

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 turn 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.

“RAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!”

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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