

I initially intended to hold down the fort anyway. I ought to prevent any unfortunate accidents.

Amelia chimes in, sounding perplexed.

"However... Ares, you said those mermen surrounded you—where did they come from, I wonder?"

"The ocean's a big place."

Mermen inhabit every corner of it. You hear stories of them all along the coast, and people hate any aquatic monster that can function on land even for short periods of time. Apparently, mermen form colonies, and if you see one, then that means a hundred are lying in wait, or so they say.

"It's precisely because the ocean is so vast that for them to have swarmed you so quickly on a single test dive sounds...quite rare to me. Ares, you truly are unlucky..."

I instantly resent the look of pity that Amelia gives me. Yet, thinking about it, she's right.

Even though I was wearing the merman armor, should they really have converged around me so quickly right after I dived in? Maybe one of their colonies was close by? Well, Toudou was nearby as well, so there's also a chance that *he's* the unlucky one...

".....You're right. Okay, I'll try going down there again tonight."

"...Huh?! But why...? Are you going to wear *that* again?"

Sheesh—I don't want to put it on, either. But there's still time.

If there's a merman colony close by, we should annihilate it straightaway. Best to be on the safe side.

Sanya has just returned from doing some additional surveying outside, and when I tell her of my plans, she grins and says, "Huh?! Wait, that sounds like so much fun! I'll go with you!"

"...I doubt there will be any fun involved."

The beach is deserted again. In the pitch darkness, only the scent of the saltwater lingers.

If anyone showed up now, we'd have a hell of a time explaining ourselves. Any man caught wandering the beach in a merman costume (well, it's really closer to armor) would be labeled as a freak.

After I equip the merman armor, Amelia looks at me with a different gaze than usual and asks again, "...Ares, do you really intend to go down there?"

"I'm just going for a quick dip."

".....You better come right back to this spot! You won't be able to take it off yourself, so if you don't come back, you'll be a merman for life—got it?!"

Don't say something so terrifying!

If worse comes to worst, I'll just destroy this stupid suit. I'm good at destroying things. Probably even more so than fixing things!

I swing my mace—Wrath of God—a few times through the air. There's no way

to tell what god is angry right now. To be honest, I don't even know who I should unleash my wrath on.

"In that case, Ares, we'll be in regular contact while you're down there."

"Of course."

Sanya is looking at me, full of excitement.

Rabi remains silent and turns her cheek, quivering slightly, away from me. She's smirking, isn't she?!

I enter the water silently; it's quiet down here. The sky is cloudy tonight, and not even the light of the moon reaches the ocean floor. Nonetheless, it's teeming with life. I walk through the swaying seaweed and past schools of small fish.

Perhaps the ocean floor is home to many nocturnal creatures, because the water is full of them right now. Due to my intimidating appearance, however, none of them look my way, and instead they flee in the opposite direction.

The current is strong, and the ocean floor is largely void of landmarks. If I get lost, I might never find my way back.

Seriously, I am so glad I sold off Stey when I could. There's no way I could handle her going rogue down here.

With that on my mind, I push off a large boulder and swim around slowly, taking in my surroundings. Nothing in particular seems awry.

I roam listlessly along the ocean floor for a while, but I don't see any mermen.

That said, the ocean is immensely vast. It's probably due to being underwater, but I have trouble sensing any nearby presences. Perhaps earlier was just a coincidence?

Just as I waver on whether to call off the dive, I hear a voice coming down from above me.

"Ah, there he is! Hey, monster man!"

I swing my head around and look up. Sanya is waving at me with a smile.

I try to rub my eyes, but the eyes on my suit are on the sides of my head—for

decoration only—and my actual eyes are in the suit's mouth. Nothing doing.

Sanya paddles through the water with outstretched arms and legs and swims toward me at a decent clip. Her tail acts as a perfect rudder, veering left and right as she approaches. Not that I care, but she definitely doesn't look like a mermaid.

Following after her, a swarm of mermen runs along the ocean floor, spears in their hands. There's a ton of them.

Is this fun for her? The hell is she doing?!

Fascinated, Sanya swims down to me in her perfect doggy paddle. The mermen following behind her notice me and stop dead in their tracks. The ones at the front come to a sudden stop, and all the mermen behind them trip over one another.

That's odd... I told Sanya to stay put, didn't I? Also, I'm not a "monster man."

Sanya lands in front of me and raises both hands in the air with a smile. Seriously, she looks like she's having the time of her life.

"What are you doing here?"

"Boss, you stick out like a sore thumb. You're super intimidating. Even with dulled senses underwater, I still picked you out instantly. You look like the king of the mermen. But I'd rather you not talk with that thing on—it's terrifying."

"And what about watching over Amelia, like I asked you to?"

"Rabi's there with her. She'll be fine."

This chick just does whatever the hell she pleases, doesn't she? What kind of shitty subordinate directly disobeys commands?

The mermen stare at Sanya and me in bewilderment. It turns out I'd seen only a small fraction of their total numbers.

The mermen expand their range instantly and surround Sanya and me. There are so many of them. I can't even feign to begin counting how many.

It's as if the ocean floor itself is wriggling. Only their eyes give off a disgusting glint.

“What did you do?!”

“...I was just swimming, and they followed me. What can I say? I’m popular.”

She’s right that the mermen seem to be interested in her alone. Their emotionless eyes are focused on her limbs.

“...Well, mermen are known for kidnapping the females of other species... either to eat or to reproduce with...”

They’re a bit like goblins or orcs in nature—if they interbreed with a different species, then whatever offspring they produce will supposedly be even stronger. Personality aside, Sanya’s appearance and abilities are top-notch. For these mermen, she’s a first-rate trophy.

“...Ewww. You gotta be kidding me...”

Sanya makes a face and crosses her arms to hide her chest, staring at the mermen surrounding us.

Anyone would react that way... Suddenly, I have a great idea.

“With these numbers...there must be a colony nearby. Maybe if they capture you, they’ll lead us to it?”

We’re up against mermen, after all—I can annihilate as many of them as needed. Even if an evolved type or subspecies appears, it’d be a cakewalk for me.

Sanya’s bare shoulders shudder in disgust.

“.....Y’know, boss, there are some things you just shouldn’t say.”

“...”

As they surround us, the mermen tighten their circle to the maximum. They don’t seem keen to attack. From their perspective, I’m a mysterious, unidentified merman who took some prey they were after. They aren’t attacking me, despite their advantage in number, because of my larger size—or perhaps because they think I’m one of them.

With this many mermen in my path, it might be a challenge to obliterate every last one of them. Actually...maybe I can just intimidate them into freezing

in their tracks?

Yet this overwhelming number almost certainly means that a colony exists—maybe even multiple colonies. I would ideally like to slay them all right here in one fell swoop, but this is absurd...

I remain silent, but Sanya is swaying back and forth nervously. She actually seems flustered.

“Um, boss, you’re kidding, right? Right? Even if I’m a mercenary, there are certain things you just shouldn’t order people to do!! Do you understand that?!”

“...I’m only kidding. I can’t have you filing a complaint with my superiors. I still have a use for you.”

“When you say it like that...”

In the next moment, a merman one whole size bigger than the rest emerges from the swarm.

His arms are thicker than the others’ and he holds a razor-sharp golden trident. An ancient-looking necklace adorns his neck.

As with goblins, these types of unintelligent demi-human monsters are defined by their sociality. Typically, a single boss commands the group with authority. They’re always easy to determine if you look closely—a pronounced difference in body size, equipment, and certain facial features. I’d bet this one is the most eminent of the bunch.

Even though the leader is a whole size bigger than his cohorts, I’m still taller in my merman costume.

The merman leader cries out. I have no idea where the crazed voice is coming from.

It could be spoken language, but even though I may look like a merman, I can’t understand it at all.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I raise my mace and decimate the merman leader in front of the horde.

The merman didn’t even have a chance to wield his magnificent trident

before erupting into a cloud of red mist and viscera.

“Whoa! Boss, you’re the worst...”

“The appropriate level to defeat him was between fifty and fifty-five. He would have been tough, for a merman...”

I’m the industrious type. If there’s no specific reason not to, I kill all my enemies as quickly as possible.

We’re up against mermen right now, and they’re bound to be more adept at fighting underwater than we are. But that doesn’t matter if you kill them where they stand. Eliminating the boss throws the rest of the group into chaos. As I predicted, the mermen—with their leader now dead—cry out simultaneously.

Sanya slides behind me to shield herself—which is pointless, because we’re surrounded on all sides.

“This is the first time I’ve ever felt bad for a monster.”

“You fight, too!”

“What’ll I do if I get hurt?”

“I’m a priest, dammit. I can heal your arm, even if it gets ripped off.”

As we exchange light banter, I lord over the mermen. Sanya now turns her back to mine, keeping an eye on my rear.

The mermen’s cries reach a crescendo. Normal mermen would have already let their rage take over and attacked, but maybe it’s because I’m a merman myself that they don’t even try to come at me. I brandish my mace in their faces, but they don’t seem keen to escape, either.

Just what are they thinking...? Countless unfeeling eyes are focused on me, but I can’t see rancor or despair in them.

Not that I give a damn about a monster’s feelings, but...maybe this is all part of a strategy?

If I can’t eliminate the entire colony, at the very least I want to kill every merman present. Where should I cut through their defenses? As I furrow my brow inside the sweltering costume, the entire horde of mermen lets go of their

weapons simultaneously.

They all kneel, and some begin to fall prostrate. They aren't highly poised by any means, nor are they all in formation, but it is unmistakable that they are bowing to me. Their heads are all toward me, defenseless, as they grovel in the sand with both hands on the ocean floor.

So even mermen bow down to their leaders...

"...Boss, this is amazing! You've reduced an unintelligent species to worshipping you..."

I sensed an aura of respect from the mermen I encountered last night, too, but they didn't bow in my presence.

This merman armor looks ridiculous...but the effects are incredible. Zolan, that cheeky bastard... He really is a genius, after all.

Bow to me all you want—I'm not gonna let a single one of you leave here alive.

"Hey, hey, I've got a great idea. Boss, what if you gave up the priesthood and became a merman king? There are so many of 'em, I bet you could unify the entire population."

".....I never thought of that."

"Wha—?! Eek!"

Sanya cries out, but I pay her no mind, instead whirling around to grab her and hold her up for all the mermen to see with my left arm and brandishing my mace with my right.

"RAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

I let loose a scream with all my might. I can't make the same noises as an actual merman, so it's really just for show.

However, I think they get my drift. The mermen all look up at me and begin to applaud loudly. Their distorted cheers echo through the water, forming a massive wave that spreads across the ocean. In this moment, I truly have become the merman king.

I still have Sanya pinned under my arm, using her as bait, and she stammers, her face twitching. “H-hey, boss... You sure you don’t wanna rethink this? I mean, I’ll still do what you ask of me and all, but...shouldn’t we focus on more humanlike targets? You’ll be sick of eating fish before you know it.”

This chick really likes pushing my buttons. Just like Amelia, I can never tell if she’s being serious or sarcastic.

The mass of mermen writhes and opens up a path, almost as if the ocean floor has been split in two. I take a step forward, still holding Sanya under my arm.

“.....You shall be my sacrifice. Heh-heh-heh... Mwa-ha-ha... Silverwolf... You will prove an excellent broodmare in helping the merman race to flourish!!”

“Holy crap! Boss, you’re terrifying me!! Boss?! Um, boss?! Have you forgotten that you’re only *acting* like a merman?! Hey! Your scales are scratching me, and it hurts!! Boss!!”

§ § §

“...Are you sure you’re okay? Ever since you went underwater to test the magic item, you’ve looked really stiff.”

“...Mm, I’m okay now. There’s no use worrying about me anyway.”

Aria offers a few words of concern, and Toudou nods, her expression dark.

It’s been a number of days since her chance encounter with the massive monster under the sea, but she’s still not feeling like herself.

It’s not from a sense of fear, however—it’s bewilderment. She’s put her life on the line in battle thus far. She was deathly afraid of the undead, but she overcame it. There is no reason that Toudou should be so frazzled by the slightly powerful enemy she saw.

Yet nonetheless...as Aria waits in silence for a response, Toudou continues. It sounds like she’s making excuses.

“I mean, I feel like I’ve grown a lot on our journey, too...but I just can’t...see how I’m gonna beat this one.”

Their eyes met for only an instant, but the merman’s figure remains freshly

ingrained in Toudou's mind.

Ever since, Toudou has gone over in her head how she would fight this creature, but she ends up killed each and every time, at a loss for what to do. Of course, since she fled so quickly from the water, she saw the merman king attacking the other mermen for only an instant.

There's no way to know how accurate her imagined battles against the merman king are. Yet, based on her leveling up and her experience, Toudou's capacity to gauge difference in strength has grown more precise.

It's highly out of the ordinary for her to remain this out of sorts even after checking that difference multiple times.

"Was it really that bad...? Mermen aren't a particularly strong race. Sure, they're much larger than we are, but given the time we spent battling in Golem Valley—although brief—they shouldn't be very tough—"

"I dunno how to describe it, but...he just *felt* different. Maybe he was some kind of demon..."

"...But it was unmistakably a merman, right?"

"Uh-huh. Definitely a merman."

Toudou nods immediately, and Aria furrows her brow.

All demons are superior beings compared with humans, but even the word *demon* itself indicates a wide range as well.

In this current age of the Demon Lord's menace, the appearance of any sort of powerful demon becomes quickly known far and wide—even among commoners without combat experience, much less Toudou, the Holy Warrior. There can't be that many possibilities as to who this merman being is.

Aria and her clan know a great deal about demons. She's been taught the names of those that have sided with the Demon Lord, along with their powers and what they look like. There aren't any merman-like demons among them.

"Since we don't have any information on him, maybe he's a rogue demon...? That much is possible, but...having said that, the entire ocean has fallen into the Demon Lord's army's hands by now."

“Oh yeah... You mentioned a sea demon, right?”

Aria nods in response to Toudou.

The demon controlling the ocean, Heljarl, is famous for his cunning intellect and brutish personality. Most of all, his power to freely command the various ocean-dwelling monsters that have historically remained out of sight beneath the surface has left humanity landlocked.

“Heljarl is really the only sea demon out there... But I’ve heard he’s not a merman.”

“Hmm...”

That means all that Toudou knows is that a powerful, unidentified demon-like monster now inhabits the coast.

Toudou is about to withdraw into thought when Limis, who’s been listening to the conversation all this time, suddenly claps her hands. She sounds exasperated as she changes the subject.

“Oh come *on*, you two! Aria, Nao, you both look so depressed—I realize there’s a powerful monster in our midst, but we should really be focused on forming an elemental spirit covenant, yes?”

In the time the party has spent chatting while walking along, they are now drawing near to Cloudburst’s port.

Toudou squints against the salty wind. The blue sky is translucent, the water’s surface calm. Aside from how tiny the moored boats are against the massive scale of the port, the peaceful seascape reaches every corner of her vision.

The party has come here to check the procedures involved before actually establishing a covenant with a water elemental spirit. Any spirits close to the beach are low ranking, but they can at least use this as a chance to verify the steps leading up to the actual covenant.

Toudou is still not herself, and Limis pats her on the back before continuing emphatically.

“Besides, the place where you ran into the merman was pretty far from the sunken temple, right? He’s probably back into deeper waters by now, and even

if he shows up again, we'll all be with you next time. We'll at least be able to distract him and get away. I'm here, and so are Aria and Glacia."

"...Yeah, you're right."

"I'm concerned as well, but we probably shouldn't think too hard about it. If he was an operative of the Demon Lord...he wouldn't have let you, all alone under the sea, escape so easily."

Aria is exactly right. If Toudou was attacked back there, she isn't confident that she would have been able to escape. That's how much of a difference in power she felt. It's because of her experiences thus far that she realized just how strong that merman was.

"Heh-heh... Mermen are pretty dumb to begin with, and even if we had to fight him, I'm sure we'd manage, don't you think?"

Limis chuckles and looks at Toudou with her translucent blue eyes.

With that, Toudou once again sees the figure of the merman, obliterating his own followers, in her mind's eye.

She has a point... He definitely didn't seem very smart.

Aria and Limis stare at Toudou; even the generally indifferent Glacia is looking at her inquisitively. Finally, Toudou slaps herself on both cheeks and psyches herself up once again.

It still doesn't make any sense, but Toudou's not the type to remain down in the dumps for long. She can't keep showing her unease in the face of her companions, either.

Toudou feels like a brand-new girl as she takes in a deep breath.

"...Okay! No use thinking about it. Limis, explain to me how this covenant stuff works."

Even if defeating the Demon Lord is still far off for the Holy Warrior's party, they'll continue to move forward, step-by-step. There's no doubt about that.

§ § §

"The sea is vast, Amelia. So very vast..."

Amelia's boss likes to say meaningless things from time to time. He might be tired.

She responds by slapping her forehead and frowning.

Detection magic is difficult to wield, but when it comes to tracking Ares, Amelia's magic is flawless. She can detect his responses far beyond her normal detection range—even at the bottom of the sea.

"This is unreal; there are tons of them. What?! It's not only mermen. Is this...a temple? Amelia, give me my location."

"...You are approximately fifty kilometers northeast of the sunken temple."

"So this must be a different place. It's not a temple... What the...?! Why have they settled this close to the shore? It's ancient. Ruins, maybe? Did they make these half-destroyed ruins their stronghold?"

"Ummm... Perhaps you should tone it down a notch? Why are you getting so worked up?"

Rabi stands motionless on the beach and watches as Amelia reports to Ares.

"I-in any case, Ares, this is beside the point—"

"Wait, wait—there's a school of giant fish. They're in immaculate formation. Why are there so many? Do mermen have such an intricate social hierarchy? Eliminating every last one of them through brute force will be tough. I'll have to think hard about this one."

Ares is speaking quietly, but he can't mask his brimming enthusiasm. And even though he's on the dangerous ocean floor, he doesn't sound nervous at all.

"I'll beat them down all at once. But...it will take time. Amelia, I'm temporarily releasing you from your post. Watch after Toudou and his party and report to Creio. And keep in contact with me as usual, too."

"Huh...? But... J-just how do you expect to make your way back to us...?" she responds, completely taken aback—she thought Ares despised the merman armor.

"I'm putting Sanya in charge of navigation, since she disobeyed my orders and

followed me here.”

Amelia hadn’t realize Sanya was gone until Ares had already been underwater for a while. He’s gone soft now that Stey, who disobeys commands without even realizing it, has left. It shouldn’t come as a shock that Sanya, a scout, would be able to disappear without leaving behind a trace.

Amelia starts to respond before realizing that the line has been cut from Ares’s end. She sighs deeply and clicks her tongue.

“...Tsk. He hung up.”

She could call him back, but chances are he’ll just hang up again. Amelia slumps her shoulders and inhales deeply, mumbling, “Look at him, having a real ball down there by himself... So unfair.”

The mermaid armor for Rabi and Amelia will be ready soon, but they can’t dive down to follow Toudou just yet—they have no idea what shenanigans he’ll get up to next. And should that happen on their watch, Ares might be disappointed with them.

Rabi remains motionless and silent, waiting for Amelia to speak. Unlike Sanya, for better or worse, Rabi keeps still unless commanded otherwise.

“Ares will not return for some time. When he does, we’ll be back on schedule to continue supporting Toudou and his party. Until he returns, I will be supervising all activities as his representative. Rabi, please take over lookout duties for Sanya.”

“...Understood, boss.”

Rabi nods briefly. They can’t afford to just sit around because their leader is at the bottom of the sea.



Third Report

On Undersea Monsters

The ocean floor is uncharted territory. Along with the issue of breathing underwater, you have to deal with atmospheric pressure and monsters. Even mages who can use water elemental spirit magic to venture beneath the surface never go to the ocean floor.

I've been down here for at least twenty minutes. Guided by the group of mermen, Sanya and I have at last arrived...at an underwater town. Crude houses fashioned from rocks and seaweed line the dimly lit seabed, stretching far into the distance.

The town is on a much smaller scale than any human town, but the very fact that it exists on the ocean floor is staggering.

Contrary to its somewhat mysterious atmosphere, the town's residents are all strange-looking. Despite the fact that they are intrinsically bottom-feeders, the innumerable emotionless mermen swarming here are simply disgusting.

Still snug under my arm, Sanya stares in amazement.

"Whoa, what the heck...? Are mermen really this clever?"

Even mermen are smart enough to use simple tools. I've never seen anything like it, but it's not outside the realm of possibility for them to establish towns.

However, the scale of this place is gigantic, and moreover—

"They're coexisting with other monsters...?" Sanya whispers, flabbergasted, upon noticing a gigantic monster lurking among the shadows between the rocks. It's a giant octopus with innumerable tentacles, shining a noxious bright green. I don't know the monster's name, but judging from its life force, it's as strong as the giant squid we fought on our boat journey to Cloudburst.

Its slimy tentacles writhe, and its proportionately small eyes hone in on me. However, I'm not worried it will attack.

The octopus is leagues more powerful than any merman. If anything, they're more likely to be this monster's dinner.

Following our guide, we pass right in front of the giant octopus, but it simply watches us go by. The mermen aren't concerned whatsoever.

The merman leader I annihilated wouldn't have stood a chance against this creature. How the hell did they tame it?

The farther we progress, the more heterogeneous the colony becomes. There are plenty of mermen still about, but other breeds of monsters are also greater in number.

Some are especially fiendish monsters known to attack humans and demons alike. There are krakens and sea serpents—sea creatures that could sink a ship by themselves—but they're all completely docile. And they're not alone.

Krakens and sea serpents lead solitary lives. They're not the sort of opponent you can talk sense into, and I can't imagine any mermen trying their hand at negotiating with them, either. They're mortal enemies. Can they even communicate with each other?

"...Boss... This looks like a bad sign, don'tcha think?"

"..."

How should we annihilate them all? The swarm is much larger than I expected. Even the mermen just passing by number at least one or two

hundred strong. Including the other monsters present, the total military capacity required would be astronomical.

Individual mermen pose no threat whatsoever, but eradicating this many of them is a real problem. I don't have any options for attacking multiple targets at once, and casting a barrier to rope the whole swarm in would be impossible.

However, that doesn't mean we're completely out of prospects. Given the massive size of their swarm, someone has to be leading them—someone with sagacious wit and charisma eclipsing any peon merman. Take the leader down, and they'll collapse into a riotous mob.

As I walk along and consider our options, the merman guiding us stops in front of a building bigger than the rest. Unlike the other structures, this one was built with a high degree of technical skill.

The building has been dug out from the craggy mountains towering from the ocean floor, and it resembles a sanctuary. It's not likely that the mermen built it. The structure shows some deterioration, but the pillars and stairs are smooth, far exceeding merman engineering capacity. Due to its proximity with the sunken temple, this place could easily be a product of the same civilization.

The merman guide leading us cries out, clearly indicating for us to follow him.

"...You've really got guts, boss— Yow!"

I tighten the arm that's holding her and squeeze to shut her up.

The average merman cannot comprehend human language, but we should be careful just in case.

"You will be a sacrifice for our kind to flourish."

Now I'm pretending to be both a hero *and* a merman—I don't even know who I am at this point.

"Y-you're kidding, right?! H-help me, Ameliaaaa! Eep—"

Sanya lets out a stifled cry. Remaining silent, I swing my mace down on the merman approaching behind us and smash him to bits. My mace slams into the ground and the entire ocean rumbles. A putrid scent billows into the water with a cloud of blood before dissipating.

Maybe he was just curious, or maybe he was testing me, but all I know is that someone behind me just touched my sacrifice.

The merman guide leading us turns around in a flurry and falls prostrate, bowing repeatedly. I can sense the surrounding mermen examining me covertly from a distance.

Makes sense—they're animals after all. The leader of the pack is expected to be the strongest.

I need to be recognized as the most powerful of them all. In the next instant, I kick the merman guide in the stomach. I kick him only once, but he's sent flying. Must be our difference in level. He ends up splayed out against a rock wall and falls silent.

He shouldn't be dead—I went easy on him.

"...Boss, you seriously call yourself a priest?"

Shut up. Maybe you ought to try playing pretend sometime.

Another merman stumbles in front of us and takes the leader's place without batting an eye. I may not understand the subtle nuances among mermen, but this one's distinguishing trait is a slightly sharper dorsal fin than the other one's.

He cries out at me unintelligibly, and I nod in response. Apparently, he's the new guide.

Following him, we proceed inside the sanctuary. It's quiet; there aren't many monsters inside. The hall isn't particularly wide, and a number of long, narrow doors line both sides.

Judging from this hall and the height of the ceiling, whoever created this sanctuary must have been a medium-size race akin to humans and mermen.

This place gives a lasting impression of desolation rather than royalty. The hall is adorned with sparkling stones here and there, and I can see the occasional odd statue and rusted metal vessels; it's like this is some sort of museum.

After more than ten minutes of following our merman guide without incident, we finally stop in front of one of the doors.

The gigantic black door is the type that opens from both sides. However, two

monsters block its path.

I stop dead in my tracks at their appearance. The merman guide doesn't wait for me and steps in front of them.

The monsters are aquatic demi-humans but different from mermen. They have dragon-like features, with scaly faces and shining golden eyes. Unlike mermen, they wear light armor that's smooth and blue, and they wield pristine ivory-white spears in their hands.

They're aquatic beings called *dragonewts*. Sanya is also shocked, staring wide-eyed.

This is a breed with the head of a dragon and the body of a human, characteristics that lead them to be known as *seadragon knights*.

These demi-humans are leagues stronger than mermen; they have high intelligence and robust physical frames. They're closer to humans than monsters but have violent temperaments—there are hardly any examples of successful negotiations with this race. Every member is a warrior, and encountering one on land is sure to entail a fearsome battle. That said, they are very few in number, so it's rare to actually run into one.

As such, I've never encountered any myself. If I stuffed and mounted one and sold him to some rich scumbag, I could probably make enough gold to hire another set of mercenaries equal to Rabi and Sanya as a set.

In other words, they're worth one Stey. Basic arithmetic means they're actually worth two Steys—one for each of them—but selling both at once would probably mean a discount. So...probably about 1.7 Steys?

At any rate—these seadragon knights are tough as nails. Their golden eyes shift from our merman guide to me.

Dragonewts are tough enough to begin with, but these two aren't letting their guard down one bit, even though we're all mermen. A strong life force resonates from them, and their stance shows no sign of weakness. This race possesses its own particular abilities, and these dragonewts definitely have combat experience.

And there are two of them here. Taking on both at once wouldn't simply

double the required effort—it would be a real headache. At the very least, they would never go down as easily as the mermen. For now, I've decided to give up on the taxidermy idea. They should be thankful for that.

I quell my animosity and look toward the seadragon knights and their glassy eyes. At the end of the day, I am a priest, and it's not my intention to battle them head-on. Thankfully, the seadragon knights seem to have a cooperative agreement with the mermen. I'll aim for their blind spots and finish them off one by one.

I can hear Sanya growling. She hardly has any equipment with her; she left behind her bow, likely because it encumbers swimming, and her throwing knives, too. Her exposed abdomen is equipped with a thin belt holding only one knife in its holster, a precarious weapon up against the dragonewts' spears.

But really—dragonewts? I never expected to encounter any here... They are few in number to begin with and are a very proud race. Why would they establish relations with mermen, a low-ranking species?

This situation requires thorough examination. I'll have to reconsider my previous extermination plan.

The merman guide makes a series of strange cries. One of the seadragon knights, standing slightly to his left, simply listens without responding.

Suddenly, the seadragon knight on his right draws closer. As a merman, I'm on the tall side, but this seadragon knight is blessed with an even more statuesque physique. His weapon isn't crudely fashioned like the mermen's, either.

Pressure racks my entire being. Dragons are some of the strongest creatures from birth. Dragonewts aren't quite on the same level, but to make up for it, they have hands to grip weapons with, as well as special abilities. In terms of strength, they're on par with silverwolves.

"This sucks..."

Sanya glowers at me and sighs. However, her tail is wagging and whipping against my arm.

She still wants to fight, even given her current disadvantages? I truly don't understand anyone that obsessed with battle.

The seadragon knight looks down at Sanya. Foam bubbles from his mouth as he suddenly produces a deep voice.

“A mermaid?”

That’s human speech. Can this thing really comprehend the human tongue? Did it respond to Sanya’s voice? And anyway, *mermaid*? Sanya looks nothing like one. She has a furry tail, for crying out loud.

I’m not doing anything to hide her, so Sanya’s long, lithe legs and silver tail sticking out from her skimpy swimsuit are in plain view.

Nonetheless, it seems the seadragon knight thinks Sanya is a mermaid.

...Oh, I guess this is an effect of the mermaid armor... I’m surrounded by idiots.

“Our king will be pleased.”

“K-king? Who’s that?!” Sanya says, trembling, but the seadragon knight ignores her and turns toward me. He narrows his sharp gaze and looks me over repeatedly.

“You’re quite tall...for a merman warrior.”

The merman armor does resemble a merman, but if you look closely, it’s obviously fake.

Its scales are coated in metal and the dorsal fin was appropriated from an actual sea serpent.

I’m able to fool fish with it, but dragons could be another story... Perhaps I should keep my mouth shut? It would be a real headache if my merman armor got destroyed while I’m here under the sea. I’ll end up having to try the Holy Warrior method of soldiering through an underwater stroll.

However, there are two of these knights, and I heard the one say something I can’t quickly forget: “*Our king.*”

The king of the seadragon knights, clearly the leader of their colony. Until I confirm his existence, I can’t let my identity slip.

Do I have some sort of technique I can use to continue to fool them? Or

should I kill them both before they have a chance to report me, and look for this king on my own?

It's quite obvious these two are gatekeepers. That means their king likely resides past the door they guard.

The seadragon knight has drawn within a few steps of me. At this distance, I can definitely pull off a preemptive strike.

However, in my current state, without any buffs, even a critical hit to his blind spot probably won't one-shot him.

At any rate, the biggest problem is his counterpart, just a few meters away. He will retaliate the instant I attack first. And if he did choose to retreat, that would prove even more of a nuisance.

Maybe Sanya could take out the closer one? But I don't have a way to tell her that, and she doesn't have an appropriate weapon. Even if she had her bow, the seadragon knights have their vital points covered by armor and helms, so it's unclear if she could one-shot them, either.

Maybe I should lure them closer to me? Would they both come within my mace's reach if they suspected something?

A million questions race through my mind. Time inches past.

The dragonewt continues to stare at me. Then his partner suddenly calls out to him and he turns around.

The pressure on me vanishes. It seems they've finished conversing with our merman guide.

The guide stands by my side, looking up at me. Maybe he convinced the seadragon knights of something?

"Very well, then. Lock that mermaid up in a cell and show this newcomer inside."

"Wait, what?! What the hell do you plan to do with me?!"

Sanya erupts from under my arm and squirms relentlessly in protest.

I squeeze her even harder. I'm not sure if I should follow along and let them

take Sanya with them.

She wouldn't have any problems escaping if up against only dragonewts, but if they tie her up, then that changes things. No—handing her over to them, defenseless, when I don't know what their intentions are, is a risk I'm not willing to take.

I adjust the timbre of my voice and produce in a guttural growl:

“No. This is my sacrifice. I won't hand her over to anyone.”

“?!”

The dragonewts go wide-eyed. They must be astonished. I would be, too, if a merman said that to me.

Their sharpened gazes fall on me. Their alertness, which was already high, has now skyrocketed.

“You can speak?”

“...I'll say it again. I refuse to hand her over to you—she is for the benefit of the merman race.”

“You dare...defy us?!”

In the swiftest possible of movements, the pair of seadragon knights turn the tip of their spears toward us. The air grows heavy, and our merman guide begins to freak out.

I raise my mace and point it at the dragonewts, making clear my intention to do battle.

An official member of the Church would be one thing, but there's no way I'll let a rental like Sanya come into harm's way, either. Issues of trust spread quickly, like wildfire. Once I get my hands on some gold, I intend to rent even more mercenaries.

I turn my murderous intent toward the dragonewts, honed like a razor-sharp blade. Their vigilance spikes even further.

“Who is he? Is he really a merman?!”

“His face is completely calm... You there—could it be that you have divine protection from an evil god!”

“What?! Boss, is that true?!”

I’m gonna kick your ass one of these days, Sanya.

The dragonewts slowly start to retreat. Our merman guide tries to hold me back, and I drop-kick him across the room.

Seeing the merman smashed against the wall, the two dragonewts give a cry of horror.

“Look what he did to his companion...!!”

“What a violent brute... Is this the power of a believer in the evil god Lucief Arept?!”

“What?! Boss, is that true?!”

This is already starting to piss me off. Let’s just blame everything on this evil god.

Lucief Arept is the God of Darkness, a deity oppositional to the God of Order. He is an enemy of Ahz Gried and provided divine protection to Zarpahn, the vampire I fought in the Great Forest of the Vale. I’ve eliminated countless numbers of Lucief’s followers, and I know exactly how to deal with them.

“All glory to Lucief Arept.”

“W-wait!”

The battle commences. At this rate, even if one of them gets away, I can simply blame it all on this evil god. I anticipate this might lead to some internal strife among my fellow clergy.

I ignore the dragonewts’ spluttering and raise my mace high, ready to step in.

Before I can swing, the door behind them opens.

“Cease, merman warrior.”

A cool, velvety voice completely different from the dragonewts’ resounds

throughout the hall.

The dragonewts instantly lose all interest in us and quickly return to their positions on both sides of the door.

I step back a few paces and raise my guard. A tall demi-human appears from the other side of the black door.

The male demi-human is cloaked in a lacquer-black robe that looks like it was spun from pure darkness, with light-blue hair and two curved horns that protrude from the sides of his head. His face closely resembles a human's, but his eyes flash a deep crimson. I don't know what otherworldly blood he's mixed with, but I can see a trace of scales peeking out from the neck of his robe.

Although his face appears human, from the neck down, he is clearly something other. The feet visible below his armor are covered in reptilian scales, and his clawed hands are gripping a massive black staff that's as tall as he is.

"M-my liege...!"

"He's dangerous!"

"I don't mind."

I can tell from his form that he has a strong life force. His wide-open eyes practically sear me with pure evil.

He steps toward me and I can see the claws on his feet under his robe hem scraping the ground unnervingly. His eerie reptilian pupils bore into mine.

I take another step back in spite of myself. Sanya is also at a loss for words.

An inhuman chuckle escapes his sanguine lips.

I just barely manage to restrain my arm from reaching out. I can see a number of seadragon knights in full military regalia standing past the door behind him.

"All ocean dwellers are my friends and my subjects. Know your place, merman warrior. Come, acknowledge me."

Arrogance, a smile rife with pride, and a vivacious life force that suits his demeanor unusually well.

I know his name. That is to say, every reputable mercenary does.

“The sea demon—Heljarl?! What...what is the right-hand man of the Demon Lord doing here?”

The price of at least two hundred and fifty Steys has been spent across the Kingdom on this single demon. The root cause of humanity’s loss over control of the oceans.

I know I can kill him. But why is this abomination here in the first place, within reach of my mace, which could pulverize his head into mush?!

I’m utterly overcome by the inanity of the situation when the two seadragon knight guards leap toward me. They twirl their spears, pointed directly at me. They don’t make a sound, instead focusing their bloodlust into their weapons. I smash both of them down in an instant with my mace.

I’m acting in neither haste nor fear. These creatures are fast and strong. But they’re nothing compared to Felsa, the werebeast I fought in Golem Valley.

I can feel a shudder of elation rising in my brain as I realize I’m face-to-face with this prized bounty, which all of humanity yearns for.

Is this...God telling me—to murder him?! Yes, there is no question about it.

He’s saying, *Kill him, and don’t leave a speck of dust behind!*

I could liberate the oceans. I could! I wouldn’t need to bribe Stey for money ever again!

The evil staring me in the face is nothing but a key to improving my financial prospects.

His life force is truly formidable—but it’s nothing compared to the calamity he’s perpetrated.

I leap back a few steps to avoid the whirlwind of spears flying at me from left and right. Their wide tips slice through the wall like butter and continue to aim for me. The merman armor is rife with blind spots, but the wrath emanating from the two seadragon knight guards is more than enough to reveal their movements. I’m not sure what’s irked them, but it’s actually a godsend.

Any opponent who comes at me with brute strength is a sitting duck. If they're weaker than I am to begin with, then all the more.

I can kill him. Slay him dead. If he's that arrogant, he's done for. After I defeat these two, all that's left is him behind them.

There's no way Heljarl expects that I'll attack him. I'll pretend to counterstrike the guards and obliterate him in one fell swoop.

A spear thrust scrapes by, just in front of my eyes. The perfect opportunity.

As I move in for the counterattack, Heljarl, who's been watching us silently, suddenly raises his voice.

"That's enough. Both of you—halt."

The dragonewts cease attacking all at once. Their spearheads, now motionless, remain aimed at me.

Falling in line, I also come to a stop. If only he would have waited a few more moments to stop them, I could have attacked.

Heljarl starts to clap nonchalantly. He parts his lips and says in an almost seductive manner, "Merman warrior, I will forgive you for calling me 'sea demon.' You and I are kin."

Beyond the large black door lies a throne room.

It was likely an altar originally; the pillars and small staircase leading up to it are resplendent and symmetrical. A functional throne made of light-blue stone rests on a pedestal to the rear.

But above all else, I find myself swallowing a lump in my throat as I count the sheer number of seadragon knights standing at attention in the spacious room.

There are over a dozen of them—a real hassle on land and nearly unrivaled underwater. It's a number large enough to deter the human race from entering even if they were aware of this stronghold to begin with.



Fighting them on a ship might change things, but this is the ocean floor—it's an extreme burden.

However, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Giant sea monsters can't enter this building.

Heljarl himself is undoubtedly powerful, but this hall will limit his speed and range of motion.

I need to take him by surprise and finish him off here and now. Then I'll take the bounty money and hire another two hundred and fifty sets of Rabis and Sanyas.

Sanya finally stops writhing and stares quietly. She must be processing the situation in front of her.

I follow her lead, gauging the power level of the enemies in front of us. Just then, one of the seadragon knights guarding Heljarl opens his mouth.

“Such impudence! Kneel before the supreme ruler of the oceans!”

Everyone has their full attention on me. At this rate, it will be impossible to destroy Heljarl alone. Even if I do find a split-second opening, I'll be forced to take on every one of his guards lying in wait. Best to keep a low profile for now.

If they flee, we will not follow. The only thing we have going for us is the fact that they haven't noticed I'm human—yet.

It's hard to believe a demon would be fooled by this costume... What the hell is going on here?! I'll have to get Zolan to make me another set of this armor.

Heljarl raises his hands, cool and composed, halting the seadragon knight's speech. His razor-sharp claws glint in the light.

“No matter. He has exceptional battle prowess for a merman. Surely he must have been through some serious bloodshed.”

There's about to be even more bloodshed...but it's okay. This is fine. I'm even starting to enjoy this merman charade.

—I hereby proclaim: In the name of the God of Order, Ahz Gried...I will destroy

you.

Heljarl's voice is oddly calm in the face of a suspicious merman. I even feel an inkling of trust.

"We must show respect for his devotion to his craft. Merman warrior—what is your name?"

There's no way I'm telling him my real name. I doubt they've even heard of me, but if I were to count every instance where I've given my name since starting this quest to defeat the Demon Lord, it would only be the two times I fought against demon kind. Better safe than sorry.

Stephenne Veronide— No...

"My name is Gregorio Legins."

And I'll kill you. Out Crusade third rank, the "Mad Eater" Gregorio Legins, will take you down.

"Hmm... Gregorio, is it? A fine name."

"...I believe I've heard his name somewhere, my liege."

A seadragon knight next to Heljarl cocks his head quizzically. *Are you serious? Why the hell would a dragonewt living on the ocean floor have heard of Gregorio?!*

"...It is a common name."

"Well, no bother. Right now, we should simply be thankful that a new warrior has joined our ranks."

Heljarl sits on his throne and smiles at me. Two guards stand at his side, protecting him. I'll wait for the perfect chance. Rushing things will only cause my downfall. I want to get information out of him first, if possible.

I want to know his motivations. What is Heljarl doing in a place like this?

The entire ocean is his domain. The power as puppet master over all the monsters in the ocean is formidable, but thus far, that's applied only to ocean-bound vessels directly. After gaining control of the oceans, he should be focusing on creating a diversion for the entire ocean kingdom.

What is the point of him being served by mermen and seadragon knights in a place like this? Could this be their actual headquarters?

Cloudburst is the only city nearby. It's a terrible location for a base of operations, and the building itself is dilapidated.

I re-grip my mace handle tightly and control my breathing before asking Heljarl, "What would you have me do?"

In response, Heljarl strokes the lacquer-black staff in his hands and thinks for a moment.

"Currently, we are gathering military forces. We only need to wait a short while longer before it is time to show the world our power."

"...What will we be attacking? Ships?"

"Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha..... Ships? Ships, you say? Mwa-ha...ha-ha-haaa—"

My question was meant to draw out only minimal information, but Heljarl has erupted in maniacal laughter.

His raspy voice echoes throughout the throne room. The seadragon knight guards don't move a muscle.

Heljarl's laugh, rife with ridicule, stops abruptly. He points his staff directly at me.

His crimson eyes burn like fire. The seadragon knights all concentrate their gazes on him.

In a voice intoxicated and euphoric, Heljarl announces to his vassals, "We will attack the hero. The last vestige of humanity's hope, a thorn in Lord Kranos's side. The one who defeated that filthy vampire and that thickheaded werebeast—I will kill him. Behold! The legend of the King of the Ocean begins now!"

§ § §

A genius.

Even from Limis's perspective—she herself born into a distinguished elemental family, having the most preeminent elemental in the Kingdom of Ruxe for a father—the young girl Naotsugu Toudou is an absolute genius.

Toudou doesn't have the knowledge or enough experience. In terms of talent, however, she is exceptional.

A talent for magic comes down to one's lineage. Mages aren't created in a single generation. The House of Friedia has also taken multiple generations, over many, many years, to produce a bloodline proficient in the use of sorcery. Limis is a direct descendant of this bloodline in its purest form.

Toudou, on the other hand, inherited such talents through the divine protection of the Eight Spirit Kings.

The raven-haired hero steps into a magic circle that makes spirits visible atop the pier. She is then swathed in a brilliant flash of blue light.

Aria is agog with fascination; in fact, Limis must have the same expression on her face.

The blue light signifies low-ranking water elemental spirits that cannot normally be seen by the naked eye. Due to their proximity to the ocean, these elemental spirits are everywhere, and they've approached Naotsugu Toudou, hoping to form a covenant with her.

This amount of affinity with the spirits is almost unheard of for someone not of a line of mages specializing in water elemental spirits.

In terms of talent alone, Toudou clearly outranks Limis. Of course, affinity is only one factor that goes into casting elemental spells, but if any other elementalists were to witness the scene currently unfolding, they'd go mad with jealousy, that's for certain.

Toudou narrows her eyes and slowly raises her arms in the air. The typically invisible low-ranking water spirits gather in her palms. Even though they haven't entered a covenant with her yet, they already seem to be obeying her commands.

Toudou has divine protection. This result was expected to happen, but actually watching it unfold in person is incredible.

This is the warrior summoned from another world for the sole purpose of defeating the Demon Lord—the gods' disciple, a beacon of hope for humanity.

The Holy Warrior.

“Incredible... At this rate, with just a little training, I bet you’ll be able to cast water elemental spells...”

“Uh... Ha-ha... I sure hope so.”

Toudou is not trying to establish a covenant today. Coming in contact with the spirits made her feel as if she were in the middle of a dream, but she comes back to her senses and leaves the circle, running toward Limis, who is standing in sheer awe.

Garnet, who’s been resting on Limis’s shoulder, peers at Toudou keenly. Limis gives her honest opinion.

“At this rate...you might even be able to form a covenant with a high-ranking elemental spirit... Maybe.”

“That’s good to hear... I was really worried you’d say I didn’t have the affinity.”

Affinity is not enough to form a covenant with high-ranking water elemental spirits that possess the kind of will and intent inherent in human beings. Toudou is still an amateur.

However, seeing the magical aura that surrounded her just now, forming a covenant with one seems more than possible.

In fact, when Limis herself was just a child without any real knowledge or magical energy, she formed a covenant with Garnet, something many famous mages failed to do.

Toudou is elated, finally seeing some promise, yet Limis looks at her aimlessly and mumbles, “I have to...try harder, too.”

The primary objective of the party’s journey to Cloudburst is establishing a covenant for Limis. Toudou has the same goal, too, but hers comes second.

Garnet shifts its eyes and stares out at the ocean.

No one hears Limis’s misgiving—it’s washed away by the roar of the sea.

§ § §

It turns out there are real mermaids locked in the prison.

They're not pseudo-mermaids like Sanya, who's simply pretending—they're the real deal, with actual tail fins. Their blond hair is wavy, their blue eyes showing exhaustion. There are three of these sea princesses, famous for their stunning looks and singing voices. They have thick metal collars around their necks, and the chains leading from them are wrapped around a pillar.

Mermaids are demi-humans who fall closer to the human side of the gene pool. They are friendly with humans, and some oceanic nations have even established official relations with them. Their voices are imbued with magical energy, allowing them to wield special magic powers, but on the other hand, they're physically weak and often fall prey to mermen and other monsters.

Whoa, whoa—is this some sort of bonus stage? ...Maybe not. Who keeps mermaids incarcerated? That's vile.

There's a rumor that mermaids have their own unique culture—they bestow a reward unto those who release them from confinement. Is this the will of God?

I take a step into the room and inspect the prison's layout. It was probably a storeroom originally. If this really is their stronghold, the facilities are pathetic. This can't be Heljarl's base of operations.

The mermaids look up as I encroach on their environs and they quickly huddle in the corner, terrified.

Four mermen dressed in military regalia guard the door, along with one seadragon knight as their leader.

The security must just be for good measure. This place doesn't seem particularly important.

The seadragon knight leader hands me a metal collar.

"Watch yourself. If you let your guard down, they'll cast magic on you."

"What kind of magic?"

“...It’s a charm. Don’t you know?”

“...It won’t work on me.”

I’m used to mental pollution. Any crusader who fights the followers of darkness has a strong resistance to those skills. Without it, you’re dead.

At any rate—how does someone with a tail fin manage to charm anyone...?

“...You’re a strange merman.”

How rude. I’m clearly just your average, everyday merman.

Without answering, I prop my mace up against the wall for a moment and hold Sanya, who I still have with me, up with both arms. Her face is close to my ear, and I can hear her mumbling through the thick metal scales of my armor.

“Boss. This collar’s no dice. I can’t break it. I won’t be able to get it off.”

I now understand that Heljarl’s motive is the Holy Warrior. This is a grave situation.

At the same time, it’s a chance to extract even more detailed information from him. First and foremost, I need his trust.

I also need time. From what I can see, Heljarl is an imbecile. Even his dragonewt guards are more cautious than he is. If all goes well, I can extract information from him in a short amount of time. I’ll get everything I can out of him before killing him.

I have no intention of taking him captive. It’s too risky to let him live. And if I did take him captive anyway, I’d have to kill him.

“Boss, think you could give me a scale from your mane? I might be able to use it as a lock pick.”

“No.”

I may look absolutely ridiculous, but this is a magic item. If it loses its functionality from messing around with it, I’ll be in deep trouble.

I put the metal collar around Sanya’s neck. I can’t tell what it’s made from, but it’s definitely high quality.

Sanya grips the collar and tumbles on the floor. She looks back at the seadragon knight leader and asks, “Hey, where’s the key to this thing?”

“...It’s with me. What of it?”

The seadragon knight points to his belt—a dull silver key hangs from it.

Unarmed and bound in chains, it would be hard for Sanya to take him down... right?

I look at Sanya, who’s rolling on the floor making a show of appearing terrified, and say, “She belongs to me. Hand over the key to her collar.”

“...I cannot allow that. I’m in charge of the keys. No exceptions.”

“I see.”

I pick up my mace and, before the seadragon knight can react, smash his head to a pulp, helmet included.

The seadragon knight dies without even a chance to cry out. The entire room is speechless as I put on my best merman impression.

“Those who defy me will be annihilated.”

“G-geez, boss. You’re horrifying... Is that really you?”

“There is no room for negotiation. Anyone I can kill, I will kill on sight.”

I have no intention of arguing with anyone. It’s a waste of time.

The mermaids are shuddering in the corner from my sudden violent outburst.

I crouch down next to the seadragon knight’s headless corpse, splayed out on the floor, and rid him of his keys. No need for his spear.

“From today on, I am the master of this prison. Glory to the evil gods.”

“Do you think you can just keep saying ‘evil gods’ and get away with anything?!”

“Yes. All is well. In the world of demons, the strong are the righteous.”

Sanya is disgusted by the growing pool of the seadragon knight’s blood and moves to avoid it.

“All is *not* well! Right?! Boss?! C’mon, let’s get outta here!! Let’s wait for a real opportunity, okay?! There’s no way this’ll work!! Surely mermen are a bit smarter than this, right?!”

“Mermen are not smart. Except for me.”

I look back at the merman jailers, who are frozen stiff from witnessing what just unfolded in mere moments. They clearly have no idea what to do now that their leader is dead. They don’t even feign to raise the shoddy spears they hold in their hands.

I could obliterate them in an instant, but I purposefully refrain. Instead, I trample over the corpse of the seadragon knight and clearly state my demands, with no concern for whether they can actually understand me.

“From now on, I am your boss. Obey me.”

Obey me and then die.

§ § §

“That merman is extremely dangerous, my liege.”

In the throne room, Heljarl’s right-hand man, a seadragon knight warrior, bows his head deeply.

The seadragon knights are the strongest and most intelligent of aquatic demi-humans, and they know battle. They’ve mastered the martial arts and learned military tactics, and they occasionally even intermingle with seadragons, the originators of their bloodline.

Compared with mermen, who are daft and weak even in numbers, seadragon knights are refined warriors. Yet, Heljarl snorts and laughs in his retainer’s face.

“Heh-heh-heh... He is brutal, proud, and true to his wanton desire. He’s utterly splendid, don’t you think? That is precisely what a sea warrior should be

like.”

“But, sir—”

With alarming speed, a single merman warrior at the lowest ranks of Heljarl’s army has shown prowess that belies the fact he’s a mere merman.

It’s as if his scales are made from metal, and his dorsal crest rivals that of a sea serpent. His eyes are cold and emotionless, and yet he has the intellect to have a command of the human language at will, something no merman is typically capable of.

Above all else, his voice projects an ominous sense of dread. He clearly has the divine protection of the evil god Lucief Arept—that much is evident.

Heljarl has reigned over the ocean for many, many years, but he’s never seen a merman this powerful before.

Heljarl is the King of the Ocean. All ocean-dwelling creatures must submit to him and give him due honor, but he is capable of pardoning the selfishness of a warrior—to an extent. The ocean abides by survival of the fittest. The strong are the righteous. Weakness is iniquity. And what’s more, this merman has shown allegiance to Heljarl.

Heljarl strokes his jet-black staff—an item given to him by the Demon Lord Kranos that has the ability to amplify magical energy—and laughs.

“The God of Oceans has blessed us. Heh-heh-heh, the fact that he’s appeared at a time like this is nothing other than the will of God.”

What does it matter if he killed the prison guard? After all, the imprisoned mermaids are simply sacrifices, which is why they’re locked up in the first place. It’s not a serious offense if they escape.

Even if some of the mermaids instigate an insurrection, it will be simple to quell them with just a few seadragon knights.

Rather, in the first place, if there is a desire for mermaids, then new ones can be easily captured. Heljarl’s military forces number over a million strong in total. Capturing a few mermaids is a drop in the bucket. Not to mention, his forces could even conquer the mermaid kingdom, which lies in the sea to the

south.

“I understand that he is strong. But he is beyond fiendish and brutal. There’s a decent chance that he will attempt to rebel against you, my liege—”

“Hmph. As if I haven’t considered that already?”

The King of the Ocean is different from any king of humans. A weakling cannot ascend the ocean throne. Heljarl snickers at his subordinate.

The King of the Ocean is a title given to the strongest warrior within the seas. Heljarl is, accordingly, conceited and believes that he is the strongest of all.

What’s more, Heljarl holds a trump card: He can cause all aquatic beings—demi-humans, even demons—to fall under his control. No matter how strong the merman who calls himself Gregorio may be, there’s no way for him to stand up to Heljarl.

Heljarl rises from his throne. The seadragon knight bows and falls prostrate, his head nearly on the floor.

The rational voice from earlier is gone—now, Heljarl’s booming voice is hair-raising.

“Heh-heh-heh... Mwa-ha-ha-ha! I, Heljarl—I will be the one to kill the Holy Warrior. I will show our Demon Lord Kranos my true power. As for that brat pulling the strings from the shadows—I will show him a thing or two as well.”

§ § §

I close the thick stone door, and a small shock wave reverberates through the water.

This room I was provided is completely empty except for a stone bed and a lamp.

Living underwater must be quite different from living on land. According to the seadragon knight who guided me, only a small percentage of Heljarl’s subordinates are actually given room and board.

It’s certainly true that this building doesn’t have the capacity to house all

those mermen outside.

Following behind me with the metal collar on her neck, Sanya presses her cheek against the door for a few seconds before shaking her head.

There are no guards here, it seems. They must trust me. That, or they think they can kill me at any given moment.

The second I let the keys go from my hand, Sanya grabs them and removes the collar skillfully, without even looking at the lock.

Sanya casts the collar aside and rubs her throat, squinting—it must have been really tight.

“This treatment is unbelievable. I’ve been a mercenary for as long as I can remember, but this is the first time I’ve worn a collar. I felt like a slave!”

“It’s a good experience for you. I’ve done it four times.”

“Boss, someone ought to lock *you* up and throw away the key. You’re seriously the worst.”

Sanya sighs, completely and utterly exasperated.

I thought she might need me to cast a tranquilizer spell on her, but she doesn’t look all that worse for wear.

“There’s merit to experiencing such hardships in a place like this, though,” I tell her, changing the subject. She sighs again.

“...Maybe you’re right. I definitely wasn’t expecting that notorious monster to appear out of nowhere. But honestly, boss, you were more terrifying. If I encountered you on the battlefield, I’d run away with my tail between my legs.”

“Lame joke.”

“No...it’s the truth. I’d do it like this.”

Sanya grabs her fluffy tail carefully and curls it up, tucking it between her legs.

She’s still cracking jokes, so she must be just fine.

I put my mace down to ponder our next moves. We don’t have much time, but we can’t let this chance slip by.

“Our primary objective is taking Heljarl’s life. But before we do, we need to extract information from him. There are a few things I need to know.”

Heljarl must be taken down before he has a chance to attack Toudou, but he is one of the leaders in the Demon Lord’s army.

There are so many things I want to ask him about: how he’s able to pinpoint the Holy Warrior’s location; the Demon Lord’s army’s next course of action; its formation, the names of its leaders, their skills and weaknesses—all necessary information for supporting the Holy Warrior moving forward.

“Whoa... So you wanna milk him for all he’s worth before taking his life...”

“I’ll get him to talk. Sanya, you need to survey this stronghold, including its layout and any escape routes. Speak with the mermaids being held prisoner and make them your friends. Also—there’s something I want you to search for.”

I can’t do everything myself. Sanya disobeying my orders has turned out to be a godsend.

“Something you want me to search for...?”

Sanya crosses her arms and blinks repeatedly.

“Yes... Although if you can’t find it, it’s not the end of the world...”

Having met Heljarl face-to-face, I now understand his strength. I couldn’t determine exactly what bloodline his is mixed with, but I felt his powerful magical energy and life force worthy of an upper-echelon demon. At the very least, he’s leagues more powerful than any of his subordinates.

However, even at that rate—considering the suffering he’s caused humanity thus far—he’s not as powerful as I thought he would be.

Heljarl’s defining characteristic isn’t his own battle prowess but rather his capacity to freely manipulate ocean-dwelling monsters: a single sea serpent the size of a massive warship or the kinds of giant squid and krakens that have struck fear into the hearts of so many crew members. He’s even powerful enough to make seadragons do his bidding—a clear indicator of why humanity has lost the oceans to demon kind.

Of course, humanity has endeavored with research. There are people called

“monster tamers” who have managed to tame and thus control monsters, but manipulating monsters with low intelligence still proves difficult—highly intelligent, prideful ones like dragon-type monsters even more so.

It is extremely unusual for even a high-ranked demon to be able to control multiple monsters at once. In reality, it’s more akin to playing God than anything else.

I recall the massive yet tame monsters I saw obediently awaiting orders outside the stronghold.

Heljarl’s notoriety only spread after the Demon Lord Kranos first appeared. As such, it’s inevitable to say that they’re connected somehow.

That means this monster taming is either Heljarl’s own power...or that of a certain magic item.

The authenticity of this claim has not been verified, but humanity has offered one conclusion. Sanya waits for me to continue.

“It’s a flute, Sanya. A flute that allows one to control aquatic monsters. I’ve heard whenever Heljarl is controlling monsters on the battlefield, he carries a blue flute with him at all times. I need you to find it. I didn’t see it on him when we met in person...so it must be in a treasure vault or in Heljarl’s personal room. It has to be around somewhere.”

If Heljarl could no longer control monsters, he’d be vastly limited in what he could do himself. On the other hand, if the flute remains even once we’ve killed him off, then there’s a high chance that another Heljarl would take his place.

Hearing this, Sanya finally lets just a few words slip:

“That’s a tall order.”

I am well aware. It’s risky. If Heljarl finds her while she’s snooping around for it, I would be hard-pressed to say she’d be able to fight him off herself. However, Sanya is a scout. I will create a diversion for Heljarl and his henchmen. This is a job for a scout.

“I implore you.”

“Oh boy. If my master heard that, he’d be green with envy.”

Sanya smirks at me and stands. It seems like she's up to the task.

She loosens herself up, stretching her toned amber limbs in her racy light-blue mermaid armor.

She's not nervous, and her pulse is steady. Finishing her stretches, Sanya wags her tail and quickly adds, "Oh, and, boss, if I die, you better apologize to Rabi."

"No need to go overboard. I've spent a hundred million lux on you—I intend to get my money's worth, down to the last cent."

"...How can you say that when you made a bet in hiring me in the first place and then haggled for a discount on top of that?"

"You're speaking in hindsight. Even if you lose an arm or a leg, a little healing magic will have you fixed right up. Now, off you go."

"...Yessir!" Sanya replies with forced cheerfulness, trembling, before discreetly slipping out of the room.

Okay, that's taken care of—time for me to focus on my business.

"So no problems at the moment, then?"

"Yes. For the moment, I don't sense my identity being questioned whatsoever."

The room is empty except for me as I exchange information with Amelia. She reports back that there aren't any problems aboveground, either.

This is working out splendidly—Rabi is keeping a close eye on Toudou and company in place of Sanya.

The party has been practicing their spirit summoning, and as soon as the mermaid armor is ready, they'll be heading to the sunken temple, I'm told.

At the very beginning, when I first joined Toudou's party, there was a whole host of problems. But now, they seem to have largely been settled. It's possible that I've just gotten used to them, but I'm choosing not to worry about that right now.

"We'll maintain our cover down here as long as necessary. Inform me as soon as you know when Toudou will reach the sunken temple."

“Understood... May the fortunes of war guide you. Please don’t push yourself too much.”

“I’ll be fine. I can’t pray to the God of Order in my current getup, so instead, I have an evil god assisting me now.”

“.....Well, if that floats your boat, Ares, then that’s fine...”

Death to Heljarl. I will destroy him. I will save the Holy Warrior and bring peace to the land.

The transmission cuts out. I sit on my stone bed, set my mace down beside me, and sigh.

Okay—just how should I start extracting information from Heljarl...? His vigilance is paltry, but I don’t think his followers trust me. If I go about extracting information from him in an unnatural way, they’ll warn him immediately.

If I’m going to get any worthwhile intel, I first need to gain their trust. I have a feeling that slaying the jail guard didn’t exactly boost their confidence in me... Thinking about it logically, this is definitely going to be a very tough mission.

Heljarl’s cronies are a thorn in my side. I could try to force their hand, but they’re monsters, after all. They have different susceptibilities. I don’t know if it will work on them, and do I really have time? In the end...I’ll probably stick with brute force, my specialty... The dragonewts can’t be with Heljarl at all times.

If I pick them off one by one, they’ll likely turn against me sooner or later, and even if they don’t, I’d rather have them dead regardless.

Hmm... I really don’t understand Heljarl’s cronies’ culture. That said, I did once research how to kill them, in the past.

As I furrow my brow and grumble to myself, the door to my room opens suddenly. Perhaps it’s because I’m underwater, but I’m having a hard time detecting other presences.

“The king would like to see your power in action, Gregorio.”

Well, well... This could be a good opportunity.

Heljarl is evidently tolerant of warriors. If I can give him a taste of my strength, chances are that he'll approve of me.

It's unusual to have me show off my own combat skills, but if those are Heljarl's wishes, then I must certainly comply.

I stand up and grab my mace, looking toward the seadragon knight who's entered.

He's obviously on high alert and stares at me with narrowed eyes. They're the eyes of a brave warrior who's come up against death and prevailed.

These damn dragonewts are a real nuisance when they're your enemy.

I raise my mace and look the dragonewt in his glassy reptilian eyes, announcing, "...I am not good at pulling my punches. I have pledged to give my life as a warrior to my evil god. Anyone who draws their weapon on me will die."

I'll thin them out. If it all goes well, I'll even force them into extinction in broad daylight.

The more I go ballistic, the more their attention will be diverted from Sanya. It's two birds, one stone.

I am guided to a completely bare stone chamber. However, it's far more deteriorated than any of the others—the floor and walls riddled with cracks and chips. This room could very well be designed for the same purpose that I'm here for today.

Heljarl is seated on a throne in the back, and seadragon knights are lined up around him.

Looking closely, I can see their equipment is all across the board. Most are wearing the blue armor that the prison guard wore, but some of them are equipped with a silvery metallic armor. This is likely an indicator of high rank among the seadragon knight troops.

When I enter the room, Heljarl claps his hands and smiles, his lips twisted with derision.

“A most sincere welcome to you, Gregorio. I thought we should test your mettle before we begin the assault on the Holy Warrior. Well, I personally didn’t think it was necessary, but a number of others did. Being a king has its downsides, contrary to popular opinion.”

“Not an issue. My evil god demands souls. Human or otherwise.”

I give a light swing of my mace to test myself out. Everything is on point. I’ve gotten used to my reduced field of vision.

I look around and confirm that the seadragon knights surrounding me are of high level, but none of them sticks out as a particularly formidable foe.

The steel tiger I encountered in Golem Valley was an anomaly.

Heljarl seems bemused by me and asks, “An evil god, you say? Gregorio, you are a disciple of an evil god?”

“That is correct. I follow the orders of my evil god. That is why I am here.”

The real Gregorio practically is a disciple of an evil god. It’s a good thing I used his name.

“Heh-heh... For you, an ocean dweller, to worship not the God of Oceans but rather an evil god... This is most peculiar. A warrior who follows his desire to bring both humans and demons alike to the slaughter... How interesting. I, too, have an acquaintance who possesses the divine protection of an evil god, but you, merman warrior, are truly a different breed.”

You’re damn right. I’m a priest, so don’t lump me in with this acquaintance of yours.

Heljarl reclines on his throne with self-importance as a single seadragon knight steps forward.

This one’s speech is far more fluid than the rest. His sharp golden eyes pierce right through me.

The spear in his hand is different from the others’ as well—it has a trident tip.

“My liege. Allow me, Hjalmar, to put this newcomer to the test.”

“Ah, Hjalmar. You, someone with divine protection from the God of Oceans, would step forward?”

“Even if this brute is a warrior, he is far too irreverent. I promise to show him the extent of your authority, my liege.”

Heljarl nods, visibly pleased by the seadragon knight Hjalmar’s statement.

Divine protection from the God of Oceans, huh? I’ve never heard of this minor deity, but judging from its name, it’s likely a type that offers augmentation to underwater combat. It’s certainly nowhere near as powerful as the God of Order or an evil god.

Hjalmar must have high credibility in these ranks, as no one raises their voice in opposition.

I can’t think of anything better than slaughtering one of their strongest in front of them. I nod emphatically and stroke my mace.

“The God of Oceans... How wonderful.”

The room falls silent. Hjalmar’s eyes flicker with intimidation, and I start performing to stir up an aura worthy of my evil god.

“My evil god will be most pleased to have your soul as a sacrifice. I will offer Him the joy of watching you suffer for all eternity.”

“?!”

The dragonewts look to one another after I make my claim. They let loose an uproarious din akin to a horrified shriek.

“What repulsive speech! Is this evil god really so reprehensible?”

“That’s not what I’ve heard!! Doesn’t He simply grant additional

power?!”

“Anyone, including that merman, who pledges allegiance to such a god is an infidel! Look at his sinister appearance—it’s a crime against the nature of life itself!”

I’ve never heard of such a thing, either, but if it creates more enemies for the evil gods, then I’m all for it.

Most of the dragonewts remain silent, but not Hjalmar. He is lording over me.

“I will smash you to bits for your insolence.”

This is one upright dragonewt. Agitating him will create huge openings. It appears that he has superior intellect as well as combat skills.

The fact that he has Heljarl’s trust is something else to consider. This gives him a boost in my estimation.

Even under ideal circumstances, this might prove to be a hard fight without casting any buffs on myself.

I don’t know the details of what divine protection from the God of Oceans entails, but it’s no use now... I have no idea what will happen to me if I lose.

I make a snap judgment call and raise my arms high, recalling Gregorio and imitating him as I scream with abandon.

“O evil god, I will now bestow unto thee a fresh soul. Please grant me, Gregorio, your power!! **Full Strength!**”

“?!”

I cast a number of holy techniques and buffs on myself in quick succession. Red, blue, yellow, green—different colored lights flash as they fill me with power.

Living on the bottom of the sea, none of these creatures has ever seen a holy technique before.

The light dissipates quickly and only the surface of my body glows slightly.

“What was that technique just now?!”

“Is this also the evil gods’ divine protection...?!”

Either my scheme is right on the money or my over-the-top acting has paid dividends, but the dragonewts definitely aren’t doubting my authenticity now. Hjalmar wasn’t expecting this, and he steps back a few paces, addressing me in a grim tone.

“You... It cannot be... Are you a wizard?!”

“Why would I tell you, who is destined for sacrifice?!”

I attack first, without even waiting for a signal. All spoils go to the victor. I kick off the ground with force, as if pouring my every bit of strength below my feet.

I swing my mace, intending to rip his head from his body, but Hjalmar reacts aptly.

His trident has a long reach and collides with my mace, sending sparks flying.

I thought I could overpower him, but his robust counterstrike rocks my grip.

My mace and Hjalmar’s trident become locked in a standstill.

However, there’s no comparing our difference in power. I still can’t read his expression, but Hjalmar’s voice shakes as he says, “Ngh... This strength... You’re no merman!”

“All glory to the evil god.”

I put even more weight behind my mace. Hjalmar is gripping his trident with both hands, but our difference in strength is evident.

The only reason I couldn’t power through him with a single blow is likely due to the God of Oceans’s combat augmentation.

I push and grind Hjalmar back steadily.

“Heh-heh-heh, this shall please my god. Fear not, for you will not know respite, but rather your soul will reside before Him for eternity. It is a true honor.”

“Ngh... You’re an abomination!”

Hjalmar jumps to the side with immaculate timing and avoids my mace. He steps back in an attempt to reposition his stance, but I don’t intend to let him go.

He’s now trying to escape, and I pursue. I lunge toward him and let loose a barrage of mace blows. Hjalmar frantically parries them with his trident.

Physically strong races have little combat experience with those more powerful than them. This will be a cinch.

My field of vision is still terrible, but perhaps it’s because my mind is completely focused, or I’ve gotten used to it—I know when his attacks are coming, even from my blind spots.

I just need to be careful of his arms, the trident he grips in them, his legs...and his long, limber tail. It’s vastly different from Sanya’s fluffy tail—it’s covered in blunt scales and is able to snap forward quickly.

“What the hell is going on?! Sir Hjalmar is being pushed back?!”

“Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die! Die for my god! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

Hjalmar lashes his tail toward me and I step back to avoid it. His face contorts ever so slightly.

Because I dodged his attack, a small gap appears in his stance, and I raise my mace with all my might—with the intention of smashing down his trident raised in defense and obliterating his entire head.

In that instant, time slows to an infinitesimal halt. Each moment feels like multiple seconds, minutes. My breathing, the flow of the water, Hjalmar’s eyes widening—I can see it all so clearly. There is no fear in his eyes, even at the last second.

The moment my mace comes crashing down, Heljarl’s voice booms.

“Halt, both of you! That’s enough!”

Hjalmar’s gaze softens. I ignore the command and smash him into the ground.

The crowd erupts into an even greater disturbance. I lift my mace back up slowly. Chunks of stone silently float in the air. Hjalmar is splayed out on the ground. Having taken a direct blow to the face, he doesn't show any signs of moving.

The helm protecting Hjalmar's head has entirely caved in from a single blow. It hasn't actually cracked, but it's taken a fatal hit. Hjalmar is still alive, but it's just a matter of time now. Faint pinkish blood stains the clear water. Heljarl furrows his brow.

"...Why...did you kill him...?"

The strong never attack directly. That's a given. Hjalmar wasn't as strong as the steel tiger in Golem Valley, but if he appeared during the middle of a skirmish, it would take at least a few minutes to fend him off.

There's no room for remorse. Per the God of Order, I am pardoned of all injustices.

The room is dead silent for a few seconds. Then Hjalmar's life force flows into me—he must be dead. I'm still shy of a level-up.

Hjalmar was probably training for a moment like this. I look down at him and spit out my words.

"You must be out of your mind if you plan to fight the Holy Warrior with this kind of strength."

"Rrrgh... How...how dare you!!"

One of the seadragon knights' eyes go wide as saucers and he points his spear at me. I raise my mace up to match him.

"Bring it on, warriors of the sea, as many of you as you like. Our objectives may differ, but in the name of my evil god, I shall provide you a requiem."

I look around the entire circumference of the room and assess the situation. There's no way I can kill them all. If I'm going to take them on, I should definitely start with those with the highest life force. Yet, facing them all in a

row will be rough going, even for me.

Just then, the dragonewt to the right of Heljarl shouts out.

“Ah, I’ve just remembered! Gregorio Legins... That is the name of a man who appeared on our blacklist!”

“What did you say?!”

There’s no way his notoriety has managed to reach all the way down here... Has someone betrayed me? Did I miss an enemy lying in wait?

Either way, this is bad... If I was going to use a fake name, I should have used one that was actually fake and not belonging to someone I know.

Heljarl grips his staff and stands up. He moves with grace, but he’s clearly on high alert.

“He is a combatant who serves the Church of the God of Order. They say he is a man of fiendish strength and has massacred scores of followers of darkness.”

Heljarl now looks suspicious.

“A disciple of Ahz Gried...?But he’s a merman!”

The dragonewt who made the claim stares at me with his eyes practically bulging out of their sockets and shuts his mouth.

This is all just confusion. They’ve got the wrong guy. It’s just someone with the exact same name.

“There are no churches on the ocean floor. Nor any followers of darkness. I can scarcely even imagine a merman coming out victorious against one such being on land—nor can I imagine a reason he would even want to fight them. This must be a case of mistaken identity.”

“B-but...!”

“Just what about him seems characteristic of a disciple of the God of Order?! I know the priests of that Church. They claim to be bearers of miracles, but they lack any sort of skills in combat, and they certainly aren’t mermen!”

That is simply absurd. Yet, the dragonewt being screamed at refuses to back down. Anguish rings in his voice as he complains.

“...P-perhaps he himself has fallen to the darkness?”

“...Explain.”

The dragonewt begins to explain, with little confidence. I can't help but steady my mace and hang on to his every word.

“I-it's just speculation, but...he could have committed so many sins that the God of Order abandoned him... Perhaps he was robbed of his human form and forced to eke out a life as a merman... Thinking about it, I believe he's overwhelmingly more powerful than any other merman, and it's quite clear he harbors a great amount of hatred.”

That's not how the God of Order operates, dumbass.

“Or perhaps...there's also the possibility he simply became enamored with this evil god from day one...”

“So you're saying he wanted to become more powerful? And gave up his human form? *For that of a merman?!*”

This is ridiculous. Why on earth would I be forced to give up my human form? What could I have possibly done?

Heljarl grips his staff and his eyes bore into me. I could deny it all, but it doesn't bother me if they get my story completely wrong.

“I'll let you imagine for yourself. All I can do is obey the divine revelation of my god. And furthermore, I have already been proven correct.”

“Correct...? Just what do you mean?”

“My evil god desires the soul of the Holy Warrior. I am simply a vessel for this wish. I was right to come here, was I not?”

“.....”

Heljarl falls silent, clearly deep in thought.

He’s looking at me, from what I can tell, but the eyes on my armor might as well be papier-mâché.

If I can gain his trust, I’ll wait for the right time and bash his skull in from behind. Otherwise I’ll just assassinate him.

Yet, there is one thing I am certain of: The Demon Lord Kranos’s army is being controlled. Even if Heljarl isn’t a follower of any evil gods, most of the legions of darkness are. He can’t refuse me flat out.

Heljarl remains silent for some time before nodding placidly.

“...Very well. If you truly wish to fight that badly, we might as well give you a chance to show us everything you have.”

“?! My liege?!”

“Though it was not foreseen, Gregorio has defeated Hjalmar. He is capable.”

Demons generally fall under the rule of brute force. Anyone with power is respected and given high status.

Just as I start to feel the room’s bloodlust and agitation abate, I drop my mace and fall to my knees.

He is dead. I will kill him dead. And I will fall to any level of depravity to make that happen.

As I drop to my knees, Heljarl bursts into sublime laughter and barks orders with all the arrogance of a king.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha... Gregorio, I shall grant you the privilege of annihilating the Holy Warrior. As the sword of the King of the Ocean, you will go and slay that pesky Holy Warrior—Ares Crown!!”

?!

“.....Y-yes... Yes, my liege. I, Gregorio, will follow the orders of my evil god and join the ranks of your subordinates. And I shall

kill this...Ares? Crown? ...Correct?"

Thank God. Thank God I didn't use my real name.

Sure, I've said my name out loud a few times since this journey began, but where did they even learn it?

Cold sweat pours down my body under the thick merman armor. Heljarl grins at me from ear to ear.

"Hold on now, Gregorio. I'm not asking you to march into battle on your own. Ares Crown is still inexperienced, but he's been chosen by the gods as the Holy Warrior—essentially, your human counterpart. Our army is infinitely powerful. Let us sink the entire water capital down to our depths."

§ § §

This job is so incredibly strange, Rabi laments once more.

She has an abundance of experiences with odd jobs and dangerous assignments due to the nature of her work, but she can't remember a job as twisted as this one.

Since the objective is to defeat the Demon Lord, it's certainly a top-ranked mission in terms of difficulty, but who would believe that her employer dived into enemy territory dressed as a merman?

The Holy Warrior and party are walking on the other side of the road, just within range of her field of vision.

She follows them silently and twitches her ears under her thick hood, picking up the sounds of her surroundings. Mixed in with the sound of the wind and water and other noises of daily life, she can hear the Holy Warrior's voice.

Rabi's abilities as a scout are far inferior to Sanya's, her total physical capabilities even more so.

That said, as Rabi follows behind the party from a distance of over one hundred meters, there's no sign of Toudou noticing her at all.

Toudou looks utterly defenseless. He's gotten used to his position but hasn't mastered every single maneuver yet.

Considering that he began fighting only six months ago, it's actually quite miraculous, but he's still too inept to be carrying the name of the Holy Warrior.

Rabi doesn't think he is truly resigned to kill.

Not the kind of resignation required to kill on the battlefield—Rabi's talking about the resignation to kill with composure anytime, anywhere.

It's a twisted quality for the average human but one that any mercenary worth their salt already has. And this Holy Warrior doesn't have it. If Rabi attacked him right now, Toudou would experience a moment's confusion before reacting accordingly—which would leave him exposed.

Even if Toudou's prowess far eclipsed Rabi's, even if he was at a high-enough level where Rabi could never take him down in an honest one-on-one fight, leaving himself vulnerable like that would undoubtedly give Rabi the opportunity to kill him—that's just how exposed he would be.

Their boss has the proper readiness about him. Rabi remembers it clear as day—the first time they met, the way he looked her up and down, evaluating her.

He was calm and composed but didn't leave any openings. There was no murderous intent in his eyes, but he looked at her like he was beholding a monster.

His eyes showed that he doesn't trust anyone: a rarity for an assassin, much less for a priest.

Rabi can't imagine the kinds of carnage he's been through.

That is why Rabi is different from Sanya—she hasn't tested him, and in return, she has not been tested. Rabi is timid.

Toudou and his party are peering into a waterway. There must be a fish—they're all pointing, their eyes wide.

Rabi has been given instructions to keep Toudou and his party away from the water until her boss eliminates the sea demon. In other words, she's to keep them out of his hair. It appears that they've gotten in his way once or twice before.

Rabi thinks for a moment before deciding to speak up. She's already met them once, but she slightly disguised herself at the time. Going forward, they should have some acquaintance. Rabi dislikes talking to men, but she can't use that as an excuse now.

She masks her presence and jogs up to them, calling out to the Holy Warrior from behind.

"You should probably...be more careful."

"EEK—?!"

Toudou and his companions cry out in hysterics and whirl around to look behind them.

Nothing but blind spots. Rabi could have all their heads rolling in one second flat. Of course, that's not what she's here for.

Her only job is to keep them away from the water.

"In this area, around this time...a very powerful merman is known to appear... He carries a mace as a weapon, and he'll beat down anyone, even his own kind. He is a terrifying cold-blooded merman."

"Wait, what?! I-is that—?!"

Toudou's eyes fly wide open and bore into Rabi. Is he really that shocked?

"I don't know the reason why, but judging from previous years, he'll leave these parts within a few days. Until then, you should definitely stay out of the ocean. He's never come up through these waterways, but you all look like you're new here and a bit clueless, so out of concern, I took it upon myself to warn you."

The words flow easily from Rabi's mouth. Her calm voice finally quiets Toudou's unrest.

Limis and Aria must have also realized she's not an enemy, as they drop their guard down a notch.

They're naive, as expected. And far too much so. If they let their guard down this easily, then Rabi could behead them with her eyes closed.

Rabi smiles and Toudou, flustered, gives his thanks. He's staring straight at Rabi, but she doesn't mind.

"Ah, um... Thank you so much. A-and you are...?"

Rabi thinks for a moment before coming up with something that will get the overall gist across.

"Pardon me. I am a...traveling monster researcher, Rabi. Every year around this time, I visit this city to study a certain merman called 'Mermares.' You all look to be traveling mercenaries—I feel we may have the opportunity to meet again before long, if fate allows. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

§ § §

Terrifying—that's the one word I would use to describe the scene before me.

Scores of mermen and seadragon knight troops line the ocean floor. They all have weapons, and some are even riding ocean horses with long white manes—kelpies. A giant jellyfish, spanning many meters, floats above my head like it's waiting for my command. Farther back in the formation, an even bigger kraken slips into the darkness and wriggles its tentacles.

There's power in numbers. Even a high-ranked mercenary would have a tough time taking all these troops head-on.

So this is Heljarl's power, huh? I now fully understand the desperation of the humans who first confronted this group—and why they were decimated.

I must kill Heljarl here. As I silently etch this oath into my mind, Heljarl, surrounded by seadragon knights acting as his imperial guards, announces with the confidence of having successfully exacted his malice:

"Behold my forces! I may have yet to assemble all my subordinates, but these will be more than enough to bring down one miniscule port. I know not of the Holy Warrior's strength, but no matter how powerful he may be, they'll be worthless here on the ocean floor."

"...Your army is truly formidable."

The majority of ocean monsters can't wield their full strength on land, but even that fact has its limits. If Cloudburst was to be attacked by this massive

number of monsters, it may very well sink to the ocean floor.

Toudou's competence has come to the fore, but he's still level 40. If he's attacked by this many monsters, he'll be pushed to his wits' end and lose.

“When did you begin gathering your forces?”

“Hmm. Just when was it, now?” Heljarl asks the seadragon knight closest to him. The knight's eyes bulge in his head as he says, “Since we determined the Holy Warrior's location, my liege. In terms of time, approximately ten days ago, I believe.”

Ten days ago... I arrived in Cloudburst seven days before that. There's a gap.

However, I don't think it's a case of the knight being inaccurate. Toudou did arrive in the city precisely ten days ago.

But what exactly does this mean? There's only one reasonable conclusion.

These guys have been tracking the Holy Warrior's movements through some method, but I don't know precisely how.

I have assumed the identity of the Holy Warrior twice thus far on my journey. That is the reason they think his name is Ares Crown, but they're still tracking Naotsugu Toudou, not me.

I need to know how they're doing it. I need a plan. Making sure not to sound suspicious, I ask, “Where is the Holy Warrior now?”

Heljarl opens his mouth to respond, but instead, the seadragon knight next to him steps forward. He's carrying a short golden staff in lieu of a spear and is equipped with light armor protecting his vital points. He steps between Heljarl and me, baring his fangs in intimidation.

“In the water capital. We don't have any further details yet. You'd best sit tight for now.”

They don't have the details, huh? That means they didn't learn his whereabouts by actually searching for Toudou in person... In that case, it makes sense that Sanya didn't notice this bunch, either.

If I didn't have this merman armor, I might not have even realized they were down here until Toudou was already under attack.

I ignore the seadragon knight blocking my path and make a demand of Heljarl. I have no use for his underlings.

"Tell me more—right now. I will destroy him."

"Rrrgh... You watch your tongue in front of our king..."

"At ease... Gregorio."

The seadragon knight is furious, while conversely, Heljarl sounds calm. His leniency is in stark contrast with the fact that he's a demon, and it's terrifying.

He certainly has the demeanor of a king. It's no question that he's been able to rule over unintelligent monsters, but it's possible that even seadragon knights have been his subjects from the very beginning as well.

"Even if we don't know the details, we do know he is in Cloudburst. Sinking the entire city will solve all our problems."

"And what if he escapes?"

"This is the hero we're up against. If he flees, that will merely show us what kind of warrior he is. No more, no less. Should that happen, he won't stand a chance against us. Nor does that change the fact that we will drive the hero into dust."

Heljarl's voice is rife with confidence and contempt for the Holy Warrior.

However, he's right. The Holy Warrior is humanity's hope. If he is driven back and defeated, it will have serious implications. His summoning has not yet been made public, which will mitigate damage to an extent, but his defeat will not be forgiven.

What's more, Toudou is not the type of man to face a demon who means to submerge an entire city, and run away without a fight.

I grind my foot into the ground in irritation and confirm what I'm hearing in a forceful tone.

"...If you don't know the details and manage to sink the entire

city, you won't know if he's truly dead, right?"

Heljarl looks suspicious for a moment before smirking.

"...As long as we show the fearsome strength of a demon, there's no need... for the details. We'll know the second he's dead."

"But how?"

I have to know. I have to extract as much information as possible while they still think I'm on their side.

Perhaps I've asked too many questions, as the seadragon knight steps in between us again to intimidate me.

"Watch yourself. Our king is lenient, but any further irreverence will not be tolerated."

"...I do not mind. It's a valid question. Disciple of the evil god...you are devoted to your task. I am impressed."

Heljarl restrains the menacing knight.

He has to be a complete moron. I suppose divulging such information to an outcast like me isn't all that problematic, but he's still exceedingly careless. Yet, his carelessness and the precautions he's taken to steadily gather military force on this scale don't add up.

Heljarl sits back on his throne and stares into my costume's dull eyes with an imposing smile.

"We possess an item that can identify whoever has the divine protection of the God of Order—that is, the hero—and pinpoint their location. We know the hero's whereabouts at all times!"

Hearing this, my mind goes completely blank.

For a very long time, the method used by the Demon Lord's army to identify the Holy Warrior has remained unknown. There have been many hypotheses so far but no actual proof.

Divine protection?! These bastards are using the hero's divine protection to track him?!

It's true that the number of people who possess a power as strong as the divine protection of the God of Order, the supreme deity Ahz Gried, are few and far between. Aside from the Saint and a few other special, elite beings, you could count the number on your hands.

Using divine protection to identify the hero... He can't be lying, can he? If a hero without the divine protection of the God of Order exists, that means they wouldn't be able to track his location at all, but Toudou certainly has it, so there's no use pondering that scenario.

I calm my breathing and veil my shock. Right now, I'm a merman—just a merman. Acting overly surprised would just be weird.

I'll tell Amelia everything in our call later. Sanya has another item to search for now.

"I see... Is it possible to have a look at this supposed item? I want to check its accuracy."

"...My apologies, but the item is extremely valuable. It's not that I don't trust you, Gregorio, but only a small number are permitted to see it."

Permitted? By whom? There is no one of higher rank than Heljarl in the Demon Lord's army. Does he mean the Demon Lord himself?

In that moment—and just for a brief second—Heljarl's expression changes. I catch a minuscule glimpse of intense malice.

I decide to draw back for the time being. I still have information to get from him.

"...If that is the case, then it is out of my hands. I understand."

I stare out at Heljarl's forces all standing at attention ominously. Looks like I'll be gaining a lot of things out of this mission.

My lips twist into a smile underneath the merman armor. Thanks to its thick shell, no one can see me from the outside.

Heljarl turns around to leave. His jet-black robe flutters behind him and his silver armor creaks quietly.

“Let’s head inside, Gregorio. We’re still assembling forces at the moment. We will lie in wait until we have gathered the numbers that will guarantee our victory. Don’t call it cowardice—even as a king, I have my own ties of obligation, you see.”

“...That is certainly true, for a king.”

I grip my mace and quell my urge to slay him and instead follow behind his squadron of seadragon knight guards.

I can sense innumerable pairs of eyes looking me over, but not one of them notices my real identity and tries to attack.

§ § §

Ever since receiving information from the so-called traveling monster researcher, Toudou’s party has been thrown into extreme turmoil.

“There’s no way. We have to stick it out and see what happens.”

“B-but, Nao... We simply don’t...have time.”

Aria insists they must dive down to the sunken temple the second their magic items are ready, but Toudou maintains they must wait until *Mermares* leaves the area. Limis is observing quietly, and Glacia is nibbling on a cookie without a care in the world.

The cause of all this, the monster researcher, looks unconcerned as she sips a cup of black tea with extra sugar. She must have nerves of steel—even though she’s been invited into an unfamiliar party’s lodging, she seems cool as a cucumber.

“You heard her, right? *Mermares*. The strongest merman on earth. We’re up against the strongest enemy on earth—get it?” Toudou’s expression is stern, but Aria offers a rebuttal.

“Yes, but he’s the strongest *merman*. If we prepare ourselves and attack him at once, we should definitely be able to drive him back, right?”

Mermen are low-level sea monsters. Even if he’s the strongest one, there’s no way he’s anywhere close to as strong as something like a dragon.

Toudou sighs in response to Aria’s proposal.

“...I’m not trying to be a coward here, but it definitely didn’t look like he’d go down easily from a head-on attack. And we can’t really lay a trap for him underwater, either.”

“Mermares is extremely intelligent, so a trap won’t work on him. The average appropriate level for defeating him is around ninety, they say. For you and your party at present, Toudou, it will be difficult.” Rabi presents this new information nonchalantly, and Limis’s eyes go wide as she stares back at her.

“Ninety?! You’re kidding, right?! An entire squadron of knights wouldn’t even be able to take him down!”

“It’s the truth. He is that calamitous. He’s so strong, so violent, even the Demon Lord’s army won’t lay a hand on him.”

“...I find that hard to believe. I’ve heard that sea monsters can be strong, but I’ve never heard of a merman like that.”

Aria furrows her brow. Rabi looks nonplussed and hammers her point home in rapid succession.

“It’s not as if I’m asking you to believe me. But I’ve given you warning. I simply don’t want to blame myself if you end up getting massacred.”

“N-no, it’s not that we don’t believe you—”

“I informed you out of benevolence. Mermares is brutal and far lewder than any goblin. If he catches you, you’ll be destined for the kind of torture too horrible to even mention...probably.”

Toudou cringes at Rabi’s menacing look. Her chilling tone only enhances the scenario’s plausibility.

“He...kidnaps people? Wha...! What a...what a terrifying creature...”

“Just the other day, he was seen tormenting a dog-eared mermaid, dragging her around like some sort of pet.”

Toudou’s whole body begins to shake uncontrollably upon hearing this.

Witnessing his strength from a distance was frightening enough, but if he abducts people, that’s even more terrifying.

“I-if...he’s taken someone captive...we have to go...and save them.”

Toudou’s voice trembles, and Rabi ponders for a few moments before saying, “She’s almost certainly dead by now, so you shouldn’t concern yourself.”

“...What?!”

“...The mermaid looked very happy, and now that I remember, she may have consented to the treatment. Ah yes, that was it. That was definitely the case.”

“?! ”

Rabi hops out of her chair, ignoring Toudou and her party, who exchange speechless glances.

There’s only a thin rug on the floor, but Rabi doesn’t make a sound as she lands.

“At any rate, I’ve warned you. This is the usual time for him to appear, so you might want to wait awhile. That’s all I’m saying. The path you choose is up to you, Toudou.”

“Just one minute...”

Aria stands and looks down at the hooded girl, saying, “We’re grateful for the information, but...just who are you anyway?”

“I told you earlier, I am a traveling monster researcher studying monsters and demons that possess prominent abilities. I make my living through the study of such creatures. I’m really just a humble scholar. If I can make myself of use to some passing mercenaries, I’m more than satisfied. Our world today is quite... dangerous, after all.” Rabi doesn’t hesitate to answer Aria instantly.

Her matter-of-fact response contains a peculiar dreadfulness.

The party examines Rabi again. She’s wearing an oversize reddish-brown robe that hides her tiny figure. Her head is completely covered by its hood and her expression is unreadable, but her pale skin and attractive features become visible when she raises her head.

Judging from her voice, she’s a girl—and younger than Aria, no doubt.

She’s not dressed like a typical traveler, but at the same time, her appearance

doesn't reveal a whole lot about her in general.

Further, she doesn't give the party an intimidating air, but one thing is clear—she is very skilled.

Toudou has met a number of powerful individuals on her journey, including Wurtz and Gregorio. Rabi's presence is on a different wavelength from theirs, but if she's a traveling monster researcher, then she must have the abilities necessary for that role.

Toudou stares at Rabi and raises her hand.

"Rabi... Um, Miss Rabi, you're following this Mermares, right?"

"Yes. But that said, I'm not always directly on his tail. I don't have fins, after all."

Rabi cracks a joke without even a trace of a smile. Toudou ignores her and instead gets straight to the point. They don't have time. That said, they can't afford to jump headlong into meaningless danger, either.

However, it's quite a coincidence that someone well versed in the ways of this powerful merman has just happened to run into them.

She's a little bit suspicious, but Toudou's instincts are telling her that she's an ally.

"For our own certain reasons, we have to get down to the sunken temple as quickly as possible. We'll give you a token of our gratitude, so...if it's all right, Rabi, would you mind helping us out?"

Rabi falls silent at this sudden proposal. It's a gamble. No normal person would accept such an invitation from a group of mysterious warriors.

Just when Toudou starts to give up hope, thinking there's no chance she'll do it, Rabi says, ".....Sure, okay."

"R-really?!"

"I need to show my boss some resolve sooner or later... It's the tough side of being employed, I suppose."

Rabi lets out a shallow sigh and lifts her head. Her gorgeous red eyes, slightly

transparent, meet with Toudou's.

Seeing their color, Toudou feels a deep sense of déjà vu, but she quickly shakes it off. She smiles gently and sticks her hand out to Rabi.

“Thank you! We really appreciate it!”

Rabi stares at Toudou's palm for an inordinate amount of time and cocks her head to the side before finally taking it in her own.

Her tiny hands are covered with thin gloves, but even then, Toudou can tell they're delicate. They shake hands and Rabi's eyes go wide, like she's agitated. She quickly clears her throat, saying, “...*Cough*. Yes. Likewise, though our acquaintance may be short, I look forward to our time together, Toudou.”

§ § §

After observing the troops and returning to my room, one of the seadragon knights accompanying me hands me an earring. It's small and contains an ash-colored stone, similar to the communication device I already have.

“Put it on. It'll vibrate when our king requests your presence. You better come running immediately when he does.”

Another magic item. I close my hand around the earring. I don't even have ears—how the hell does he expect me to wear it?

“Above all else, don't try anything with us. Our king may be tolerant, but he has his limits. Should you defy his orders again, you will know the wrath of the ocean's supreme ruler.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

The seadragon knight leaves my room. I dangle the earring in front of my face and furrow my brow.

Magic items are quite useful, but even those that can be manufactured easily shouldn't be used by demons. However, I already know of three different magic items in Heljarl's possession.

The first is an item that can detect the divine protection of the God of Order, the second can determine the location of anyone who has that divine

protection, and the third allows the user to subordinate sea monsters.

There's a chance that the first and second item are one and the same, but that's still too many for him to have.

Additionally, this earring was probably mass-produced. Its functionality is limited, but in terms of its use for establishing contact, it's top quality. A demon's thought process is typically along the lines of *I'll just pound their face in myself*, so this can't be the product of any demonic work.

The magic item that Felsa possessed in Golem Valley suddenly crosses my mind. Did he get it from the Demon Lord as well? I want to know more. And if at all possible, I want to gather these items together. I'm expecting great things from Sanya in that regard.

Suddenly, I can feel the seadragon knight's presence again. The door cracks open, and he sticks his head in.

"By the way...I forgot to ask. What happened to the mermaid you had with you?"

"..."

"She wasn't in the underground cell. You wouldn't have let her go, now, would you?"

The seadragon knight narrows his eyes and watches me closely. *Shit, he noticed.*

I make an effort to keep my voice calm in replying. I'm a merman—an arrogant, insolent merman.

"I'm letting her roam. What of it?"

"...What will you do if she escapes?"

The seadragon knight bears his fangs, practically threatening me.

His claim is logical, and I don't intend to quibble. I decide to push the envelope.

If he attacks me, I'll have just cause to defend myself and annihilate him. That

will draw attention away from Sanya.

I quell my malicious pretense and instead placate the seadragon knight. His shoulders stiffen and his scaly eyelids fly open as he stares me down.

“That won’t happen. She is my female.”

“ ... ”

“She’s probably just taking a walk. No need to worry.”

“Mermaids are our enemies and our prey. Everyone is searching for her. When they find her, there will be hell to pay.”

“In that case, tell them this—she is my prey, and if they touch her, they’re dead.”

The seadragon knight looks at me like I’m the enemy.

I know how dangerous this is. All eyes are on me. I couldn’t have made it this far without Sanya.

Hopefully this will make things even a little bit easier for her.

§ § §

Sanya heads down the narrow hallway with utmost caution, concentrating on the surrounding presences.

Her uniform silver fur swishes back and forth in the water, and her ears twitch as they listen for monsters nearby.

One of Sanya’s greatest strengths is how sharp her senses are. Thanks to her innate skills, her senses are anywhere from hundreds to thousands of times more accurate than a regular human’s. However, being underwater, which she is not accustomed to, has dulled much of her senses. She needs to stay especially vigilant.

Tracing her palm along the wall, Sanya creates a mental map of her location. A few hours have passed since she’s been on the move, but since she’s had to take a number of detours to avoid the guards, she still doesn’t have a full picture of the structure’s interior.

This job sucks. Sanya presses her back to the wall and lets out a sigh.

Thankfully, there are only a few guards on patrol, and there is no shortage of places to hide. On the flip side, the ones she's seen have been highly trained. It'd be one thing if she had a proper weapon on her, but she's largely empty-handed, save for a single small knife. Sanya calmly analyzes the difference in combat strength between her opponents and herself.

With the element of surprise, she can take down one of them no problem, but the seadragon knights are patrolling in packs of two at the minimum.

She could potentially take down two at once, but if the second calls for reinforcements while she's handling the first, she'll be in trouble.

Normally, no enemy would ever come this far down into the sea where the building is, but the troops aren't letting their guard down. From listening to their conversations, Sanya has learned that they're being extra vigilant because of her boss.

Honestly, getting in my way like this... What sort of grudge does the boss have against me anyway?

Sanya's mermaid armor has slipped off her shoulder, and she pulls the string back up before looking around the corner down the hallway again. She knows where the exits and entrances are, but she's still uncertain of the magic items' locations.

She's narrowed it down to a few possibilities, but she doesn't have any concrete information.

The structure contains many rooms, but aside from the throne room, only two have security assignments.

The most likely place for the items to be is in Heljarl's quarters, but that room is guarded by five seadragon knights at all times and she can't even get close to it. She doesn't have any information whatsoever on this other room, but it has a massive lock and multiple guards in front of it, so it must be the treasure vault or another important chamber.

If it was being guarded by humans, she could handle them, but with seadragon knights as guards, she has zero confidence in her ability to properly

interrogate them.

Sanya has had experience with infiltration tasks in the past, but the unfamiliar surroundings and anxiety that comes with life-or-death situations have left her depleted.

Maybe I should go back to the boss's room and rethink this.

The thought pops into her mind, but the fact that she hasn't made any headway whatsoever prevents her from falling back on that idea.

Sanya also has pride as a mercenary. Plus, there's the chance that her boss isn't in his room.

Sanya continues pondering as she keeps up her diligent search. Just then, as she turns a corner, she notices a seadragon knight standing at the end of the hallway and she quickly hides.

—That makes three guarded rooms.

However, unlike the other two, this one has only a single seadragon knight guarding it.

Compared with the guards by the other rooms, this one appears to be quite at ease.

What to do? Sanya vacillates for a moment, but there aren't any other seadragon knights patrolling. She can take this one down if he's alone.

Things will only get more difficult if she keeps searching through all the rooms. She decides to put it all on the line.

Sanya silently draws her knife from her waist and steadies her breathing, stretching her arms to loosen her muscles.

Her blade isn't designed for throwing. She has to go in close, aim for the throat. It's a legitimate blade, honed from the fangs of her silverwolf werebeast ancestors, and razor-sharp. Slicing through the scaled throat of the seadragon knight will be a cinch.

Ten meters separate them. She won't be able to close the distance without being noticed—the knight is on his guard, after all.

She'll distract him and rip open his throat. That's the only option. Thankfully, right now Sanya is a powerless mermaid. Causing the knight to slip up won't be hard to do.

"This kinda thing is really Rabi's specialty..." Sanya mutters to herself, brushing her bangs forward to hide her eyes. She hunkers down, making herself look small to minimize her presence.

Sanya has observed Rabi's methods for a long time. She's also replicated them on a few occasions, although not many of them have been successful.

Sanya inhales and summons her resolve, staggering out into the hallway without taking care to mask her footsteps. The seadragon knight in front of the door locks her in his gaze instantly.

She approaches him, pretending like she doesn't realize she's been discovered, in short, staccato steps.

The seadragon knight's expression changes from suspicion to grim regard. His shrill voice rings through the hallway.

"?! What?! What is a mermaid doing here?"

Sanya finally pretends to realize she's been discovered and looks up.

Their eyes meet. Sanya's face falls and she shrieks in terror, but only just quietly enough that no one else will notice.

"Eek?! Eep... Meep..."

Sanya steps back and presses her back against the wall. Her eyes widen in desperation and she practically crumples to the floor.

She needs to feign weakness through her voice, expression, and presence. She's not sure if she's pulling it off, but the seadragon knight approaches her with the same grim regard. Light glints off the tip of his razor-sharp spearhead.

"Did the jailer let you go? Or are you rogue? How did you escape?"

"Eep... H-help me...!"

Sanya pleads with the knight in a voice much higher than normal. She fakes a

retreat and then puts her back to the wall again.

Sanya squirms pathetically as the seadragon knight takes a few paces toward her and snorts with derision.

His cold, unblinking eyes seem to regard her as if she were a mere object. He then turns the handle of his spear, not the tip, toward Sanya.

“Don’t move. I’m going to bind you. If you act up, you’re dead.”

Wait—is this working? Have my skills improved?

The knight is off his guard. He doesn’t show one iota of concern that she might attack him. He also doesn’t appear to have noticed that her hand has slid behind her back, where she grips her knife.

Sanya is blown away by this realization. Although different races boast different skills, this particular technique is something she’s never been able to master, no matter how much she trained. Rabi has always made fun of her because of it.

Elated, Sanya tries copying Rabi even more. She hunches her shoulders as if to emphasize her chest and says in a trembling voice:

“Ooh, I’m s-so scared. D-don’t touch me! I...I might be cute and weak, and I’ve never lifted anything heavier than a carrot, b-but...if you come any closer—I-I’ll...I’ll bite you!!”

Sanya is really laying it on thick now, and the seadragon knight immediately goes on alert. He steps back quickly and points the tip of his spear at Sanya.

“Just who are you?! Where did you sneak in here from? And drop whatever you’re holding behind your back!”

“?! Huh... Wh-whyyy?!”

But this always works for Rabi...

The knight wastes no time in lunging forward with his spear. Sanya instantly dodges the twirling spearhead approaching her with blinding speed. There’s a scraping sound as the blow misses and the spear’s tip chips the wall. If she hadn’t dodged it, Sanya would have been left with another orifice in her head.

“Eek!! D-don’t kill me!”

“It’s too late for your little performance now!”

The knight rains down his spear on Sanya. She assesses its pattern instantaneously and ducks, lying prone to avoid it. A portion of her hair that floated upward is slashed off by the tip.

This would’ve worked perfectly for Rabi... Sanya puffs out her cheeks, and the seadragon knight hollers, “Hey! We’re under attack! Someone—!!”

The knife released from Sanya’s hand pierces the seadragon knight’s throat. His eyes go wide as blood gushes forth. He attempts to scream as his life begins slipping away but is unable to form any words.

A few seconds later, as her enemy crumples into a heap, Sanya breathes a sigh of relief.

She was lucky. If the knight had actually been focused on their skirmish, she wouldn’t have been able to take him down in a split second.

Sanya grips the knife stuck in the knight’s neck and twists it back and forth just to be extra sure before finishing it off.

The soul has left his dead body. His now-colorless pupils show Sanya’s reflection as she stares down.

“Rabi would’ve taken this guy’s head off before he even noticed...”

Sanya strains her ears, but she can’t hear footsteps or anything else. Calming her breathing, she drags the knight’s body into the room he had been guarding.

The seadragon knight raised quite a ruckus. It doesn’t appear that anyone’s approaching yet, but she needs to investigate the room with haste.

As she begins to do so, Sanya lets out a short sigh.

“Aw, man... I was wrong. No wonder the room wasn’t locked... Spare weaponry...and nothing else. Fail.”

The dimly lit chamber is jam-packed with weapons. It’s clearly not what she’s looking for.

Sanya drags the seadragon knight’s corpse to the far end of the room and

walks along the rows of armaments. Spears, swords, shields, maces—there's a ton of different stuff here, but nothing of value and nothing even resembling the magic items she's after.

...Guess it'll have to be in the treasure vault or Heljarl's quarters after all.

Sanya does a final check for anything useful inside before switching up her game plan.

Both rooms are under strict surveillance, from what she saw at a distance. They're this building's most dangerous spots.

Sanya doesn't want to go there. Silverwolves are brave, but they're not reckless. There's no way she can take on multiple seadragon knight guards, with full military armament, and incapacitate them in a split second. If they call for reinforcements, that will only prove detrimental to her boss's strategy.

That said, Sanya still hasn't had a chance to show her boss what she's got. She wants to succeed at this important task, no matter what it takes. It's a point of pride for the silverwolf race to show their superiors what it is they're capable of.

In that case, she decides to set her sights on the treasure vault. Heljarl's quarters are simply too dangerous.

"Man, if only I knew how to use magic, I might be able to do something about this conundrum..."

Guess I'll have to head back to the boss's room for now and consult with him.

Just as Sanya decides to do so, aimlessly muttering to herself, she is hit with an epiphany.

"...Ohhh... Magic... Right, magic! I don't need to be the one to cast it."

Sanya recalls what Ares told her: *"Make friends with the mermaids."*

She scrutinizes the plan in her mind, nodding once, and she leaves the weapon storeroom with utmost caution.

There's only a single merman guarding where the mermaids are locked up, probably because Ares usurped the jail's supervision. He looks at Sanya and doesn't even feign to call for reinforcements. For some reason, Sanya knows

exactly what the merman is thinking.

Boss, you really scared the crap outta this guy... Just who's the real monster here?

It seems like he's too afraid of upsetting Ares to try getting in Sanya's way.

Sanya remains cautious, prepared to counterstrike if attacked, as she enters the room.

Seeing her come in, the mermaids' faces turn pale and they huddle in the corner.

Mermaids are the most famous race of aquatic demi-humans. They're known for their good looks and voices, but their most notorious aspect is the powerful charm their voices contain.

In ages past, mermaids' charms have been known to lure crew members to their deaths by causing them to steer their ships straight down into the ocean.

It's doubtful that they'd be able to completely control the mind of a seadragon knight, but they can certainly create an opening for attack.

Perhaps because Ares didn't follow after Sanya, the mermaids' faces relax slightly. They flap their mouths open and shut, but no sound comes out. It's because of the collars around their necks.

And now, the key to these collars has been passed from Ares's hands to Sanya's.

She approaches the bewildered mermaids and shows them the key ring. Their eyes go wide with surprise.

"I need your help. I'm trying to steal one of Heljarl's magic items."

The mermaids' eyes go even wider as they exchange glances.

Sanya killed the seadragon knight guarding the weapon storeroom. She hid his corpse, but it's only a matter of time before someone notices.

When they do, the rest are guaranteed to go on even higher alert. Not much time left now.

Sanya explains the situation to them. The mermaids look at one another for a

few moments before finally nodding back at her.

§ § §

“Did you have anything to add?” asks the King of the Ocean, and the seadragon knight standing next to him, Halgen, shakes with fear.

Halgen has served as Heljarl’s right-hand man since before the world came to know him as the “sea demon.” Halgen straightens himself up and opens his mouth hesitantly.

“...No, my liege. May your will be done.”

“We have known each other for many moons now. Do not hesitate to speak. It’s about Gregorio, no doubt?”

Heljarl has gathered with his trusted retainer in a room fashioned into an operations center in the back of their dilapidated stronghold.

Despite being able to control sea monsters, Heljarl has amassed a group of troops that are still a ragtag gang of fighters.

The only seadragon knight who Heljarl trusts is highly intelligent and has a storied history.

Heljarl is a king but not a dictator. Even without the power to control sea monsters, Heljarl’s strength is unparalleled throughout the entire ocean. He’s more powerful than even the strongest of ocean dragons.

Thus, Heljarl listens to his subordinates. It’s just one embodiment of his composure.

Halgen inhales deeply before continuing.

“That merman is dangerous. He murdered Hjalmar. He might go for your throat next.”

“I’ve already heard as much multiple times.”

“Your power is great, my liege. But there is still time before we mobilize. I feel we ought to drive a wedge between him and us, just to be safe.”

Heljarl's shapely brow furrows subtly at this, and he waves his arm that is resting on his elbow.

"Yet his kind of power is invaluable. Power and faith... If he's really that remarkable of a merman, then I may even add him to our vanguard. If I control him, he won't be able to wield his full strength."

Giant sea monsters are one thing. They can cause serious destruction simply by slamming into something.

However, Gregorio's battle tactics don't simply rely on brute force. Heljarl's power entails being able to control sea monsters, but if he was to constrain any part of Gregorio's volition, that would only hinder his capabilities. Gregorio's power is a matter of technique and faith.

Heljarl continues, sounding almost deliriously impassioned.

"Right now, I need all the power I can get. My forces must extend beyond the ocean to reach land... To show the Demon Lord my power and to let that brat know just what the King of the Ocean is capable of."

Heljarl is not completely focused on the Holy Warrior. His vision surpasses him.

Halgen nods in response and replies, voice muffled, "I have one proposal. Gregorio has that stubborn mermaid with him. If we make use of her, we can drive a wedge between him and us without wasting resources..."

"Oh? ...Explain, then."

At Heljarl's prompting, Halgen begins to explain his theory.

Kill the Holy Warrior and obtain honor. The King of the Ocean's pride will not settle for simply taking control of the seas.

Not a moment later, Heljarl nods profusely.

§ § §

"Ares is always so reckless."

"Is that so?"

"But the same could be said about you, trying to accompany Toudou and his

party.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Rabi’s voice is completely void of emotion as she and Amelia speak to each other. Her face, too.

She’s probably just a bit of an airhead, but Rabi’s plans with Toudou are anything but half-hearted.

Rabi hustles to prepare, searching for a few necessary items in her large knapsack—a recovery potion in a glass bottle, some sturdy see-through string, a butcher knife, a heavy book, thick-framed red glasses.

“...Glasses? What are you going to use those for? I’ve never seen you wear them once, have I?”

Rabi pulls down her hood and puts the glasses on for Amelia.

The glasses give her the air of an unathletic, slightly dorky young girl. She timidly averts her gorgeous red eyes. Her translucent white skin looks like it’s never seen the sun.

She hunches her shoulders and grabs the neck of her robe with her slender hand, hiding her body. Tears flood her eyes and she starts to shake all over. Her voice escapes her thin peach-colored lips as she pleads in supplication.

“I...I s-simply cannot f-fight. It’s s-so dangerous; I j-just want peace. Eep! ...No —! Wha...! D-don’t touch me— N-no, give my glasses back— I c-can’t. I j-just can’t do it— Oh... Ares—”

“Huh? HUUUUHHHHH?”

Amelia can’t help herself from crying out, but Rabi’s expression is already back to normal. She releases her hands from her collar and shrugs. The pathetic, weak voice she’d been using to inspire sadism in her opponent is nowhere to be found.

“—Just like that, and then you shear their head clean off. I’m weak, so I have to come up with all sorts of schemes...”

Amelia’s frozen stiff, dumbfounded, as Rabi continues.

“Just now, Amelia, you were wide open. I could have beheaded you ten times over.”

“.....Ngh... You’re...conniving...”

“It’s more than likely ingrained in my DNA. I know what it’s like to be preyed upon.”

Rabi removes the glasses and puts them back in their case, tucking it into a small bag that hangs from her belt. It will hold only a few limited items, but it’s a small enough bag that it shouldn’t impede her movement underwater.

“Please get in touch with me via transmission. It will be easier for you to do so if you’re close by. After all, you’re used to it.”

“...But, Rabi, without you here with me, what will I—?”

Amelia has very low combat skills. Without anyone to defend her, she’ll have a hard time following behind.

Rabi’s expression turns thoughtful. “There’s...nothing I can do. You need to keep in contact with the boss and myself. There won’t be much use for advanced holy techniques on this trip.”

“.....I suppose you’re right.”

It’s not exactly as planned, but they can’t call Ares back here now.

It’s only reasonable for Amelia to have an escort. Yet, they need someone to check on things underwater, and aside from that, it will be safer to finalize the spirit covenant before Heljarl’s troops have amassed.

“...Things aren’t going according to plan, after all... Even though I got my own mermaid armor and everything.”

“You can just wear it here in your room, can’t you? At least it’s not merman armor.”

Finally, Rabi equips her large hatchet, stored in its sheath, and shrugs.

Amelia sighs deeply at Rabi’s ludicrous advice, which she doled out without a second thought.

“...Huh? But, Rabi, didn’t you say you’d be too embarrassed to fight in a

swimsuit—?”

Rabi can supposedly put up with it if they're all the same gender—but the Holy Warrior's party she'll be accompanying is led by Toudou, a boy.

From what Amelia's heard, it's not a matter of preference but rather a special characteristic of her breed that makes it impossible for her—will Rabi be okay?

Amelia's question is naive, and Rabi furrows her brow—the first time Amelia's seen her do so. Then she answers nonchalantly. “No, I'll be fine. It seems like there are some special circumstances regarding this issue, so I wasn't sure whether I should tell you, but... Amelia, Toudou is...a girl. She may look androgynous, but there's no doubt about it.”

“.....What?”

§ § §

Garnet lies flat on the bed and looks up at Limis.

“Listen, Garnet. Don't get scared, okay? They're not enemies. They won't attack us or anything like that.”

Garnet doesn't answer her. It simply lifts its head as its tongue flicks out of its mouth.

One of the most important factors in establishing a covenant with an elemental spirit is one's compatibility with any existing spirits.

Water is an advantageous attribute when put against fire. You could say that water elemental spirits are Garnet's natural enemies.

Whether or not Limis is even able to establish a covenant with an elemental spirit of Garnet's rank is just one part of the equation. But she's come this far—she must succeed, no matter what it takes.

Limis has made steady progress in preparing to establish a spirit covenant. The only concern that remains lies with the elemental spirit who's been with her since childhood.

“...Sometimes I just wish I could understand what you're thinking...,” Limis mutters to herself, sighing.

Garnet continues to look up at her and doesn't move a muscle.

Why hasn't Limis been able to establish a covenant with other types of elemental spirits? High-ranking ones can even understand human language. From Garnet's rank alone, it should be able to start speaking, too, but there's no such indication at present.

Just then, the door to Limis's room opens. The Holy Warrior, who Limis has been entrusted with assisting—Naotsugu Toudou—sticks her head in and calls out.

"Limis, the preparations are complete. Your mermaid armor is ready. Zolan brought it here for you."

"...A little earlier than expected, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but it seems like he really put a lot of work into it. He said he was inspired for the first time in ages."

"Inspired—?!Okay, fine."

Limis brings her finger toward Garnet and it climbs up her shoulder in a flash. She checks that Garnet is where it should be before gripping her staff and standing up. She's worried, but there's no turning back now.

Then, as Zolan hands her the completed mermaid armor, her face goes stiff. She holds nothing but a scrap of red cloth in her hands. If she bunched it up, it would probably fit in her palm.

Mermaid armor. The magic item necessary to establish a covenant with a water elemental spirit.

"Um... Ah... This... Well..... I was prepared for this, but now that it's in my hands, I'm curious... What about this is supposed to be armor? It's way smaller than the sample we saw, too!!"

Aria is holding a similar scrap of cloth, hers blue, as she stares into the distance, stock-still.

Glacia spreads out her mermaid armor, seemingly disinterested. Hers is a light-blue color, but it doesn't look like armor, or even a magic item for that matter. Maybe it's because she's so small, or perhaps it's because her chest is so flat, but Glacia's bikini essentially covers only her private parts. The same

goes for Limis's.

It's the type of thing they'd hesitate to wear even if they were only going for a swim.

Zolan, the dwarf who delivered the items, clad in a colorful shirt, beams with pride and laughs uproariously.

"I made 'em this way to save on materiaaals!! Better than strappin' on a pair of seashells, ain't iit?!"

"Seashells?! What the heck?! You're telling me to wear *this*?! Just how am I going to explain this to my dad?!"

"H-hang on, Limis, settle down—I've already got mine on."

"...Nao, aren't you...*mortified* to wear something so indecent?!"

"Please don't say any more... It hurts my soul. But mine is definitely a step up from that!"

"Nao, you might be able to wear the holy armor Fried over yours...b-but what about us?! We don't have that luxury!"

Limis's lips tremble as she glowers at Zolan. He smiles and gives her a thumbs-up.

Limis seriously considers burning him to a crisp on the spot before restraining herself.

Aria has received the largest bikini, due to her *size*, and she abruptly says, "...It has barely any defense..."

"Hyuck-hyuck-hyuck... This set o' mermaid armor is custom-made! It's imbued with crystals that accumulate magical energy, so even a gal like you with zero magical energy can become a mermaaaaid! That feature comes free o' charge!!"

".....It has barely any defense..."

Why is he being so meaninglessly cordial?! Aria barely manages to keep her tongue on a leash.

Crystals that accumulate magical energy are useful but rare, and only a limited few people are able to craft with them. Finding any is a tough job—Limis

and Aria couldn't do it on their own. Zolan is an old pervert, but he's most definitely a genius.

Aria's eyes glaze over. She grew up surrounded by men, and she has even less tolerance for this crap than Limis. But in spite of her zombielike stare, Zolan isn't deterred one bit.

He takes a nimble step forward, practically jumping for joy as he screams, "Okay—hurry up and put 'em on! Show me yer very best mermaid impression! Quick! Quickly now!"

"Rrrgh..... G-Glacia, no! Stop taking off your clothes!"

Glacia doesn't seem perturbed and starts to undress, while Limis rushes to stop her.

She stares blankly up at Limis, and Zolan begins to applaud—he's really heating up now.

Toudou stands in front of Glacia as if protecting her and chastises Zolan.

"This is sexual harassment! Zolan, we're thankful you brought them to us and all, but seriously, get out!"

"Perish the thought! Makin' sure they're the right sizes is the manufacturer's responsibility! I, Zolan, may be an old man, but I haven't lost my pride as a creator of magic items—"

"I must apologize for my husband's behavior."

"?!"

A delicate hand reaches out and grabs Zolan's shoulder. It barely touches him, but he stops dead in his tracks. The hand belongs to an elf, though how and when she entered the room is anyone's guess. She's over two heads taller than the dwarf Zolan, with distinctively long, pointy ears.

Her golden hair is tied up, and her porcelain-white skin and blue eyes make her look like a princess from some faraway land.

Toudou and company are shocked, and Zolan's face freezes stiff as he turns around and shudders.

“S-sweetums... Wh-what’s the matter? ...I’m at work right now, and—”

“I think your work here is finished, *darling*! Come, we have another request, so let’s get back home.”

“B-but I still haven’t checked the sizes—”

“Ah-ha-ha, oh, darling, I know your skills better than anyone. There’s no need to check. I’m sure they’ll fit perfectly.”

“No, no!! I gotta see the mermaaids!! That’s what I came all the way here to Cloudburst foor!!”

As Zolan starts to throw a tantrum, the elf turns toward Toudou calmly and lowers her head in supplication. Her hand remains gripping Zolan’s shoulder.

“I’m so sorry. He’s always this way. No matter how many times I tell him, he won’t change.”

“N-no, it’s okay...”

“But I can guarantee you he is skilled. If there happens to be anything wrong at all, please come back and visit our shop. We’ll fix it for you free of charge.”

“O-okay...”

The elf smiles at Toudou, who can manage only a half-hearted reply, and drags Zolan out of the room. The dwarf’s yelping slowly dissipates.

Awkwardness hangs in the air. Looking down at the mermaid armor, Aria says with disgust, “...‘Sweetums’? ...He...has a wife, it seems...”

“...Yeah, and he’s totally whipped.”

“Why does he spend his time making things like this if he has such a beautiful wife? I just...don’t understand people...”

Toudou looks at Limis’s mermaid armor and scratches her cheek in total bewilderment.

At any rate, their preparations are now complete. All that’s left to do is head down to the sunken temple with Rabi.

“...Is this really going to work? He said something about saving on materials...”

“...W-well, we should be able to manage... Probably,” Aria mutters, not looking very confident at all.

§ § §

This is clearly excessive military force. You can get a sense of their indomitable will from the mass of troops gathered without having taken Cloudburst’s defenses into consideration whatsoever.

There’s power in numbers. Merely dispatching the countless mermen to Cloudburst will send the city into a frenzy. If they’re able to remove the grates from the waterways and use the canal that runs throughout Cloudburst, they’ll be able to overrun it in no time.

The number of monsters has increased exponentially in the last few days, to the point where they could likely defeat the entire Kingdom’s naval forces.

What can they be so afraid of, to amass an army this size? No one would believe that they’re just trying to be prudent.

Are these orders from the Demon Lord? Or are they just trying to cover all their bases? Even so, this is completely over the top. Heljarl already controls the entire ocean himself—amassing this many subordinates is just going to create unwanted openings, if anything.

“A fearsome army indeed. Amassing this many troops just to attack one small city... Is this the power of the Demon Lord?”

As I start to dig for information, one of the seadragon knight guards answers begrudgingly, eyes wide.

“...We only answer to one lord. Heljarl is descended from the God of Oceans. This army belongs to him and him alone.”

The God of Oceans, huh? Perhaps Heljarl and the Demon Lord Kranos’s relationship is not quite the lord-vassal type I expected.

They were likely once separate forces that united as one. This makes them only more troublesome.

“Come to think of it, this army isn’t the sort the Demon Lord

would gather. Do you have some kind of cooperative alliance with him?”

“...If you manage to distinguish yourself in battle, you might just see for yourself.”

The seadragon knight falls silent before continuing at length.

“However, Gregorio, do not forget. Your life belongs to Heljarl, the King of the Ocean. You should be thankful that you have the honor of attending him as a merman.”

“I will pay him back in kind first by slaughtering the Holy Warrior.”

The seadragon knight doesn’t reply, simply nodding in agreement.

Cloudburst is a port, but taking down the entire city logically entails attacking it from on land. I haven’t heard about any plans like that, which was what made me so dubious about Heljarl’s whole strategy, but it looks like his internal affairs are more than a bit complicated.

Just then, the earring I attached to my dorsal fin starts vibrating. I turn my head and say to the seadragon knight on guard, “Seems your king is calling.”

“You don’t need my permission. Don’t make our king wait. Get moving!”

I wonder what he wants. There should still be some time until his troops attack the city.

I arrive in front of the throne room. They must have increased security—there are five fully armed seadragon knights guarding it.

I suddenly realize that I might have overstayed my welcome. Because of the seadragon knight guards, I can’t afford to do anything reckless, and I don’t know how far Sanya’s gotten with her search for the magic items. I need to wait for an opportunity.

I estimate that opportunity will occur right before Heljarl commands his army to march.

Just prior to manipulating all the monsters he's gathered, Heljarl will be left defenseless. In that moment, I'll be able to identify the flute that he uses to control them.

The seadragon knight guards straighten their backs and narrow their eyes at me. I perceive a stinging sensation, almost a rise in pressure, akin to murderous intent.

"You're late. Our king awaits you. Get inside."

"Ex Strength."

"?!"

I cast buffs on myself in succession with holy techniques as the seadragon knights look on in astonishment. A number of high-level buffs only a high-ranking priest can wield rise within my body.

"Wh-what...are you doing?!"

"It's a divine message from my god. You don't mind, do you?" I ask as I finish casting the buffs. Take any and all precautions—that's my motto.

If I see any kind of imposing security measures, then you better believe I'll come prepared. And if I claim this is a divine message from my evil god, then they won't deny me.

The seadragon knight guards shudder in fear and open the door without a word.

Gripping my mace, I step into the room. Heljarl and his bodyguards pierce me with their gazes.

In that moment, I know I was right to come prepared.

"Ah, Gregorio. So good you're here."

"Has something happened? I see you...have my sacrifice with you," I respond, maintaining my composure. Sanya and the rest of the

mermaids are standing behind Heljarl. They don't look to be tied up, but they're completely still.

I wondered why she didn't contact me—she's bungled the job. Sanya's face is horribly lifeless, drained of color.

Her glassy-eyed expression is so unlike her energetic, vivacious look that it leaves me feeling utterly repulsed.

Fortunately, however, she's still alive.

"Yes, Gregorio. I regret to tell you, but...your mermaid was causing a ruckus, you see. It was not an easy decision, but I've made her a bit more...compliant."

"A ruckus... Did she do something?"

As I probe, feigning ignorance, a seadragon knight standing next to Heljarl cries out sharply, "'Did she do something?!' Your mermaid led the other mermaids to the treasure vault and broke in! The guards were severely wounded! If our king himself hadn't intervened, they would have likely suffered even worse. This is on your head!"

The treasure vault, huh? I did tell Sanya to befriend the mermaids, but I can see that she went a little overboard.

The other seadragon knights are all glowering at me with bloodlust in their eyes. At this point, I can't quite blame them.

However, I snort and laugh in their faces. I can't be held accountable—in trivial moments like this, I have to laugh it off.

"...Ha! They took a beating from a bunch of mermaids? Such a disgrace to the Demon Lord's army. They lost to my sacrifice—I guess those spears are just for show. Are the followers of the God of Oceans that pitifully weak?"

"What did you say?!"

"Your loss was due to your own weakness. You are not worthy

enough to call yourselves warriors.”

As I chastise them, I assess the difference in our combat ability. There are five knights to the left and right of Heljarl and six more up against the wall.

None of them is particularly powerful, but taking them down in one blow from head-on will prove tough. Allowing them any time will only guarantee the arrival of more reinforcements.

Heljarl raises his palm at the enraged guard to pacify him and breathes a small sigh.

“Gregorio, that will be quite enough. My soldiers are not weak. Rather, your mermaid is strong. She had the help of the others, but even then, it’s unfathomable to think she managed to take down so many of my men. Furthermore, you had a responsibility to watch over her. I gave you permission to roam freely throughout our stronghold, but that permission does not extend to your mermaid breaking into our treasure vault.”

Sanya strides robotically out from behind Heljarl to stand at his side. He licks his lips and continues.

“Even my army follows certain rules, and sin begets punishment. Fortunately for you, you’ll soon have a chance to vindicate yourself—”

I see—it appears that somehow, Heljarl has no intention of punishing me physically. It must be because our showdown with the Holy Warrior is very soon. Above all else, I’m just glad that Sanya is still alive, although she’s been captured.

Sanya slowly draws the knife stuck in her belt. It’s large and fang-like. She handles it elegantly, pointing the tip directly at me.

“I’m not taking her hostage, but I won’t give this mermaid back to you, not yet.”

“What did you do to my sacrifice?”

“Mermaids are ocean-dwelling beings. They cannot defy me, the King of the Ocean.”

Are they under the power of a different flute of his? It’s true that Zolan said

the mermaid armor tricks others into mistaking the wearer for a mermaid, but that implies the effect has its demerits, too. I was not expecting this whatsoever.

Sanya should have resistance to mental manipulation from her training, but I guess she couldn't stand up to it this time.

Heljarl smiles, pleased, as I fall silent.

"Worry not. Our objective remains the same. I don't intend to behead you here and now. I have mercy for faithful soldiers. Follow my order and slay the Holy Warrior. Slip into the city amid the confusion, find the Holy Warrior, and kill him. If you do, consider your sins washed clean. I'll even give you your mermaid, too."

"Very well. Yet, I have one thing to ask: Will my mermaid return to her former self?"

"Heh-heh-heh, yes, of course. If I deem it so."

Heljarl lets out a low chuckle. He's telling the truth.

I can't see any emotion in Sanya's eyes. I have no use for magic items at this point, unless they turn her back into her old self.

There are a number of techniques that cause mental contamination, but the majority of them only restrict the target's thoughts. What's more, mindless emotion can have the most drastic influence on one's actions.

This means that someone who's been mentally compromised loses the ability to attack with their potential. Sanya's movements were elegant when she drew her blade, but she can't currently unleash her true strength.

They haven't tried to manipulate my mind, only because they're likely scared that I'll become less powerful.

"Until I return her to you, this mermaid will be part of my personal guard. She needs to work to make up for the soldiers she killed. We'll be ready to attack in a matter of days. You'll manage until then."

They're trying to keep me in check. A seadragon knight on Heljarl's right, one who looks more regal than the rest, seems to relax a bit. It must have been his

plan.

I cross my arms and watch Sanya. She doesn't seem to be any more relaxed as she stares back at me.

As Heljarl said, it's natural to strike back when attacked. This particular seadragon knight is far more troublesome than the rest.

I lower my mace in my hand and ask Heljarl, feigning ignorance, "...How are you controlling them? Drugs?"

"...*Drugs?*" Heljarl retorts, his mouth nearly splitting at the seams. His reptilian eyes are boring into me.

A screeching laugh reverberates through the water. All Heljarl's soldiers are frozen stiff.

"Bwa-ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Splendid, a splendid joke, Gregorio! As if I, the King of the Ocean, would ever stoop to such pathetic methods. Very well, then—I'll show you!"

"M-my liege!"

Heljarl ignores the entourage around him trying to hold him back. He gets to his feet and slowly reaches out to me with his right hand. In the next instant, a long, transparent blue flute abruptly appears in it.

The flute is almost an entire meter long. Its translucent bluish body has a number of haphazardly placed holes, and the tip is adorned with several sea-green jewels that I've never seen before.

It's precisely what I've been searching for this entire time. A strange impulse runs down my body from head to toe, leaving me shivering.

So he *did* have it after all. Is it magic?! I couldn't see him hiding anything earlier... He completely fooled me.

I'm dumbfounded, and Heljarl raises his voice as if he is announcing the item's presence.

"This is the secret treasure passed down through the descendants of the God of Oceans, created from the root of all marine life—Mar Animus—and a true

testament to me, Heljarl, as sole ruler of the seas!”

The seadragon knights surrounding Heljarl fall to their knees in unison like the loyal vassals they are.

The only ones left standing are Sanya and the mermaids, who have had their mental faculties stolen.

Heljarl glares at me. The tolerant air he had when we first met is long gone. Nothing but euphoric power stretching in all directions and an unspeakably limitless pride remain.

“All ocean-dwelling beings are my servants! Gregorio, you may be a powerful warrior, but you are no exception! What—did you think that because you’re a merman, I would excuse you?!”

I see how it is...

I lower my mace and slowly begin to kneel.

“...Yes, my liege.”

The corners of Heljarl’s mouth turn up into a smile.

In that moment, I pretend like I’m going to fall to my knees, but instead I kick heavily off the ground and lunge toward Heljarl. It’s important for crusaders to never falter.

No matter what comes my way, I won’t hesitate. It’s an easy claim to make, but most people can’t actually follow through.

Sure, I, too, used to hesitate. But no longer. I’ll execute a sudden onslaught when they’ve lowered their guard. The perfect sneak attack. The entire room is under their king’s control. Just as I looked like I was going to kneel, they all let their guard down.

—None of them is able to react in time—save for just one.

As I go to swing my mace down, my attack is deflected from below, at an angle. My mace is thrown off its unwavering trajectory and smashes into the ground. Heljarl’s eyes grow wide as he realizes what’s happening and takes a step back.

Sanya had instantaneously stepped in to block my attack. Her eyes show neither anger nor strife. I can't tell what the hell she's thinking; she's acting as a wall between Heljarl and me. The soldiers surrounding us finally get their wits about them.

Their murderous intent pierces my being, and I raise my mace once again. Heljarl glowers at me.

"...What is the meaning of this, Gregorio? Surely this isn't some sort of joke you're pulling."

It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance: Heljarl and his flute. Taking them both out in one fell swoop would return the oceans back to humanity.

As for Sanya, I can just send her to the Church to heal.

Emotionally, I'm torn—I want to save Sanya, but I can't weigh that against restoring peace to the ocean.

The soldiers encroach and turn their spears on me. I thrust my mace at Heljarl and demand, "Give it back— No, I will make you give me that flute back, Heljarl!"

"You'll...make me? What nonsense is this?! No—just who do you think you are?!"

Heljarl's eyes are rife with the intent to kill. *Intimidation* ripples through the air, smoldering throughout the battlefield.

Every ear in the room hangs on my next word. I decide to identify myself clearly and openly.

"I believe it's time I dropped the act. My name is Gregorio Legins. I am a disciple of the evil god—and a member of the Demon Lord Army's Disciplinary Corps. By order of His Excellency the Demon Lord, I demand you return that sacred treasure to me now!"

Time comes to a halt. The soldiers surrounding me are visibly agitated and stop in their tracks.

Heljarl's eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets as his lip trembles.

“Disciplinary Corps...?! What the hell is that? I’ve never heard of such a thing!!”

Yeah, neither have I.

“Saying you’re unfamiliar with it is not enough to give you a pass, King of the Ocean. His Excellency the Demon Lord is tolerant, just as you are, but he, too, has his limits.”

“Ngh... Preposterous... You’re implying that Kranos has forsaken me?!”

Heljarl takes a step back, perhaps unconsciously.

“Foolish! Absurd! Ludicrous! I am the one controlling these vast and endless oceans! You have no idea the hardships I’ve endured—”

He’s completely bought my act. It’s a good thing demons are so simplistic. But then again, I wouldn’t normally assume a merman to be allied with humans.

It would seem that Heljarl has heard of it after all. Everyone has skeletons in their closet, and demons? Mountains of them.

Heljarl grips his staff and burns his gaze into me.

“Killing the Holy Warrior is Kranos’s greatest wish! I will not be punished for nothing!”

“Hmph. Do you have specific orders, then? Spit them out.”

“Rrrgh...”

The warriors are abuzz, murmuring among themselves. Heljarl bites his lip. Again, the lenience I’ve seen in him thus far is nowhere to be found.

Just as I expected, his plans to attack Cloudburst were not a direct order. In fact, his strategy doesn’t even align with the Demon Lord’s movements thus far.

Suppression through sheer numbers is a frightening strategy indeed, but had it been the Demon Lord’s orders, there would definitely be a unit attacking from on land, and in that case, Sanya would have sniffed it out in the city.

A member of Heljarl’s entourage, standing on his left, screams in a panic, “W-wait! Our king has not betrayed anyone! It’s true that he wasn’t

given a direct order, but has the Demon Lord forgotten his achievements thus far?!”

“You fool. That is for His Excellency to determine, not I. Attempting to understand his forethought is an exercise in absurdity. The only thing you’ll be allowed is to lower your head and await your judgment.”

“!!”

Heljarl’s forces are powerful, but they’re nothing compared to the Demon Lord’s. Speaking in terms of sheer military strength, there are a number of individuals within the Demon Lord Army’s top brass confirmed to be more powerful than Heljarl. And it’s obvious that Heljarl knows this.

“Ridiculous... Disciplinary Corps? And on top of that, you want me to give back Mar Animus?! This item is proof of my birthright as King of the Ocean—it belongs to me. The only thing your lot has done is give it the form of a flute! Have you forgotten that I’m only cooperating with you because I was asked to?! We are equals!!”

“M-my liege...!”

His entourage tries to stop him, but Heljarl continues.

“And in the first place, Mar Animus can only be used by the one who has the blood of the God of Oceans coursing through his veins—me and only me! What could you possibly accomplish by stealing it?!”

Heljarl’s eyes are filled with intense wrath, giving off incredible amounts of bloodlust and intimidation. The staff in his right hand gleams brightly.

That said, he’s really letting his mouth run. This is all highly useful information. I file it away in my brain and focus on what’s most important now.

The flute cannot be used by just anyone. In other words, if Heljarl is killed, then it will be rendered useless. The other option would be to destroy this so-called Mar Animus, a testament to the King of the Ocean’s throne.

I snort with derision at Heljarl’s wrath and respond with a glib remark.

“It can only be used by you... Are you sure about that?”

“?!”

“How long have you believed you are the only one with the blood of the God of Oceans coursing through his veins?”

I’m talking out of my ass here, but Heljarl is speechless. I finally notice a glimpse of fear in his eyes.

It seems I’ve landed a critical hit. Heljarl’s loose lips might prove to be his only virtue.

“It can’t be... Did you possibly search for them?! Why and how?!”

“Judging from your appearance, you already know.”

“But...but...they broke ranks with the Demon Lord! They couldn’t possibly be allied with the likes of you—”

“! My liege! Say no more!!”

One of Heljarl’s troops shouts to stop him from speaking further.

A seadragon knight wearing a purple helmet steps in front of Heljarl and glares, his spear pointed at me.

“My liege... Please calm yourself. This brute is trying to extract information from you.”

“What?!”

Shit, they’ve figured me out. It would’ve been so much easier to kill him if he kept running his mouth...

No matter—I’ve gotten the bare minimum of what I wanted out of him. All that’s left is to bash his brains in.

The seadragon knight calms his tone, yet there’s still a trace of rudeness as he interrogates me.

“Gregorio, are your actions truly per orders from the Demon Lord himself?”

“...”

“Our king and the Demon Lord are compatriots. I cannot fathom that the Demon Lord would punish our king now, when he’s so close to attacking the Holy Warrior.”

The knight speaks with conviction. Perhaps Heljarl and Kranos are closer than I predicted.

Hearing this, Heljarl’s eyes grow wide. Then I see it in them again—pure rage.

This anger far eclipses what I saw earlier. His voice and entire body are quivering with wrath.

“You’re right. It can’t be Kranos... This makeshift plan of yours, your unbelievable strength for a merman... Are you...involved with...that brat?!”

Brat...? Who is he talking about?

There isn’t anyone within the Demon Lord Army’s top brass who fits that description that comes to my mind.

“Heh... So you aren’t as stupid as you seem.”

“Rrrgh... That human, trying to curry favor with Kranos— Just what is he trying to do to me, the King of the Ocean—?”

“ ... ”

Human?! Did he just say human?! Is there a human in the Demon Lord’s army’s inner circle?

If I could, I’d be holding my head in my hands. Of course, there are humans who secretly collaborate with demon kind behind the scenes, but this brat Heljarl is talking about can’t be one of them. It’s clearly one of Kranos’s elite—a human with the authority to plot an assassination attempt on Heljarl, who controls the entire ocean. Whoever this human being is, for them to hold that kind of authority and be allowed to wield it, they must certainly be in Kranos’s favor.

Nothing like this has ever happened before. Can the current Demon Lord’s erratic movements be chalked up to this human member of his inner circle?

Heljarl isn’t even listening to me anymore, nor is he focused on me. His

golden eyes are searing his wrath into this so-called brat, through my being. I probably won't be able to get any other valuable information from him at this rate.

Sanya brandishes her knife as Heljarl screams, "Your...merman appearance...is a fake, too! What preposterous mimicry!"

"I'll leave that up to your imagination. If you surrender now, I will go easy on you. This I promise."

I raise my mace to encourage his surrender, but Heljarl immediately screams in retort.

"Kill him! Let the seas run red with his blood and beat him down before Kranos's very eyes!!"

"So you resist... I have no choice, then. I will need only to deliver your head to His Excellency myself."

Seadragon knights generally carry only spears. They're useless in a free-for-all.

What's more, this isn't an enemy camp—it simply lacks the equipment, preparations, and anything suited for battle in general.

"...D-don't let him escape! Protect the king!" the seadragon knight screams, and the soldiers flanking Heljarl step out in front of him. Sanya leads them.

She's leading with her right foot, her stance ready to respond to anything. Her chest rises and falls imperceptibly. Her breathing doesn't reveal any anxiety—her arms and legs are perfectly in tune.

Seadragon knights are polished warriors themselves, but they don't hold a candle to Sanya. She can snipe from midrange distance, and her movements are a whirlwind of tricky maneuvers. Her skill with a knife is the real threat.

How many scouts out there can manage to parry my mace? Depending on the situation, she could even defeat me. However, Sanya isn't that powerful from this range, and not with her current weapon. Nothing to be afraid of.

Sanya watches my every move.

"Your plan was pathetic, but you were right!" Heljarl screams. "Now,

Gregorio. Can you defeat my subordinates? Can you mow down this many of them? Witness my power as king and burn the image into your mind as you die a pitiful death!”

“Please. I lack any emotion.”

“?!”

Demons are the enemies of crusaders. They capture the weak as hostages on a daily basis.

I bring my mace down toward Heljarl’s head without a moment’s hesitation. Sanya meets my attack with her knife.

A knife is paltry next to a mace. Sanya’s not truly parrying my blows—she’s improvising her own counterattack without getting overpowered by me.

She manages to deflect another one of my blows, but I can see that her hand is shaking as she attacks. She uses her right arm to deflect a high kick I quickly unleash, and her thin body levitates for an instant. I can feel her muscles groaning in agony. Her slender frame then does a flip to avoid my next attack.

Sanya’s abilities are not well suited to defense. Especially not against me.

“It’s a shame. She’s an outsider. This was a done deal the moment she stood before me. Her only remaining purpose in life is to become a sacrifice for my god. Did you really think that taking her hostage would work on me?”

“...How vile!”

I don’t really want to kill her, but Sanya became a problem the second she was brainwashed.

Crusaders make their living by acting with resolve. I immediately determine that her life isn’t worth more than annihilating Heljarl.

Sanya looks at me, and suddenly, her expression reverts back to normal. Her face falls and she screams out, nearly in tears. However, she’s still facing me directly—did Heljarl restore only her consciousness?

“Nnngh... Ow! Boss! Stop it! I’m sorry! W-wait—you’re fighting for real here?!”

“Your plan is worthless. The incompetent will die.”

“I’m conscious! I’m fully awake, y’know! Boss?! Boss?!”

Despite her tearful voice, Sanya extends her knife toward the hand my mace is in with one elegant movement.

Perhaps because her consciousness has returned, the attack is pitiful. I step back to dodge it and slam my mace into her stomach.

“Guh...”

Sanya’s body floats through the water. Her eyes bulge from her head and a scream of agony escapes her slack-jawed lips.

She flies toward a group of soldiers who scramble to avoid her. There’s no one there to break her fall, and she simply smashes into the wall behind them.

Heljarl’s eyes go wide; he must have thought he could create a longer diversion. The soldiers themselves are shaken up, too.

The ones who looked about ready to attack me from behind are having second thoughts.

“Absurd... You attacked without even a moment’s hesitation?!”

“Want to try and sic those mermaids behind you on me, too?”

“Rrrgh... Bring it on!”

The horde of troops leaps at me all at once—from both flanks: the front and the rear.

I ignore them and kick off the floor, my gaze locked on Heljarl.



Fourth Report

A Full Account of the Hero's Support in the Water Capital

The entrance to the sunken temple is just as deserted as last time. The guards present even look a bit bored.

Rabi, in her thick hood, sits on the staircase railing and looks up, noticing Toudou's party. She gazes at Toudou with her deep-red eyes and smiles faintly.

Limis is also wearing a robe, and she scowls upon seeing Rabi.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Rabi. We're counting on you today," says Toudou.

"Yes. Let's get this taken care of."

Rabi hops down from the railing. Limis looks around suspiciously before asking, "Your outfit... Did you wear the mermaid armor like you're supposed to?"

"Of course I did... I can't use magic, so..."

To prove her point, Rabi lowers her hood and removes her robe.

Limis can't believe her eyes at what appears from under it. Droopy rabbit ears

flop out from inside the hood, and she has on a pair of red-framed glasses they've never seen her wear before, all to Limis's amazement. But above all else —

“Wh-what is that...?”

“It's mermaid armor—is something wrong?”

Rabi flutters her sleeves, answering calmly.

Her outfit doesn't look anything like a swimsuit at first glance. It's more like a thin, hooded white jacket, and it keeps the least amount of her skin exposed from her chest down to her stomach. Only her bare legs are visible.

She has a pouch for items hanging from her belt and a massive blade almost like a machete, perhaps for harvesting purposes, that sticks out like a sore thumb.

At any rate, her outfit offers leagues more coverage than what everyone else was given. Astounded at the difference in their swimsuits, Limis exclaims, “What...on earth...?! You're totally covered up!”

“It's that type of mermaid armor, I suppose...”

“And I got stuck with this! Look! What the heck?!”

Limis desperately throws her robe to the ground. Rabi's eyes go wide at the red bikini she's wearing.

Limis's body is always covered by her robe, and her skin is pure white, with no trace of any sun exposure. The red bikini against her skin is blinding. The cloth covers only the bare minimum of her breasts and lower body, leaving all four limbs exposed to the elements.

She grips her imposing staff, which is just a weird accessory at this point.

The temple's guards are staring, and Limis glowers at them, shooing away their glances.

Limis is an aristocrat, and as an aristocrat's daughter, she must uphold a standard of feminine modesty. She has never once dressed like this before.

“...Th-this! This is what I'm talking about! Wh-why is only yours so modest?!”

“I threatened—er, pleaded with Zolan and managed to convince him. I’m not like you, Limis—I don’t have anything I can show off with pride.”

“Does it look like I’m proud of anything here?! Ahhhhhh!! I should’ve been more convincing, too!!”

Garnet is holding on to Limis’s smooth, bare shoulder for dear life. It’s in the same position as always, but its grabbing on to Limis’s bare skin is tickling her.

Toudou looks at Limis as she quivers in anger and then at Rabi, who’s unperturbed. Next, she turns to Aria and whispers in her ear, “...Hey, Zolan said he was saving on materials, right? You don’t think the entire reason for that was because of—”

“...I think it’s probably best that you don’t say anything to Limis.”

Aria’s cheek twitches as she watches Limis and Rabi’s exchange.

Glacia throws off her robe without a trace of embarrassment. Her swimsuit is a cute light-blue number with frills.

Limis has definitely drawn the short stick this time. Toudou can wear her armor over the bikini, and Aria’s is blue and therefore doesn’t stand out as much as Limis’s.

Drawing people’s attention won’t really matter once they enter the sunken temple, however.

“Limis, leave it be. If you’re embarrassed, let’s just go down there and get this over with.”

“I know that! Geez!”

Limis scrunches up her shoulders and steps onto the underwater staircase, descending slowly.

“Okay, let’s all go. I want to get this over with in one day, if possible.”

Dressed in full armor, Toudou sticks her hand out toward Rabi. Rabi furrows her brow and timidly takes Toudou’s hand.

The mermaid armor is functioning perfectly. This temple sunken to the bottom of the ocean is a resplendent, magical sight, and the rest of the party

can hear Toudou audibly gasp as she leads them. The sunken temple is eerily silent, like they've come to the far reaches of the universe.

From atop Limis's shoulder, Garnet emits a soft glow underwater, almost as if on fire.

Rabi already knows the general structure of the sunken temple and the monsters nearby from the prior reconnaissance Sanya conducted. This shouldn't be an especially difficult assignment.

There are a few things missing from Sanya's reconnaissance, but she is nonetheless an excellent scout. As her fellow apprentice, Rabi knows this full well. Her heart pounds in her chest and she subdues it, establishing composure as a voice suddenly enters her head.

"Rabi, can you hear me?"

"Yes. No problem."

"Good... I'm not able to reach Ares, so I wasn't sure."

Amelia's voice rings clearly in Rabi's mind. She's a little bit worried about this job, but there's no reason to call it quits. There's no way that her boss, Ares, will lose that easily.

"...Understood. I will exercise caution. If anything happens, please get in touch with me."

Garnet is burning brightly. Rabi takes another look into the sunken temple's depths, dark and void of any signs of life, and frowns.

She had been expecting as much, but it's really hard to get a read on anything in this place. Without any prior reconnaissance, it would be nearly impossible to explore down here.

Just then, Aria blinks repeatedly and stares down at her hands.

"...This is such a strange feeling. I'm not cold, and I'm not in pain. And we can even speak."

"Yeah. It really is...kinda different from being on land."

Toudou cocks her head to the side in wonder, unsure of how to accurately

explain how she feels different. Rabi sighs and says, “For now, let’s head for the deepest part of the temple, as discussed. We don’t know when Mermares will show himself.”

Rabi heard that Toudou saw him only from a distance, but she must be traumatized, as her expression turns grim.

“...I’ve been meaning to ask you, Rabi, but this Mermares—did you come up with that name?” asks Limis.

“Yes, I did. What of it?”

“...No, it’s nothing... Just wondering.”

Limis doesn’t seem to think that makes much sense, and she turns back around to face forward.

The monsters that appear in the sunken temple are completely different from any that Toudou and her party have battled so far—fish with massive fangs, starfish that shoot powerful jets of water, a giant octopus almost as big as Toudou, and massive jellyfish that sway to and fro like ghosts.

That said, the party has a wealth of experience in battle from their journey thus far, and none of these creatures proves to be formidable in the least.

Toudou blocks a jet of water from one of the starfish with her cracked shield and proceeds to slice it in half with the holy sword Ex.

Blood mottles the water. The bisected starfish twitches for a moment before becoming still. Limis looks at Aria, who’s fighting a blue crab with her sword next to Toudou, and says, “...Oddly enough, I’m starting to get hungry.”

“Monsters are all quite toxic, so you’d best not eat them,” Rabi answers conscientiously and Limis shrugs.

“Our last priest used to eat them. He said he could purify them himself, so it was fine.”

“...That priest sounds depraved.”

“Well, our party’s able to carry a lot of food, so ever since he left, we haven’t been forced to eat many monsters... We’ve mostly been up against golems and undead anyway.”

Limis must be reminiscing over their travels thus far—her voice is tinged with nostalgia.

Having killed the starfish, Toudou goes to back up Aria, who slices a deep gash into the side of the blue crab's thick exoskeleton. She chops off its giant claws as it foams at the mouth, trying to escape, and proceeds to rip it apart with her sword.

Having defeated her target, Aria sheathes her sword uncomfortably.

"They're quite solid."

"You should aim for the joints. If you're attacking from the front, you'll need a blunt-force weapon."

Toudou also sheathes the holy sword Ex, which glitters dimly, and turns to Rabi.

"...What's this crab monster called?"

"Ummm..... Iron Crab. It's a type of crab with an armored shell as hard as iron. A staple of Mermares's diet. He tears them open with his bare hands and devours them."

Rabi appears to consider her answer for a moment before responding, and Aria's shoulders twitch as she looks doubtful.

"I've never heard of a monster by that name before..."

"Hey, Rabi, did you just make that up on the spot?" asks Limis.

"I specialize in highly powerful monsters. The wimpy monsters around here are outside the scope of my research."

"So you *were* just making it up... Ah, Glacia! Don't eat that! You'll get a stomachache!"

Before anyone noticed, Glacia sat down next to the Iron Crab and pulled the meat from its shell with her fingers, bringing it toward her mouth. Toudou goes over to stop her.

Seeing this, Limis's shoulders relax, as if the poison were sucked out of her body, and looks around the area.

“...I don’t see any elemental spirits, though. High-ranking spirits should be easy to recognize...”

“Perhaps there’s a chance there aren’t any around here?”

“They must be hiding somewhere...”

When establishing a covenant with a high-ranking elemental spirit, it’s not the user who chooses the spirit but rather, the spirit chooses their user.

There’s a definite chance they’re already silently evaluating the mage in their presence who’s entered the sunken temple.

Elemental spirits are nature personified. Trying to catch a glimpse of one that’s hiding is nearly impossible, even for Limis.

Limis stops herself from voicing the anxiety that swims into her mind and says in her most positive voice, “Well, there’s no use worrying about it right now. Let’s push forward.”

The party defeats various monsters and proceeds according to the map for one hour without incident before arriving at the inner reaches of the sunken temple. It’s a simple room lacking in any extraneous adornments.

The floors and walls are stone, but in the center of the floor, there is a magic circle the party has never seen before. It’s ancient, but the motif has been preserved and is still easily identifiable.

However, the magic circle is completely empty.

Limis approaches it with caution and says out loud, almost as if speaking to herself, “...This is a magic circle for summoning spirits. Not for confining them.”

The magic circle somewhat resembles the one in the basement of the Friedia estate, where Garnet was confined, but this one has the opposite effect.

Limis is facing a spirit here today, and naturally, she’ll use an approach similar to what she used with Garnet. In other words, Garnet was confined, so it couldn’t leave, and this magic circle will serve the same purpose—just through different means.

“Power must be called upon from our surroundings and accumulated in this circle, attracting the spirit. It’s a kind of ritual that calls to them in this temple.

The temple itself is a giant magical apparatus. Magic circles are common enough, but you rarely see one this massive.”

The letters engraved around the magical seal’s circumference are the script of ancient mages still not fully understood to this day.

Limis kneels by the circle and traces it with her fingertips before looking back up.

Judging from the temple’s design, this location is the easiest place in which to accumulate power. It should be ideal, but they haven’t detected any spirits yet.

Garnet lets out a little moan and stirs. Limis stands up and looks at Toudou.

“...Guess there aren’t any here, huh?”

“We’ll have to search the entire area... We’re not restricted to any one area of the temple anyway. It’ll be like a game of elemental spirit hide-and-seek...only extremely challenging. This is textbook training for an elementalist.”

“We’ve got no other choice. This could take us a couple of days, so let’s get on it.”

Limis sounds dejected, and Toudou nods at her with conviction.

The party abandons the idea of finding any elemental spirits quickly and instead begins to search every room.

The hide-and-seek is rough going. Perhaps in order to allow the spirits to move freely, the rooms of the sunken temple generally don’t have doors. The majority of them are empty, but some contain monsters, so the party has to stay on their toes.

Toudou peers into the fifth room and slays the monsters that appear before letting out a sigh.

“...Geez, this place is massive. Ridiculously massive.”

“We wouldn’t have even gotten close without the mermaid armor.”

The group still has it easy. Normally, tackling a place like this requires a well-thought-out strategy for dealing with being underwater.

If they look carefully, the party is able to notice human bones scattered here

and there throughout the temple.

They're the bones of mages who came to establish covenants with elemental spirits, just like Toudou's party has. They must have been especially skilled mages to make it this far without mermaid armor, yet now, as mere skeletons, it proved to be meaningless.

The party occasionally spots a few rusted knives or dilapidated staffs on the ground, but none of them looks legitimately useful.

Rabi scoops up a gold coin at the end of the hallway and examines both sides, saying, "...This wasn't originally a place that had many human visitors. There are a lot of odd folk among mages..."

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

Magic isn't supposed to be a realm for humankind to get involved in, after all. In the past, some countries even went as far as to ban the study of magic.

Power comes at a price. You could definitely say that playing a game of hide-and-seek isn't such a high one to pay.

Toudou inspects another room, making sure not to step on a number of red starfish stuck to the floor, and shrugs.

"Nothing here, either."

"There just aren't any clues. Do we even know what water elemental spirits look like?"

"...I'm pretty sure they mimic aquatic monsters. They might also appear in human form, though..." Limis answers, and Aria looks down at the starfish that Toudou was avoiding. Limis hastily adds, "Oh, but still, you should be able to tell they're different. Elemental spirits aren't living beings, so...no matter what they end up mimicking, there should be some kind of distinction. Also, just because they're a spirit doesn't mean they're limited to singular form, either—"

"...I see. Well, we'll gain some battle experience this way... As long as we watch out for Mermare—"

Rabi watches the party converse back and forth and masks her expression as she clutches her sleeve.

...This is definitely going to take longer than anticipated.

She knew it was going to be a chore, but she had hoped to finish this up as quickly as possible.

The longer they're down here, the higher the chances are of something going wrong. Bringing Rabi with them is just added insurance—insurance for if and when a monster that Toudou can't handle appears.

Not to mention, Rabi's boss is currently unreachable. Having come this far, all she can do is pray that nothing out of the ordinary happens.

Rabi stares at the group, and her eyes meet Limis's gaze.

"By the way, Rabi, can you fight?"

"Erk... Do I look like I can?"

Rabi clutches her arms to her chest and glances up at Limis pitifully.

Limis smirks at how vulnerable she looks.

"...Doesn't seem like there's much to be afraid of in here, though."

"I'd rather you not expect much from me."

"But if you can't fight, then how do you normally get around in your travels?"

"I always hire an escort... Oh—that huge jellyfish has poison that causes paralysis, so be careful."

A giant jellyfish floats toward the group, about to attack from above. Toudou rushes to slash off its outstretched tentacles.

Rabi steps back a few paces, outside its tentacles' reach, and offers some encouragement.

"You must never let your guard down. I don't expect any particularly strong monsters to appear in this temple, but it's hard to detect their presence here... Be careful of monsters attacking from above."

"O-okay..."

Toudou braces herself, cleaving through the transparent jellyfish's innards.

She has potential but lacks experience. And her level is too low. Judging by

her current amount of strength, she'd be considered upper-intermediate or maybe, taking her equipment's status into account along with a little leniency, lower-advanced. As a soldier for hire, she'd be a decent find, but as the Holy Warrior, a massive undertaking, she's highly inadequate.

Rabi gets it now, and as she watches Toudou continue to search for elemental spirits, she comes to a conclusion—she's underdeveloped.

Toudou's well accustomed to fighting monsters, and she can defeat almost any that spawn near human civilization, but should any sort of accident occur, she'll be dead meat. That's where Toudou is at right now. Rabi understands why her boss hired her to be an escort.

The ranks of the Demon Lord's army are far denser than those of humanity's forces. If Toudou was placed on the front lines right now, she wouldn't last more than a month.

Humanity's strength lies in their sheer numbers. Only a small handful of polished gems are holding up the entire mountain of stones.

Re-creating these gems through artificial methods is extremely difficult. It's a matter of destiny.

Even with the most thorough backup, when death comes calling, there's no escape. In reality, there have been many disciples of Bran Chatre, but including Rabi and Sanya, only a few still live.

"Have you been able to reach the boss?"

"...No. This is the first time...anything like this has happened..."

Rabi conceals her shock as Amelia's voice suddenly rings in her head.

Their boss is a genuine abomination, someone so insanely determined as to cross the ocean and even possess the sheer strength to pull it off.

He summoned the nerve to calmly face one of the leaders of the Demon Lord's army. More than anything, he's almost *too* used to fighting formidable enemies.

Among the clergy, if you get to the top, you tend to go off the rails, they say.

If he was to slip in and disguise himself as her ally only to wait for the

opportunity to snuff her out, Rabi wouldn't have a sliver of confidence that she could evade him—and she always has her guard up.

Even against the Demon Lord Army's inner circle, if a single punch could fell them, it would be his. Rabi believed as much.

Until this morning, that is.

"I have a bad feeling about this..."

"..."

A number of hours have already passed since Rabi and company have made their way down to the sunken temple.

Not being able to contact Ares for this long is a definite cause for concern.

"Rabi, is something the matter?"

"...No."

Rabi must look grim—Toudou asks after her and she lifts her head back up.

Maybe she should get the party to temporarily evacuate... But they're not in any immediate danger yet.

Her boss probably wouldn't be mad at her if she decided to withdraw now, but as long as she's getting paid, she needs to cover all her bases. If anything, since her boss is currently absent, Rabi needs to make the best decision possible.

"If you're tired, should we take a break?"

"No, please don't worry yourself. I might look exhausted, but I'm still fine..."

Rabi shakes her head as Toudou speaks to her with concern.

Although maybe not quite to Sanya's degree, even Rabi has a sense of pride—only about a speck of it, though.

The party continues through the dreary temple, making sure to thoroughly check each and every room.

Limis doesn't even know what number room they're on now as she mumbles to herself, unable to make sense of it all.

“Not one whiff of them. We’ve been walking for ages...and any water elemental spirits should have already noticed us... If they’re interested in a covenant, then they ought to be getting close by now, I think.”

A school of small fish swims slowly down the hallway. Limis reflexively looks in their direction, but they’re just fish.

The sunken temple is filled with a whole variety of creatures, but none of them has appeared to be a water elemental spirit just yet.

However, they still need to check each and every room in this building, and it’s eating up a large portion of Toudou and company’s mental energy.

“Is establishing a covenant with a high-ranking spirit always this tough?”

“Hmm... I’d say we’re fortunate to at least know that they’re in this location. The hardest thing is the actual negotiation that happens when you finally find one...,” Limis replies as she lets out a short sigh.

The criteria needed to catch an elemental spirit’s interest differ for each individual one.

Powerful mages may be able to unconditionally establish a covenant with some, while others demand a tribute. Sometimes it involves a training exercise with a specific goal, and sometimes—as in Garnet’s case—the reason for establishing a successful covenant remains a mystery.

“The negotiation itself should be a little bit easier for Nao, who has the divine protection of the Eight Spirit Kings, or myself, who’s already established a covenant with a high-ranking elemental, but—!”

In that instant, the entire sunken temple faintly shakes.

Toudou looks up and scans her surroundings. Aria unsheathes her blade and keeps alert.

The school of small fish scatters and flees. The sunken temple shuddered for only a moment.

“...Was that...an earthquake?”

“...Or maybe the workings of the spirits?”

The group huddles together and listens closely. Aria puts her hand on the wall to check for vibrations. It's simply flat and cold, as always, and she can't feel any additional trembling.

What was that?

Toudou is scrambling to inspect their surroundings when her eyes meet Rabi's.

"...Um... Rabi?"

"...We have to go."

Rabi's ears are twitching rapidly with abandon. Her deep-crimson eyes dart around in terror. She clutches at her chest so tightly that her hands turn white, and her voice trembles. She was solid as a rock until just a few moments ago—the sudden change is staggering.

"Huh...?!"

"I can sense a formidable monster. Come, start running... Let's get out of here right now. We'll die!! Come on! Don't stand there looking foolish—run!!"

The group makes a mad dash for the exit. They ignore the monsters they encounter, only slaying those that block their path.

Toudou is leading the pack and quickly glances back, yelling, "What the heck is going on—?! Rabi?!"

"Not important! Hurry! Run! Something's coming!"

Toudou has no idea what's happening, but Rabi, who's always been so calm, is shouting impatiently at them—a true indication that this is a genuine emergency.

Limis momentarily stops in her tracks, intending to help Rabi, who's currently taking up the rear with shaky steps. Rabi slams right into her.

"Watch it—!"

As Limis cries out, the entire building shudders again—much stronger than the first.

A massive two-meter-long fish monster in their path becomes frightened and

scurries off down the hallway.

“Is it...coming from the outside?”

“The building...is being attacked...by someone of tremendous strength. What...the...?”

Rabi is green in the face and her gaze darts back and forth. Her ears are twitching wildly, furtively trying to detect the presence of whatever’s come upon them.

The sunken temple shakes again, but this time it’s not a single tremor. Twice, three times, all in succession, the shock waves are increasing in strength.

“This is crazy... What sort of attack is strong enough to make the whole building shake—?”

Toudou is dumfounded. Rabi’s breathing is ragged—she looks about ready to keel over as she replies, “And...it’s getting closer.”

“Getting...closer?”

“It’s an aquatic monster... Fighting one here would be...disadvantageous. If we’re going to meet it head-on, we must...do so aboveground.”

Rabi says all this so suddenly and without warning, and Toudou is unable to make heads or tails of the situation. She takes a deep breath, and her expression returns to a state of composure. Nothing good will happen if they’re all in a flurry.

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but the exit is close. Everyone—remain calm. Rabi, can you detect the monster’s presence?”

“...Yes. Within a certain distance, that is.”

Hearing this, Toudou smiles at everyone in an effort to give them peace of mind before quickly doling out instructions.

“Okay—Aria and I will cut through anything blocking our path. Rabi, I need you to let us know when the monster is nearly on top of us. Limis, you make sure that Glacia and Rabi don’t go astray.”

Toudou has a mental map of this place. She should be able to lead the party

to safety.

“...It’s breaking through walls and getting closer.”

“What a horrific creature.”

Rabi closes her eyes for a few moments before speaking, and Aria’s cheek twitches in response.

The walls of the sunken palace are sturdy. Even though they look worn, they’ve managed to hold up after all these years.

There’s no chance that Aria and Toudou can do what this creature is doing and break down the walls to advance forward.

The party falls back in line and starts to run again. Perhaps the monsters are afraid of whatever’s attacking from outside, because they’re no longer appearing in Toudou’s path.

Toudou and the others sprint up a flight of stairs. There’s no sign of the booming sounds of destruction dissipating—it would seem the abomination can’t suppress its anger.

A crazy thought begins to enter everyone’s minds: Maybe the entire temple will come crashing down upon them.

At last, the group arrives at a familiar straight passageway.

They can make it. Just as Toudou heaves a sigh of relief, Limis, who’s taking up the rear guard, emits a shrill, piercing scream.

“Ah...! Nao, look!”

“Huh?! Gyah!!”

Toudou whirls around, and something brushes her cheek. A bluish white light passes just next to her.

Aria stops dead in her tracks and watches the light as it passes over Toudou and quickly disappears into the distance. It’s similar to the ball of light they saw in the Great Tomb, but it burns more brightly.

“Wh-what was that?!”

“An elemental spirit! A really high-ranking water spirit!!”

“Wha—?!”

By the time Limis erupts in excitement, not a trace remains of the light or its shadow.

Yet after it departs, Toudou can feel a powerful magical energy resonating in the room.

Blinking in astonishment, she traces the path the spirit took.

“What?! A spirit? But why?!”

“It left...”

The presence of magical energy dissipates over time. That said, if Toudou follows its vestiges right in this very moment, it should lead her directly to the spirit. She squints, trying to search for any clues, when Rabi shakes her by the shoulders from behind.

“Right now, our top priority is escaping this place!”

“Y-yeah, you’re right..... I don’t know if we’re lucky or cursed...”

“It won’t make any difference if we don’t make it out of here alive!”

The elemental spirit they had been searching high and low for was just here. If they let it go now, there’s no telling when they’ll find it again.

However, it’s not worth dying over. More importantly, they now have Rabi in their party—even though she wasn’t originally involved in their quest to defeat the Demon Lord. Taking that into consideration, it’s not easy for Toudou to make the risky choice.

Looking forward, there is a fork in the road: three paths that split off from three separate pillars.

The spirit’s vestiges veer off to the left. The exit is straight ahead. If they go straight, they’ll soon come to the same staircase they descended in order to enter the temple.

The end is in sight. Just as Toudou starts to run, the most powerful shock wave yet rocks the surrounding area.

“?!”

Fragments of the ceiling start to float down through the water. Limis ducks reflexively.

The tremendous force and noise are different from earlier. Not closer, per se, but clearly coming from a different kind of impact.

Not long afterward, the water starts to whirlpool. A rippling current... The force of the impact slams through the party's bodies.

If they're not careful, they could get washed away. Toudou quickly jabs her sword into the wall, rebuking her body for nearly being swept away, and grabs onto Aria by the arm. Aria in turns grabs onto Limis, who embraces Glacia to protect her. Rabi also grabs onto Limis's shoulders and braces against the impact.

The torrential stream of water lasts for only a moment. The impact subsides, and quiet returns to the room.

Limis's eyes are wide with fear. Toudou pulls her sword from the wall and inspects the situation, her face pale.

"Rrrgh... Wh-what was that?!"

No one was hurt, but the impact was tremendous—like being rocked by a storm at sea.

Rabi eventually answers Toudou, her expression severe. Her glasses have slipped down her nose, and she pushes them back up. Her bloodshot red eyes are focused on the hallway, still filled with vestiges of the spirit they saw.

"The elemental spirit...is fighting, it seems. It's fighting the monster that's attacking the temple. I believe...it has deemed the attacker...to be trespassing on its territory. I can feel it. It's very...very, very close."

"The elemental spirit...is fighting?"

There is another sharp sound that echoes in the pit of her stomach. It's not an impact like before, but just as Rabi said, it's extremely close. If there weren't any walls around them, Toudou's sure she would be able to see it—that's how close it is.

At this proximity, Toudou can feel two forces colliding. She can't tell which is

which, but she knows that they're both formidable masses of energy.

Looking up, her eyes meet Limis's, whose face is similarly pale. Her shoulders are trembling.

"What are you talking about? Fighting? Something's able to rival a high-ranking elemental spirit here, in its own home? Elemental spirits are nature incarnate, y'know! They're practically gods! What kind of abomination would be willing to attack one head-on...?!"

Limis's voice is shaking, and Rabi, her face just as ghastly white, replies, "There's no...rivalry..."

Her expression is twisted with sheer terror, like she's staring death in the face.

"The elemental spirit...the guardian of this temple... It will...lose... The enemy it's up against is...no mere monster!!"

Rabi is shrieking in horror. As if to quell her voice, the largest shock wave yet rocks the entire temple. A sordid, deep rumble threatens to bring the entire structure crashing down. Something has ruptured, and the destructive din shows no sign of abating.

"This is bad... Run! Please...now! Hurry! Hurry!!" Rabi screams, out of breath. But she's already too late.

Toudou's gaze locks onto a figure that appears down the hallway from around a corner.

The faint light reveals its full form. At first glance, it appears humanlike, wracking Toudou with an extraordinary sense of terror.

Its jet-black robe lends an air of nobility, and it grips a massive staff in its hand. Its pale-blue hair is flecked with blood. It has its face turned down, so Toudou can't fully grasp its appearance, but it doesn't appear to be anything especially peculiar.

Razor-sharp claws protruding from both feet clack against the floor. Even without the claws, it's obvious that this figure is not of human ilk.

An image of the vampire they fought in the Great Forest of the Vale pops into

Toudou's mind. There's still over a hundred meters separating them, but its presence and sheer overpowering nature cause Toudou to crumple in fear. Perhaps it's injured; using its staff for support, it slowly walks toward her, nearly stumbling and falling, but Toudou's instincts are ringing with alarm bells louder than ever before. She unconsciously falls into a battle stance and points her sword at the abomination.

"It's not...a follower of darkness?" Toudou mumbles in spite of herself and reflexively puts a white-knuckle grip on her shield. In the next instant, a pale beam of light pierces her right through the chest.

"?!"

Aria's eyes bulge out of their sockets, and Limis screams. Toudou quickly moves to intercept the light with the palm of her hand as her sword falls to the ground with a clang.

Aria rushes to Toudou's side to hold her up. Limis also hurries over and examines her.

"Nao, are you okay?!"

"It...doesn't hurt...? It's just a beam of light."

Everyone thought Nao had been attacked, but the light was neither painful nor hot. It was just light.

The source of the beam is in the abomination's hand. As Toudou sidesteps to the left, the light bends to follow her.

What's going on here?

Toudou is extremely confused, and the abomination slowly lifts its head to look up at her. Rabi rushes to hide behind her back, terrified.

Its face is distinctly humanlike; a dark-red gash runs across its forehead, its hair is disheveled, and one of its eyes is colored bloodred. It's a face that boasts handsome features, and yet it has a certain otherworldliness.

The abomination slams its staff into the ground, and its eyes meet Toudou's. For a moment, her mind goes completely blank.

Toudou's past meeting with the vampire was a chance encounter, and she

wasn't the one fighting it.

This is different—this creature clearly recognizes her. And in the moment their eyes meet, she realizes—

—the very abomination in front of her is an enemy of humanity.

The figure opens its mouth. Its voice has a wistful timbre, like it's just laid eyes upon its deepest desire or as if it's at last discovered a bitter enemy it's spent ages searching for.

"Finally...I've found you. You are...the Holy Warrior."

Rabi's voice trembles as she whispers its name.

"The sea demon...Heljarl... Wh-what is he doing here...?!"

"The sea demon?! Then that means...he's with the Demon Lord's army!!"

Toudou knew of Heljarl before, but given his sudden appearance, she didn't put two and two together.

Aria quickly got a grasp of the situation from Rabi's murmuring, and when she blurts out the words "*Demon Lord's army*," Toudou finally gets it.

Heljarl has wounds all over his body, to the point where it's obvious even at a glance. His armor is warped and dented, and his left arm must be broken—it's not moving properly at all. The jet-black robe he's wearing is bloodstained and ripped all over.

But in spite of all this, the man before them is an absolute monster—on a completely different level.

He's in far from tip-top shape, but even then, his life force is overwhelming.

Toudou carefully picks up the holy sword Ex off the floor and points it at Heljarl.

Even though Heljarl has yet to act, his fearsome, intimidating presence alone sends cold sweat pouring down Toudou's body. She hefts her shield to protect Limis and Rabi behind her.

"Y-you're one of the leaders of the Demon Lord's army...?"

"You have arrived, hero. The Holy Warrior. The one destined to vanquish the

Demon Lord. The hero..... You—*you're* the hero?!”

Toudou has left herself wide open, but Heljarl simply watches her. The light he beamed at Toudou from his left hand has vanished.

His glistening eyes observe Toudou’s every feature—he doesn’t even glance at Aria or Limis at her side.

Her form, equipment, face, the sort of presence she commands—once Heljarl has taken it all in, he asks, voice quaking, “Is this...all you are?”

“...?”

His expression changes, and his features warp into something utterly demonic. The impact of this shift alone hits Toudou like a ton of bricks.

It’s a fearsome level of bloodlust, or perhaps more like an impulse. It resembles Howl, one of the spells Toudou has learned, except on a much different scale.

Toudou firmly grounds herself and braces her shield, taking the effect head-on.

“Guh...!”

“This...*this* is...the hero? The hero we’ve taken such precautions against? This is it?! What kind of sick joke—?! Are you telling me I’ve lost everything just to take down a peon like youuuuuuuu?!?!?!?”

“?!?”

The floor creaks and groans as fissures erupt all around Heljarl.

The magical energy surging from his body is on an order of magnitude unlike anything Limis has ever seen—her face is frozen stiff in awe.

Yet, Heljarl isn’t actually doing anything. The magical energy within him is simply escaping his body as he loses his composure.

Pure magical energy on its own shouldn’t be capable of such destruction. However, with the amount of bloodlust Heljarl has mixed in, it’s enough to cause the building to start splitting at the seams.

Heljarl is no longer looking at Toudou. A horrendous scream rips through the

sunken temple.

“This is madness! Absolute lunacy! Why, Kranos?! Why someone like this?! Why did you turn that hideous aberration, that indestructible fiend, that wicked abomination upon me all for a hero like this?! Are we...not the comrades I thought we were after all?!”

Heljarl finds himself at a loss, stuck dead in his tracks.

However, his murderous intent and wrath are genuine. Limis whispers to Toudou from behind, “His...magical energy... Nao, he’s a mage. We’re not safe at this distance.”

“I don’t know why, but he seems confused. And he’s heavily injured. If we’re going to defeat him—now’s the time. As a mage, he will need a moment to prepare his attacks... I will make the preemptive strike. Nao, with the holy sword Ex...you’ll be able to break through any evil god’s divine protection.”

Heljarl is now approximately thirty meters away. At this distance, with Aria’s physical faculties, she could reach within striking range in only a few seconds.

Their enemy is among the upper echelons of the Demon Lord’s army. He’s astronomically high-level, but if Aria can create even a momentary gap, Toudou will be able to go straight for his neck.

“Let’s take him down in one blow. Unfortunately...we’ve only got this one chance. But it’s...a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!”

Ending the sea demon’s reign here and now would be a small step forward for humanity.

This opponent is a demon who remains unrivaled on the oceanic battlefield. Normally, he would prove to be immensely difficult to take on in a fight.

As Aria finishes speaking, Toudou gives a quick nod and glares at the wailing Heljarl.

“I’m...his target. There’s no escape—we must fight.”

Toudou observes Heljarl intently as he goes mad with rage.

The power of the Demon Lord Army’s inner circle is greater than she ever imagined, but the demon they’re up against is wounded. That means he’s full of

openings.

Toudou hasn't made this apparent to Heljarl yet. From his tone of voice, he's clearly being negligent.

The spine-tingling terror that was seizing Toudou's entire being has already subsided. She's oddly composed as she re-grips her blade.

Rabi grabs Toudou by the sleeve and says softly, "Toudou. The sea demon...he can manipulate water. Your attacks—won't work on him here."

"Manipulate water... Then what do we do—?"

Rabi opens her eyes wide in response and shudders before continuing. Toudou can see her own grim reflection in Rabi's stunning ruby-red eyes.

"Normally, I meant to say. Normally, your attacks won't work on him. That's why...he's let his...guard down. At least...I'm pretty sure. Toudou, you have...divine protection. You cannot, absolutely cannot fail at this."

Heljarl continues to bellow in anguish, and his gaze pierces Toudou and her party. Although he and Rabi do not make direct eye contact, she latches onto Toudou's arm tightly from sheer dread. Rabi whispers into her ear, tickling Toudou and causing her to shudder even more.

"If you...fail...we're all...dead. I'll—I'll go with you. At the very least...I'll be a decoy."

"B-but—"

"There's...no...time. Escape is...futile... If three of us attack, we'll have a more...decent chance—of winning. Maybe. We have...no other choice."

Rabi hides behind Toudou, her breath ragged. She's white as a sheet, but her eyes show strong conviction.

"If you fail...please run. I don't...know if I can, but I'll try to hold him back."

"..."

Seeing Rabi's expression, Toudou decides to accept her offer to involve herself. Truthfully, denying Rabi at this point would likely prove fruitless. They have no other choice.

Rabi clumsily removes the hatchet hanging from her belt. Compared with Toudou's holy sword Ex, it's a crude blade, barely sharp. It wouldn't take down most opponents, even with a direct hit.

Toudou grips her sword and points it at Heljarl. She's afraid. But her sense of duty prevails.

The holy sword Ex's blade gives off a faint glimmer. Seeing this light, Heljarl's eyes, bloodshot and consumed by wrath, regain their sanity. He stands with composure, solid on two feet, his staggering center of gravity now restored.

Even in this disheveled state, he still exerts a sense of majesty.

"...I must learn...the truth. Hero, I will have your head and rebuke you and all that I have suffered in your name! And you will be repent for how you have slighted me!!"

Heljarl raises his black staff overhead and lets out an abominable scream. Pressure wracks every fiber of Toudou's being.

"Ha... HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

Her Howl rips through the water, paralyzing all in its path. With this Howl acting as her momentum, Holy Warrior Naotsugu Toudou kicks off the ground, ready to attack.

§ § §

The situation couldn't have been any more advantageous for him.

Their battlefield was underwater—the ideal setting—and he had the mermaids held prisoner along with numerous battle-ready seadragon knights at his disposal.

There was no way he'd lose. Absolutely no way. Even if this creature was actually a trusted retainer sent from the Demon Lord himself, Heljarl had no doubt he'd emerge victorious.

Heljarl comes from an ancient bloodline descended from the God of Oceans and can manipulate water at will. His attacks are at their most effective in the sea, with the ability to sink ships and summon storms.

Even before he could control all sea monsters, Heljarl was the supreme ruler

of the oceans.

The most unexpected development was that merman creature's sole objective—to take Heljarl's life. That, and the fact that he valued this objective above his own life.

Heljarl figured he would flee at some point—that he would realize he was overwhelmed by unfathomable numbers.

But Gregorio never stopped.

“M-my liege, please retreat!”

With those words, Heljarl's right-hand seadragon knight officer— Halgen—perished.

“RAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!”

Even with his thick armor and helmet, the seadragon knight was dashed against the wall by a single stroke of the merman's powerful mace, with its black luster, and fell silent.

Such was the difference between a soldier who was compelled to protect his king and Gregorio, who would stop at nothing to kill him.

Gregorio made no hesitation to strike, and the spears pointed his way from every direction did nothing to rattle him. Witnessing the brutal tyranny of this berserker—the type feasible only if one sold their soul to the evil gods—Heljarl felt terror for the first time.

A spear pierced Gregorio's side, yet he bashed down the surrounding seadragon knights, refusing to let them encroach farther. But their numbers were staggering. If he was trying to plod forward, there was no way he could avoid the countless spears being launched at him from behind.

One spear pierced his metal-like scales and inflicted some damage. Normally, it would be a fatal blow. Yet, the merman creature's stance didn't falter in the slightest.

There wasn't a trace of light in his amphibian eyes, and his entire body, and his mace, were still intently fixated on taking Heljarl's life. He was behaving exactly like a follower of darkness, cursed and hell-bent on indiscriminately

attacking the living.

Blood should have flowed from a living being after such an injury, but his wound ran dry, and his grip on his mace didn't loosen at all. Such tremendous vitality! Against the fearsome strength of a devil and his bloodcurdling howl, even the battle-worn warriors of the sea began to falter.

His movements were not quick—rather, plodding and deliberate. He stepped in front of Heljarl, mowed down the cadre of seadragon knights shielding him, and advanced on him without hesitation.

“What on earth is he—?!”

“HELJAAAAAAAAAARL!!! DIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!”

He was truly an abomination. Heljarl suddenly recalled a new breed of monster the Demon Lord had been producing as an asset for his forces. Could this be it?

More subordinates flew in to stop Gregorio, but they were quickly disposed of, as if they were no more than trash.

“What the—?! Does he feel no pain...?! Guh...”

Any living being would grow sluggish if they were injured. There were still many, many soldiers available. And Heljarl had water magic. There was no way he'd lose. There was no way—and yet there he was.

Having inferred that something peculiar was unfolding, additional subordinates poured into the room from outside. They dashed toward the abominable creature to protect their lord Heljarl.

Heljarl couldn't use any large-scale magic—it would only end up dragging his subordinates into harm's way.

Ordinarily, Heljarl manipulated water to form a shield around himself. Under the sea, all attacks aimed at him were deflected by this wall of water.

Heljarl had the option of calling off his subordinates and obliterating Gregorio with one large-scale spell. However, Gregorio's sheer strength thwarted that option.

“IT'S USELESS!! USELESS!! ANYTHING YOU TRY IS USELESS!! I have the divine

protection of the evil god!! All my wounds are instantly healed!!” Gregorio screamed, and a murmur of unrest ran through the soldiers, who were already attacking in desperation.

Their losses were extreme. Seadragon knights are powerful soldiers, but their numbers aren’t so great that they can be expended indefinitely.

Heljarl suddenly raised his left hand, which held Mar Animus, the most valuable treasure in the entire ocean. Gregorio may have been an abomination, but he was intelligent, and he had openly stated his goal: seize Mar Animus.

The jewel embedded in Mar Animus is one of a kind. Should this treasured flute ever be lost, it would be impossible to replace. Even if the Demon Lord was to find a new lineage of the God of Oceans, without this treasure, blockading the entire ocean would prove impossible.

The war between humanity and the Demon Lord’s forces is far from over. If their control of the oceans is weakened, the situation will no longer be in their favor.

“Stop, Gregorio! You are after Mar Animus, yes? Quell your rage!”

“Hmm?”

Gregorio stopped dead in his tracks. Seeing this, Heljarl slightly regained his composure.

“Don’t move, Gregorio. If you take one more step, I’ll take Mar Animus—and *destroy* it.”

Just like that, this treasure granted by the ocean, the very origin of life itself, was lost forever.

Only sheer fury and the tributes of his subordinates—who were prepared to die in order to restrain the merman creature—motivate Heljarl now.

Heljarl raises his black staff toward the oncoming Holy Warrior. He may be injured, but his wounds are no hindrance to his combat tactics.

Thus commences the battle for the King of the Ocean to reclaim his pride.

§ § §

Toudou is up against a mage. She has little experience battling them, but she

has a concept of the theory involved.

A fight between a mage and a sword master hinges on closing distance. Casting magic spells typically takes longer than swinging a sword.

If the sword master can close ample distance to land their strike, they'll come out victorious, whereas if the mage's spell hits first, they'll come out on top.

Toudou raises her cracked shield and charges at Heljarl. Aria joins in, dashing one step in front of her.

Heljarl looks completely unbothered—he's either got plenty of fight left in him or he doesn't think of Toudou and Aria as worthy opponents.

Toudou's concentration is razor-sharp, and she can see Heljarl's every movement. His forehead is stained with blood, and he gazes down at her, full of contempt. Only a few more steps before she'll reach him. Just then, Toudou puts every effort into propelling her legs forward.

She suddenly gains speed. Heljarl is watching closely, and his eyes grow wide.

Toudou summons all the strength in her right hand, holding the holy sword Ex, and howls. In that moment, a powerful shock rips into Toudou's left arm.

The hand holding her shield goes numb, and without a chance to react, her body is blasted backward.

"Ngh...?!"

Toudou manages to fall safely and repositions herself. She's not injured. The numbness in her left hand isn't preventing her from raising her shield.

However, a gap has now opened between them. This was a blast more powerful than anything Toudou has ever experienced before.

Aria looks on in shock as Toudou is repelled backward, but nevertheless, she rushes to slice off Heljarl's arm from the right. He extends his left hand and receives the blow from Aria's magical sword Lightning Howl.

Aria can't believe her eyes. Her strike didn't even graze his hand. It's as if a transparent wall just between them prevented her attack from landing.

Her face twists into a scowl. Heljarl shakes her off with a casual swipe of his

bare hand, and Aria lands on both feet. He can easily counterattack as much as he wants, but instead, he merely speaks.

“So weak... What is this?! What the hell is this?! Unfathomable...”

“...Ha!!”



Aria lays into Heljarl with an ever-changing flurry of strikes, from above, below, left, and right, but Heljarl blocks them all with his left hand; in his right, he grips his staff. There isn't any sound of metal on metal—her attacks simply aren't getting through.

“So slow! So pathetically slow! Neither your strength nor speed are enough to reach me!”

“It's not...a regular wall—he's averting the attacks using the flow of water surrounding him!”

Aria put her entire being into that attack. The moment Heljarl took it head-on, wholly unscathed, she knew she had no chance of winning.

There's only one role left for Rabi—a decoy. She hides in Aria's shadow before jumping out to strike.

Her blunt hatchet sweeps sideways, aiming for Heljarl's neck. He merely takes one step backward and avoids it completely.

Her blade slices nothing but air. Rabi and Aria are dumbfounded as Heljarl screams, “...Is that...all you've got?! ...Argh, if only you and that creature had switched places, then I'd be able to understand!!”

“!!”

“Guh!!”

A massive impact hits the two of them. This time, Toudou was able to catch sight of it, even though it should be invisible.

It's water. Just as Rabi warned them—he's controlling the water. The blast that knocked back Toudou and the attack on Rabi and Aria just now are one and the same.

The only thing they weren't expecting was how the attacks came without any warning at all.

Aria is slammed against the wall and Rabi rolls along the ground. A sharp cry of pain fills Toudou's ears.

It's an invisible attack. Although it's not an especially powerful one, taking too

many direct hits will definitely prove fatal. Toudou sees this and steps back in front of Heljarl. She has to keep him distracted from Aria and Rabi until they stand up again.

Toudou raises her shield and rushes at top speed to close the distance between Heljarl and herself.

“HAAAAAAAAAA!!”

“That’s it! Come! Come to me—and meet your death!!”

“!!”

The air—no, the water—begins to warp. It’s whirling toward Toudou like a pointed spear. There’s no chance of avoiding it.

Toudou steels herself, shield raised, and intercepts the blow. The heavy impact jolts her entire body, and a fierce grating sound radiates from her shield before passing through her. The Shield of Radiance, already riddled with cracks, whines and creaks loudly.

Toudou has never heard such a horrible sound, and she desperately manages to slice through the spear with the holy sword Ex. The invisible water spear offers no resistance and is cleaved in half, disappearing alongside the force pushing back Toudou’s shield.

Heljarl’s eyes are wide with shock for the first time.

“What...just...?”

“...That...can’t be— How did you manage...to cut through my water spear using your paltry strength?! This must be...the power of the Holy Warrior!”

Aria uses her sword to prop herself back up. Rabi remains crawling on her hands and knees and looks up at Heljarl in agony.

Toudou is staring at her blade—the holy sword Ex. Her proof as the Holy Warrior. A relic passed down from the previous Holy Warrior, light as a feather and tremendously sharp.

Holy Warriors of ages past have wielded this blade to slaughter demons, their leaders, and even evil gods.

As the current hero, Toudou is still half-baked. She can't fully utilize the sword's power.

Even so, the holy sword Ex is glowing brightly—it's encouraging her.

Toudou grips the hilt with purpose. A powerful throbbing sensation ripples through her, almost as if the sword is alive.

Strength fills Toudou's body. Seeing the shining sword capable of crushing pure evil, Heljarl erupts into crazed laughter.

"Heh... BWA-HA-HA-HAAA! HA-HA-HA-HA! HA!!"

Any traces of sanity in Heljarl's eyes are long gone.

"I see—it's the power of the holy sword!!" he screams. "And yet, so pitiful—Even that cursed merman managed that! You—you are *exceedingly inferior*. Do not despair, for now you face a real monster! Rejoice in the good fortune of facing your demise here and now!!"

"What the—?!"

Toudou's mind goes completely blank at the spectacle unfolding in front of her.

The water spear that she managed to slice through moments ago has returned, only this time in infinite numbers.

Their tips quickly whirl around and take aim at Toudou and her party.

There are simply...too many of them, each one clearly just as powerful as the first.

Even if Toudou manages to withstand them, in full armor and with a shield, her companion members won't.

"Rrrgh... Nao!!" Limis screams.

Glacia's eyes fly open, and she kicks off the ground with the kind of agility one would not typically expect from her.

Heljarl's lips twist into a merciless grin.

Toudou raises her blade high with her eyes wide, focused on the movement of the water spears.

Heljarl similarly raises his staff high overhead—and in the next second, he suddenly crumples. A thunderous roar echoes through the sunken temple.

He scowls for the first time and braces himself with his staff as he falls to the ground. The water spears vanish.

“It’s...an elemental spirit...,” Rabi utters hoarsely.

A womanly figure draped in a robe-like wave of water appears behind Heljarl.

The figure looks like Limis, but its expression is incredibly stern as it glowers at Heljarl. It lifts its staff and points it at him. This motion alone, without so much as a single incantation, sends a shock wave plowing through Heljarl. He spins around without the sense of composure he maintained a moment ago and thrusts his black staff at the figure.

Their respective blasts of water smash into each other, and the sunken temple groans from the impact. Toudou feels an incoming rush, as if a raging wave was pushing against her body.

“It’s...alive?”

“Elemental spirits...do not die...so easily. This...is your chance. Toudou, lend it your strength—”

The water spears collide again; the aftershocks make it hard for Toudou to even stand.

The water spirit’s expression contorts, using its entire body to swing its staff in large, sweeping motions.

A blade of water goes flying toward Heljarl, who then creates his own water blade to slash the spirit down. Neither of them takes any damage, but the gap in strength is evident. Heljarl is already back on his feet from the surprise attack.

“How dare a mere lowly spirit oppose me! Even without Mar Animus, you are outmatched! Just who do you take me for?! I, Heljarl, am the true descendant of the God of Oceans—!!” he screams, his feet stuck in place. Before he even realizes it, Glacia has approached him and wrapped her long hair around his ankles. The second he realizes what is happening, Heljarl kicks at Glacia’s head

in irritation, sending her flying.

Aria slashes down on Heljarl from overhead, but he swats her aside with his staff, clearly annoyed. In the ensuing gap this creates, the water elemental spirit fires a projectile that hits Heljarl dead center, but his water barrier must still be going strong—he barely stumbles from the impact.

With her hatchet in one hand, Rabi draws near to Heljarl, but then, perhaps in reaction to his bloodred stare, she simply flops back onto her rear.

Heljarl erupts into rampant laughter and bellows, “Futile! Here, in this ocean, against me, Heljarl—there will be no victors! Including that vile creature! In good time, I will end him!! That brat and Kranos will also feel my wrath! Anyone who dares make a mockery of me—I will decorate their graves with their own heads!!”

Heljarl’s intimidating presence continues to escalate with his fervent howling. Just as he claims, his life force is so immense that its influence extends to even the world around them. The word *invincible* comes to Toudou’s mind.

Even with the grand water elemental spirit added to the Holy Warrior’s party, they don’t stand a chance against the overwhelming power belonging to one of the Demon Lord Army’s leaders.

Yet, they can kill him. No matter how vast a difference lies between them, Toudou has the holy sword Ex in her hand.

Heljarl must deem her to be insignificant, however, as she is now just mere steps away from him. The water elemental spirit is draining the last of its energy as it attacks Heljarl relentlessly.

He has his back to Toudou. The holy sword can slice right through him.

Toudou lets go of her shield and grips her blade’s hilt with both hands. Everything is riding on this next blow.

“Toudou! Do it now!!” Rabi screams. In that instant, Toudou pours her entire being into a single sword strike.

She points the tip at Heljarl’s back, focused only on piercing it straight through his heart. Heljarl realizes she’s behind him and turns around, but he’s too late.

The shining tip of the holy sword Ex sinks into Heljarl's back.

—But then a powerful impact repels it.

“...Huh?”

Toudou's eyes go wide as Heljarl brings his staff down on her head. Her consciousness begins to slip as her field of vision goes dim from the intense force of the impact.

She slumps to the floor. The holy sword Ex was so firmly in her grasp, but the strength leaves her hands, and she drops it onto the ground. All she can hear is Heljarl's ridicule.

“BWAAA-HA-HAAA!! You fool! Even the holiest of blades can't pierce this armor with your pitiful strength!!”

With her dimmed vision, all she can see is Rabi, flopped down on the floor—her lip trembling, her thin arms and slender frame, her glasses slipping down her nose. The hatchet, her only weapon, gets swept away by the flow of the water and drifts off, leaving a hollow, futile sound in its wake.

Toudou cannot die. As the only one capable of wielding the holy sword Ex, she must survive, or humanity will not prevail.

Toudou's sense of duty stirs her awake.

Frantically moving her lifeless tongue, she manages to cast a healing spell on herself for the first time in ages. A sliver of strength returns to her fingertips. She subtly moves her hand so as to remain unnoticed, feeling for the holy sword Ex, which is surely nearby. Heljarl has to be off his guard right now. She has a duty—a duty to slice off his head. That's all that matters to Naotsugu Toudou at this moment.

She desperately gropes around with her hand and feels a hot sensation shoot through it. She tries to move her hand again, but it won't budge.

It must have been pierced by one of Heljarl's claws. In her dim consciousness, she can hear him shouting, confident in his victory.

“Futile! Your attempts are futile, Holy Warrior! None of you has the proper strength, level, or life force to defeat me! Bwa-ha-ha! HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HAAA!

No matter how many of you! It's all futile!"

Mixed in with Heljarl's derision, Toudou can also hear a small, stifled voice.

"I'm...s-scared... Ooooh... Wh-why did I...end up...like this...?"

Rabi is crying. There aren't any tears underwater, but her bleary, bloodshot eyes make it apparent. A string of words, almost like complaints, pours forth from her small lips.

"The Demon Lord Army's elite inner circle... A-and here I am, just a peace-loving wererabbit... Why...why does everyone always bully me...? ...Boss gives me terrible orders, and my master always pushes me to the brink of death with training... And Sanya is so insensitive, telling me that I'd make the perfect pet, since wererabbits can mate at any time, or that I have great features, so I'll fetch a high price... She's always kidnapping me and saying the most horrible things... Everyone really ought to be nicer to me... How can they all treat me so...horribly...? All I do is stay quiet, keep my hood up, try not to stand out, shaking... My dream is to become a bride, you know. Sanya should be the one getting such awful treatment, not me!"

"...Wh-what the hell is she talking about?"

Heljarl's voice is tinged with agitation.

"We'd all be better off...dead. I hate this! Oof... I think one of my bones is broken... He's just gonna complain about me anyway, that I got the people I'm supposed to be escorting injured, and then he'll cut my pay... UGH! He might even just pay me in...carrots..."

Rabi stands up. At that moment, Toudou realizes the din of battle around her has ceased.

The claw that punctured her hand and kept it pressed down against the ground suddenly goes limp.

"...I really hate anyone obsessed with fighting. I absolutely despise them. They never show any weaknesses, and they're sickeningly strong... I'm gonna go home, get my wounds healed, take a bath, and go to sleep in my nice, soft, comfy bed. It was great doing business with you."

“Hmph... You think I’ll let you go home?”

Heljarl threatens Rabi, but his voice is feeble. Did Rabi’s attempt to escape reality manage to placate him? Conversely, her response comes quite readily.

“Oh, I’m definitely going home. Because...Heljarl, sir, your head is no longer attached to your body.”

Heljarl’s eyes grow wide. His black staff falls from his hand and tumbles to the floor.

The water elemental spirit is also dumbfounded and wide-eyed as it simply observes the scene unfolding.

“...Let me guess... Your body...isn’t functioning...the way you want it to, right? Boss says that even if he...lost his head, he’d just...use healing magic to reattach it before he dies, see? It’s truly unbelievable. No normal person...is capable of such a thing.”

Rabi breaks into a smile that implies a slight appetite for sadism.

Some distance from her, Aria staggers and stands up. Everyone in the room is capable only of remaining silent and listening to Rabi speak.

“Heh-heh... When I let go of my weapon...and became empty-handed, you let your guard down...didn’t you? In reality...that doesn’t matter. My attacks are all thanks to my...*divine protection*—the divine protection of the God of Beheading. It’s an indigenous god...much more minor than the God of Oceans. But, well, you see, my dream is to become a bride, so... Did you...see my attack coming? Oh, you can’t hear me anymore? And maybe I’ve...said too much?”

“...Im.....poss...ible— Grego...rio—”

Heljarl’s head gives a sudden jolt before landing next to Toudou’s face. His eyes are wide with shock and the humiliation of having died before he even knew what hit him.

Rabi rearranges her thin mermaid-armor overcoat, which had become disheveled, and heaves a deep sigh. She forces the claw out of Toudou’s hand and grasps her by it, helping her to her feet.

“Okay, we’re finished here. All done. Let’s go home. Ahhh, I’m so glad I

researched monsters beforehand. That way, I was able to learn Heljarl's weak point. Now it's all been settled. Okay, Toudou, come on now—stand up.”

“...Ngh... Owwww. R-Rabi?! That hurts!!”



Epilogue

How to Provide Further Support

“...Why are you wearing mermaid armor indoors?”

“...Well, I was all alone doing administrative work this whole time... And I hadn’t had a chance to try it on, either.”

Amelia puffs her cheeks and crosses her arms over the dazzlingly white bikini she’s wearing, as if trying to accentuate her chest. She does a twirl, showing off her flawless pale skin.

Everyone else hated putting it on... I wish they would all take a page out of Amelia’s book.

“How do you like it?”

“It looks like it would be see-through once I got in the ocean.”

“...You don’t need to worry about that. Zolan’s wife oversaw its production.”

Even if she did, she could have changed a few other things about it, too.

That said, we owe our victory this round to the honorable Zolan. Without the mermaid armor, we wouldn’t have picked up on Heljarl’s movements until he had already attacked Cloudburst. Then our only choice would have been to run.

“I made regular reports. Why didn’t you answer the transmission for so long?”

“I was a bit tied up down there.”

It was a brutal battle. Heljarl’s minions were powerful and brave, and above all else, there were so damn many of them. Despite their low level, taking on that sheer number of bloodthirsty warriors was not an easy task.

I nearly died on several occasions... If I wasn’t a priest able to heal himself, I would have certainly depleted my strength halfway through.

However, my life-risking endeavors were worth it. I extracted information from Heljarl, destroyed the magic item, and although he got away, Rabi put an

end to him. These results will pay certain dividends down the road.

Amelia sighs quietly as she averts her gaze.

“Well, it’s no bother. As long as you’re all right.”

I wanted to call Amelia at least once, but I truly didn’t have a moment to spare. Honestly, things were so frantic that I couldn’t even hear her coming through the transmission. My merman armor, riddled with holes, should prove ample testament to this fact.

“Boss, you didn’t finish Heljarl off properly, and look what happened to me. I thought I was going to have a heart attack.”

The hooded girl, sitting on her bed and holding her knees, grumbles. My second mercenary received top marks this time around—she finished Heljarl off.

Heljarl himself was an unexpected twist, and it must have drained Rabi—her voice is listless. She’s acting, I’m sure of it. Can’t fool me that easily.

“...Why did you let him escape? That messed everything up so badly.”

“Because I prioritized saving Sanya. I couldn’t just leave her abandoned behind enemy lines, now could I?”

I played my cards well, but if I left her alone, she would have died. There’s no way I wasn’t helping someone who was in dire need.

That said, I didn’t expect Heljarl to go after Toudou... He’s definitely got the grim reaper on his tail.

Rabi remains silent for a moment before collapsing on her side and whispering softly, “.....I have nothing to say. So unfair. I’ll have to punish Sanya for being such a screwup.”

“Don’t go too hard on her. She did everything she was supposed to.”

Getting caught was definitely Sanya’s mistake, but it’s thanks to her that we were able to escape Heljarl’s stronghold so swiftly. She also led me to the treasure vault, allowing me to seize its contents. Even when she was under his control, she was apparently still conscious and able to grasp most of what was happening. Her brainwashing was dispelled when the flute was destroyed, so if

anything, it was good that she got caught.

Heljarl is dead. His army is no more. The horde of monsters he was gathering has largely dispersed.

“Boss, you’re such a hard-ass! Maaaaan, I’m beat! I think I’m gonna quit!”

Sanya, who probably had the hardest time of us all, walks into the room, complaining. She throws the wet bag she hauled all the way here on the floor and then throws herself down beside it.

The bag holds the items stored in Heljarl’s treasure vault. Mar Animus was destroyed, but a number of magic items still remained within: one that ascertains the location of the Holy Warrior and one used for summoning. Researching these items further may reveal where they were made and just how they managed to fall into the Demon Lord Army’s possession.

As Sanya sinks down to the floor, Rabi throws a furtive glance her way from atop the bed. I suppose she must have been worried about her after all. She sustained some damage to her bones and internal organs, but I cast healing magic on her, so there’s no need for concern.

“Hey, boss! Why did I have to carry your merman armor all the way here, huh...?”

“I can’t be walking around the city dressed like a merman. In any case, Rabi’s the one with something to complain about, don’t you think? Thanks to your blunder, she had to take down Heljarl. Now she’ll be rewarded with a gourmet carrot.”

“?! ”

It was just a joke, but Rabi sits up on the bed and looks at me before scowling at Sanya.

Rabi was the one to defeat Heljarl, but the credit will be given to Toudou and his party. Because that’s the way it has to be.

The Holy Warrior’s defeat of one of the Demon Lord Army’s leaders is the kind of legend, the kind of hope that the world needs right now.

The tale of Heljarl’s death will spread far and wide for some time. No—we will

spread it. And that will act as a beacon of the counterattack on the Demon Lord and his army.

“...Are you...evil?” Amelia asks.

“There’s no immediate cash reward, but an accomplishment is an accomplishment. I’ll see what I can do to get some money from the higher-ups.”

“Ares, you’re so business-minded.”

Heljarl was top brass within the Demon Lord’s army. He was certainly a tough opponent, but Toudou has his sights on someone even more formidable.

That said, I’m exhausted myself. We all deserve some respite—after we finish everything we need to do in Cloudburst, that is.

“Sanya. I need you to retrieve Heljarl’s corpse before someone steals it. I’ve got a use for it.”

“...Aye-aye, sir. How are you still this chipper...?”

“And, Rabi, there’s no time to be resting now.”

“.....Huh? ...I—I can’t move a muscle. I definitely have some broken bones...”

Rabi is shaking her head. I cast Heal on her without another word.

“...From now on, I refuse to work for a healer. Wh-what are you doing...? Don’t...b-bully me...”

Rabi raises her head slowly and looks at me with tears in her eyes. Nice try—I’ve already heard plenty from Sanya about your exploits as a beheading machine.

I say one last thing to Rabi, who seems to be forgetting something fundamental. There’s no way she actually forgot the purpose of our last mission here?

“We’re going to help Limis and Toudou with their elemental spirit covenants.”

The entire suit is full of holes—eyes gouged out, the dorsal fin shredded—and Zolan’s voice quivers as he looks over the half-destroyed merman armor.

“Wh-what the hell happened...? Merman armor’s leagues tougher than a normal full-plated suit of armor...and yet...”

“I was surrounded, you see.”

“...I dunno what kinda mermaids ya went lookin’ for, but ya really went overboard.”

Zolan pats the front of the merman armor repeatedly, clearly in shock.

However, it’s not like I looked like this right after I got out of the ocean. The seadragon knights’ attacks pierced right through me. I can heal myself with spells, but that doesn’t get rid of the blood. At any rate, let’s just forget about that.

“This item is superb. A real gem. Can you repair it?”

“It’d probably be quicker to create a new suit from scratch.”

...So I guess that means I can still use it for now.

At this point, it looks like an undead merman, but it still functions, and I don’t plan on being here much longer. I’m never again going to dive into the ocean to infiltrate the Demon Lord’s army dressed as a merman. If I have a use for it, it will be just one more time, at the absolute most.

I wasn’t sure of him at first, but meeting Zolan turned out to be the most fortunate thing that happened in this entire place.

Zolan is a pervert, but he’s exceptionally skilled. We’ll need his deep knowledge of magic items for future battles. And serious thanks to his wife for being here, too.

“There’s something else I would like to ask of you.”

“Hmm? What’s that?”

Zolan looks up from inspecting the merman armor with his magnifying glass. There’s something charming about his bearded countenance. His brown eyes gaze at me, and in order not to spook him, I manage a smile and cut to the chase.

“Next, I would like to disguise myself as one of the legions of darkness... Something like *evil god armor*, for example... Could you make it?”

“...Just what d’you intend to do next?”

Zolan looks up at me, frowning. Of course, I'd be using it to support the defeat of the Demon Lord...but maybe it's not feasible? Perhaps unethical, too? Although I'm willing to bet that if I really could disguise myself as a follower of darkness, it would prove extremely effective for the cause.

Zolan looks thoroughly disturbed, so that's the end of that. Time to change the subject. What I'm really after is something different.

"Also, do you have any interest in the sisterhood? There's a girl I want you to meet."

I've said it many times by now, but Zolan is a pervert. He's a pervert and a genius. His talents are wasted here making weird stuff like mermaid armor. I'd definitely like him to join us at the Church headquarters.

If the Church had his technical capacity to create original magic items, our analysis of existing ones would only get easier.

I know Zolan's personality well by now. He probably won't join us if I scout him directly, but I have a secret plan.

Zolan's eyes flash wildly at my question. Hesitatingly, he asks, "Th-this sister ya speak of... Is she...cute?"

"She has a great face. Certainly on par with Amelia and the other girls I brought here."

Zolan strokes his chin and agonizes over this, looking even more serious than I've ever seen him. I slyly add one more detail.

"Ah, and she's quite well-endowed. She would definitely require a new set of mermaid armor."

"...I-I'd like to know more. Anything else? Any other information?"

Zolan takes the bait, hook, line, and sinker. I'll be contacting Creio later. I nod at Zolan and add the finishing touch.

"...She's a massive ditz."

In the hall at the very bottom of the stairway entrance to the sunken temple, Limis looks nervous as she faces the water elemental spirit. The spirit has taken the form of a young woman. Even for me, with my low level of magical

sophistication, it's fully visible—clearly a powerful being.

This high-ranking water spirit is none other than the entity known as an undine.

I did not expect Heljarl to try to take Toudou's life, but there is a silver lining. That undine and the party forming a united front against him is part of that.

Today, Limis is visiting the sunken temple to complete her original goal, and the water spirit appears before her immediately.

I came down here first, but the spirit didn't show itself to me. It must have been searching for Limis and the others.

The high-level water elemental spirit smiles at Limis. Its gaze is pure and affectionate.

Conversely, Limis seems a bit hesitant, and she restlessly fidgets with her staff.

Accompanying her is Aria, who urges her along. Toudou is under the weather, I'm told, and so he's not here.

The most important aspect of establishing a covenant is the spirit's intention. The water elemental spirit's expression is sunny and poses no danger.

At this rate, the covenant looks like it will go off without a hitch. I'm not an elementalist or anything, but even I can grasp that much.

Limis hesitates before she finally starts walking toward the water spirit. I quietly keep an eye on her from the corner and release a deep breath, letting my shoulders relax.

This will finally complete our objective in Cloudburst. Limis and the others have improved their combat skills as well. We also took care of that big-shot Heljarl and managed to extract some information from him about the Demon Lord's army.

As the individual responsible for summoning the hero, Creio should be quite satisfied with the results.

I solemnly pray that our next journey will go just as well as this one.

As I close my eyes and offer up a prayer to the God of Order, I can hear Limis's flustered voice.

"Huh?! Wha—? Garnet?! Don't attack it— Ugh— You're not listening—"

An explosion and a piercing cry fill the hall, followed by a surge of heat and light. I lift my head up in a panic.



A dazzlingly bright human figure wrapped in flame is attacking the water elemental spirit, despite the highly disadvantageous battlefield. The water elemental spirit is startled and scurries to escape.

Fed up, I cast a fire protection spell on myself before kicking off the ground and charging at the fiery apparition.

§ § §

Why was I the one summoned?

When Toudou first came to this world, she turned those words over in her mind so many times, and now, they twist their way into her consciousness once again.

The girl named Naotsugu Toudou is exceptional in every sense of the word. She always got good grades in school. She loved learning, either from books or experiences, and she was athletic, too. She had a lot of friends and led a productive life. From an objective standpoint, she was a head above the average person her age.

Her only complaint was that the world was unfair. Evil flourishes and it preys upon the weak. That's always bothered her. Whereas the average person would just resign themselves to that fact, Toudou is the type who instead fights back against it.

When Toudou was summoned to this world and told the reason for this, she felt a sense of destiny. Even if she hadn't been asked to, Toudou would have likely set out to defeat the Demon Lord anyway.

In Cloudburst, at the inn, Toudou gazes at her shield on the table, full of massive cracks and fissures.

It's the Shield of Radiance, an armament that was bestowed upon Toudou when she was chosen as the hero, and it's kept her safe thus far. It became cracked from her fight with Gregorio, and it somehow made it through her battles in Golem Valley, but Heljarl's water spear has caused the cracks to spread so much that they're now clearly more like deep fissures. She doubts it will be useful any longer.

Rather, it's a miracle that this shield was able to defend against magic from

one of the Demon Lord Army's elite in the state it was in.

Even aside from the cracks, the shining blue shield's surface is full of damage. Toudou rubs her finger across it and exhales a sentimental sigh. She looks at the holy sword Ex and holy armor Fried leaning against the wall next to her. They are mere armaments, but in this world, they serve as Toudou's valuable companions.

"...Not enough..."

Toudou looks again at the sword, which was incapable of piercing Heljarl's armor.

The holy sword Ex. The Holy Warrior's blade, said to be capable of slicing through anything in the universe. When Toudou attacked Heljarl, she was fully convinced her attack would succeed.

No... Even in the Great Tomb—in Purif—when Gregorio blocked her attack with his trunk, she thought so...

It's not that the blade is dull. The holy sword Ex can cut through anything in the universe, and it's imbued with divine protection.

Toudou is blessed, and for this reason, she can find only one answer.

"I'm so...weak..."

Her hoarse voice echoes vacantly through the empty room.

Toudou feels absolutely powerless. She needs the strength to protect the people she wants to protect.

She clenches her fists tightly. Her level has definitely gone up, but how much has she really changed?

The Demon Lord Army's upper ranks were more powerful than she could have imagined. Then there was that terrifying merman on the ocean floor. And Rabi's hidden strength—breathtaking.

Toudou feels empty. Right now, her own level of strength won't help her do a single thing. She can't even feel frustration.

Back then, and even now, the world is just too rife with futility.

Toudou closes her eyes and mulls over these words and the reality staring her in the face. No tears form in her eyes—she has no tears left to cry.

So she whispers a little something to herself. Toudou repeats the words, engraving them deep into her heart, as she has done so many times already.

“I will get stronger. I will save the world. I am...the *hero*.”

Why was Toudou the one summoned? To tell the truth, none of that matters to her.

She’s not afraid of death. Well, actually, she *is*—but that’s not much of an obstacle for her.

That’s because Naotsugu Toudou has already died once.

She died in desperation, but she received a second chance at life. This isn’t the world she was born into, but she has to save it, through any means possible. She has to do what is right.

Even if it’s all meaningless in the end. Even if it doesn’t bring her an ounce of personal reward.

Even if she can’t use the armaments of the Holy Warrior, she’ll use any means necessary to continue her pursuit of righteousness.

Toudou whispers again, more emphatic this time. She’s not saying it to anyone—it’s a proclamation to herself.

“Desperation will only make me stronger. Next time, I won’t lose!”

Toudou clenches her fists and bites her lip. Her jet-black eyes, filled with powerful conviction, are reflected in the shattered face of her shield.

“...We’re back.”

“Welcome back. That was quick—did it go well?”

Aria and Limis have just gotten back, and seeing the expressions on their faces, Toudou frowns.

They look beyond tired, practically emaciated, like they’ve just witnessed a nightmare.

“Uh, y-yeah, I guess. So much happened... I don’t even know where to start.”

Limis sighs deeply and tosses herself wildly into a chair like a rag doll. Her eyes are dead. Aria looks pretty sluggish herself. Glacia's sullen expression is Toudou's only respite.

"Oh, okay. You can tell me later, after you rest..."

"Yeah... I think that's what I'll do. By the way, Nao, how about you? Are you feeling better?"

It's Toudou's turn to sigh next. She forces out a bitter smile and shakes her head.

"...It's no use. I can't...wear the holy armor Fried...anymore... It's too tight across the chest, and I just can't get it on. I tried every trick in the book, but I can't do it anymore. I'll have to stick to just the holy sword Ex from now on."



Special Story

A Wolf, a Hare, and a Stingy Priest

“Our boss this time around has a weak point—he’s stingy. I can’t believe he actually paid me a bonus for defeating one of the Demon Lord Army’s leaders... in carrots...”

Back at their room at the inn, Rabi grumbles as she crunches on one of the gourmet Golden Carrots ordered from the Church.

“It was beyond desperately dangerous. He doesn’t like paying in cash... That’s making a mockery of mercenaries everywhere!”

“But, Rabi, you love carrots.”

“...That’s not the point! It must be great for you, Sanya, not having a whole lot to think about.”

Rabi makes a show of being cruel, but her expression actually softens a bit. Sanya is no less astounded by the event.

Rabi’s rabbit-like red eyes are glued on the Golden Carrots. She looks respectable in most cases, but right now, she’s being compelled by her werebeast instincts. These luxury Golden Carrots come with a little anecdote that states they once used to be worth their weight in gold, but they’re

certainly not worthy as compensation for defeating one of the Demon Lord Army's leaders.

That said, Rabi does look really, really excited—she's a cheap date.

"Every time you defeat a member of the Demon Lord Army's inner circle, I'll give you a Golden Carrot. And if you defeat five of them, I'll throw in one more as a bonus!"

"...Boss, are you making fun of me?"

"So you don't want them?"

".....I'll take all the carrots I can get."

Rabi usually sounds subdued, but right now, she's somehow chipper.

When Bran told me she was a wererabbit, I wondered, "*Why a rabbit?*" but now I'm really glad I hired her.

Compared with Rabi, Miss Wolf over here—who didn't manage to meet her anticipated value—is puffing her cheeks, disgruntled.

"Boss, what about me? What if I defeat one of 'em?"

"I already gave you a cash bonus."

Don't you remember? I kicked your ass in our sparring match. I have nothing else to offer.

"Huh? That's it?! That's all you're giving me?! Are you serious?!"

Sanya's eyes are wide in disbelief as she slaps the table in objection.

Come on, now... Sanya's obsessed with battle. Even without a bonus, she'll fight for me; I know it.

"I see. So you're just selfishly trying to negotiate pay? Your master will be upset with you."

"No, well, but... Boss, you're a total abomination, but you're a priest, after all, so I just thought maybe if I tried harder..."

How rude. Abominations are what we kill. Human beings make up for their weaknesses with intelligence.

Sanya purses her lips and Rabi shoots a glance in my direction, sighing.

“Either way, we don’t have a chance. Anyone who makes a bet on a coin flip with our master only to immediately go and smash the coin is one hotheaded fool. You solve everything through force. It makes demons look like the more rational—”

“You said you got a good deal out of it... But is this the real reason why, Ares...?”

Amelia’s stare is ice-cold. Such insolence.

However, everything went well... Any and all depravity is allowed if it’s in the name of justice.

Everything is on the Church for not giving me a big-enough budget to begin with. My payment methods aren’t to blame here.

That said, as their boss, it irks me to be called stingy. I think for a moment before saying, “Well, let’s see... Sanya, if you take down someone in the Demon Lord’s inner circle...I’ll let you spar with me again.”

“Whaaa...? But, boss, knives and arrows and even pistols don’t work on you. Do you enjoy making me suffer that much? Look, you just do your own thing. I lose. This is the first time I’ve lost and felt more disgust than respect. You should be the one to defeat the Demon Lord.”

They’re all really laying into me here... Please, it’s not like nothing works against me.

However, it’s easy to imagine what a rabbit likes, but if you ask me what a wolf might like... Not so simple.

“...How about raw meat?”

“...If you’re talking in terms of a bonus, I’m just gonna get pissed off at you, y’know?”

“...Ah, my apologies.”

“Were you really just talking about a bonus for me?! Damn, boss, that’s just cruel!!”

Sanya is glaring at me with sheer disgust.

It's true that she has wolf DNA in her bloodline, but she is a human, after all. Maybe raw meat was a little over the top.

But anyway, a wolf... She's probably not too obsessed with money, so what would she go for as bait?

We're going to be together for quite some time, and I would definitely like to boost her motivation.

"If you were a cat, then catnip might be an option..."

"Um... Boss? Are you for real?"

I take a long, hard look at Sanya: her amber skin, striking silver hair and ears, supple muscles, and moderately sized bust.

She's a wolf... A wolf. Hmm...

I look to Amelia for help, but she shrugs, clearly incredulous. Sanya is wagging her tail.

There is still a number of the Demon Lord Army's elite out there. It's not as if we have to be the ones to take them down, but I can't just start forking over expensive items on our current budget... Crap, maybe I really am that stingy?

Having hemmed and hawed all I care to, I furrow my brow and finally say, "... How about a collar?"

Sanya's eyes fly open and she takes a step back. Rabi even stops munching on her carrot, she's so disturbed.

"Just what exactly do you intend to do to Sanya, putting a collar on her?! I didn't know you had such depraved hobbies, boss..."

"Boss, you really don't think of us as anything more than useful pets, do you? I'm gonna tell our master!"

No, that's not true... But speaking of dogs, they need a collar and a leash... Oh right, but Sanya's a wolf not a dog.

As I fall silent, Amelia ponders for a moment before adding nonchalantly, "Ares... Wasn't Stey enough for you?! If that's really what you want, though..."

you can put the collar on me.”

“?!”

Hey, Amelia, don't try to twist things—the leash I put on Stey was to keep her from getting lost.

CHARACTER DATA



NAME **Sanya Chatre**

【Level】: 65
【Occupation】: Scout
【Gender】: Female

ABILITIES
Physical Strength: High
Endurance: High
Agility: Very High
Magical Energy: Very Low
Holy Energy: Very High
Will: A Bit High
Luck: Regular

EQUIPMENT

Weapon: Bow of the Stars (specially made short bow, takes a lot of strength to pull)
Clothing: God of Theft robe (custom-made with an opening for her tail)

EXPERIENCE UNTIL NEXT LEVEL 5,545,667

A half-breed of human and silverwolf, one of the most powerful types of werebeast, Sanya is a disciple of the legendary mercenary Bran Chatre. Her innate physical abilities and sensory perception make her a highly competent scout. Due to her silverwolf instincts, Sanya is loyal by nature to whoever is the leader of her pack. Often paired with Rabi, who outranks her. Enjoys brushing her tail. Dislikes priests who try to attack her.

NAME **Rabi Chatre**

【Level】: 71
【Occupation】: Scout
【Gender】: Female

ABILITIES
Physical Strength: Regular
Endurance: Low
Agility: High
Magical Energy: Very Low
Holy Energy: Very Low
Will: Very High
Luck: Regular

EQUIPMENT

Weapon: Barbaric Beheader (a massive hatchet, dull yet durable)
Clothing: Thick robe (cheap and able to hide her entire body and ears)
Other: Red-rimmed glasses (her favorite; the lenses are fake)

EXPERIENCE UNTIL NEXT LEVEL 67,778,893

One of the apprentices of legendary mercenary Bran Chatre. A pacifist, Rabi is a half-breed of human and the famous wererabbit race. Per her own description, she's a type of half-blood werebeast whose traits "fetch a high price." Her strength and endurance are low, but thanks to her divine protection from the God of Beheading, she's able to land a fatal hit whenever she aims for her opponent's neck. Because of her wererabbit genes, she's able to mate at any time, and thus covers her entire body in a bulky robe for self-defense. Loves carrots, but is self-conscious about it, so be sure not to bring it up.



AFTERWORD

TSUKIKAGE

It's been a while, readers. Tsukikage here. Thank you so much for picking up this copy of *Defeating the Demon Lord's a Cinch (If You've Got a Ringer)*.

This series has now reached Volume 4, marking over two years since it first began as a web novel. Time really does go by so quickly.

Expanding on Volume 3, this is the edited and revised fourth volume of *Defeating the Demon Lord's a Cinch (If You've Got a Ringer)*, which was originally published on the website Kakuyomu. Our setting is the water capital, Cloudburst, which is much different from the earthy brown environment of Golem Valley in Volume 3.

In place of Stephenne, the super-ditzy sister, two new mercenaries join the party this time around. In this peculiar environment, the sunken temple, a host of new problems stand in our party's way. There's also an attack by one of the Demon Lord's underlings—this volume is full of all kinds of action and entertainment.

I wish I could tell you the water capital means lots of ocean and swimsuit scenes! But our party is focused on defeating the Demon Lord, so don't expect anything else. Sex appeal and flashing skin are nothing special. The highlight of this volume is our protagonist going on a rampage unlike any we've yet seen. He certainly has a lot of anger built up along the journey so far.

The theme of Volume 4 is "Just what is righteousness, really?" Once you've finished reading, I believe this theme will have crossed your mind. It certainly did for me when I was writing it. Also, with the publication of this volume in Japan, the first volume of the manga version of *Defeating the Demon Lord's a Cinch (If You've Got a Ringer)* by the artist Renga Kijima will be available for purchase as well.

Thanks to the light, airy way they've depicted the setting, the *Demon Lord*

world of the comics is so wonderfully different from the books. I would be elated if you checked it out—there's a good chance it will also come with a brand-new short story. (I'm working on that now.)

Okay, I feel the journey to defeat the Demon Lord is already quite lengthy, but in fact our hero's quest has only just begun. Ares's troubles will continue for some time.

I will look forward to your continued support of the web, novel, and manga versions!

As always, I must continue to acknowledge everyone who's supported me. To my amazing illustrator, bob—thank you for your support! Your drawing of Ares on the book's spine particularly filled my heart with gratitude.

I must also express my thanks to my editor, Wada, who worked so hard on this volume's publication, and everyone in the editing department at Famitsu. I look forward to your future support.

Last but not least, thank you to everyone who's supported this series since its beginnings on the web and to those who started with the published book. I express my deepest gratitude to you all.



I'm including
Amelia back
here since I
didn't get to
draw her in
this volume...

Eubot

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