

DO YOU
LOVE YOUR
MOM
and Her Two-Hit
Multi-Target
Attacks
?

1

Dachima Inaka

Illustration by **Iida Pochi.**



DO YOU
LOVE YOUR
MOM
and Her Two-Hit
Multi-Target
Attacks
?
1

Dachima Inaka

Illustration by **Iida Pochi.**

“I gotta do something, quick! ...But how? It moves too fast! If only there was a way to slow it down...”

Just that instant: “Spara la magia per mirare... Lento!”

“BLORP?!”

“Again! *Lento!*”

“BLOR-BLORP?!”

A chain cast against the slime, along with a double debuff to its speed, instantly slowed down the creature. The slippery blob was moving much more ponderously, crawling along the ground.

Who had cast this magic? Wise had, of course. She’d stopped rolling miserably on the floor and was standing there proudly.

“How...are you casting...?”

“Heh-heh. When you reach the upper echelons of the Sage profession, the magic power coursing through your body is so powerful, no mere magic seal can contain—”

“I gave her an item that cures sealed magic! Sorry it took me so long!”

“Oh! Well done, Porta! You’re the best!”

“Hey, don’t just praise her! Save some for me! I actually did a thing! Don’t let it pass without comment!”

“Don’t worry—I’m grateful to you, too... I mean, now that you can use magic, you could’ve just killed it, but instead you’ve given me the chance to finish it off!”

“Oh... Crap!”

Masato broke into a run. The slime was slowly attempting to flee toward the back of the hollow, but he was on it in a flash and, like a real hero, made to strike the giant boss monster...

“How dare you strip a mother in front of her son! You must be punished! *Hyaah!*”

...but before he could, Mamako swung Terra di Madre. Countless rock spikes pierced the giant slime. Every single one hit. Overkill.

The naughty slime was defeated!

Mamako had finished it off but was still naked and wet. She danced around happily, her two large mountains jiggling.

“Look, look, Ma-kun! Mommy did it!”

“I’m not looking! If you’ve got time to dance, then put some clothes on! Spare your son some suffering! ...Argh, she did it again... Mom steals all the limelight... Dammit! Goddammit!”

“*Pffft...* Serves you right! It’s just our fate to end up like this now... Um... Wait, Masato... Look!”

“At what? Oh...”

Masato looked where Wise was pointing and saw the giant slime vanishing. The body turned to black dust, leaving a massive pile of gems behind it.

As its outline faded, a coffin appeared, pierced by the rock spikes.

The coffin lid slid open, and inside...

“...Huh? ...Ms. Shirase?”

She didn’t answer. She was dead.

“D-d-d-did I...do s-something...r-r-r-r-really horrible?!” Mamako was in a panic!

“It’s fine—don’t worry. The PK penalty hasn’t been activated, so I’m sure she was dead before you attacked.”

“A little corpse-kicking’s no big deal. Plus, it’s just her... So look, I’ll just revive her with my magic, cool?”

“Thank you! I can inform you that I have successfully returned to life!”

They’d managed to scramble out of the hole back to the surface.

Masato’s group gathered around the newly responsive former corpse. She was the same woman of indeterminate age they’d met twice before, now

dressed like a nun. As always, her expression retained a permanent frostiness, never a hint of warmth.

But they already knew she was like that, so that actually made it easier to handle. After all, that was just who she was.

“Um, so, we meet again. What’s your name and occupation this time?”

“I am Shiraaase. I can infoorm you that I am the Mysterious Nun Shiraaase.”

“Got it. We’ll go with that.”

The Mysterious Nun Shiraaase it was.

“First, I’d like to thank you all for saving me.”

“I dunno if we did, though? I mean, you were kinda already dead.”

“In my mind, resurrecting me is the same as saving me. As my way of saying thanks, please accept this.”

Shiraaase produced a bracelet from inside her robes. It didn’t look that expensive. It was more like an old bracelet that had been in the family for generations.

“What is this? Porta, can you appraise it?”

“Yes! Leave it to me! ...Hmm, this is...a Speed II Armlet!”

“Oh-ho, a Speed II Armlet? ...Why not just call it a bracelet? Sounds kinda shady to me.”

“No, this is a genuine magic accessory! If you equip it, it will dramatically increase your Speed! It’s really amazing!”

“What? For real?!”

If it raised Speed, that meant it would let him act faster in battle.

If he could attack before Mamako, he might actually get a chance to do something.

“Right, then. I’ll be taking—”

“This is perfect for me!”

As Masato reached out for the bracelet, Wise snatched it from his grasp.

“I’ll take this! It’s mine now! Everyone got that? I’m gonna be the fastest!”

“No, hang on! Speed doesn’t mean jack to you! You’re still gonna be last because you gotta waste time chanting! An item like this should be on the hero! Me!”

“Hmm... Mommy thinks it would be better for Wise, too. After all, we only beat that monster because of Wise. Mom-approved!”

“No! No matter what you say, Mom, I’m standing my—”

“I think whatever Mama decides is best!”

“And I, of course, agree with Mamako, too.”

Three against one. Case closed.

“Argh... I wish I had my mom’s influence...”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Right, let’s get this equipped!”

Wise attempted to put the Speed II Armband around her upper arm.

Her arm was a bit too thick, though, and she couldn’t get it to clasp.

“H-hunh? Wh-what the...? That doesn’t make any... Why...?”

“*Pffft!* That’s, like, the only place you’ve got any meat on you! ...But hang on—if you can’t get it on there, then I won’t even be able to get it past my wrist.” Masato hung his head.

“From the looks of it, it would fit Mama’s arm perfectly!”

“Oh, really? Then I guess I could try...”

While Wise stared in stunned horror, Mamako took the bracelet from her and placed it around her upper arm.

It fit perfectly. Like it was tailor-made.

Mamako’s Speed improved! She can now mop up enemies before anyone else in the party! ...Chances for anyone else to get a turn are greatly reduced.

“Oh my goodness! What’s this? I think I’m really going to shine now!”

“We would be in real trouble if you didn’t. Whew... Good thing we went to the trouble of making it exactly the right size for Mamako to... *Cough, cough...* I

shouldn't infoorm you of anything unnecessarily. Though I am Shiraaase!"

"Nah, I'd figured it out on my own. You're the worst."

"This game is rigged... It's absolutely insane..."

"A mother who can be relied on earns respect, deepening bonds. A beautiful parent-child relationship. Although I suppose if we give the parents all the advantages..."

"I don't care anymore..."

"...Then the children will all start talking like that. So let me provide each of you with a wonderful item that will foster strong bonds."

Shiraaase produced a pair of rings of a simple design with no decorations to draw the eye.

"Porta, appraise these?"

"Sure! ...Hmm, these are...Aderire Rings!"

"And what's that?"

"It's a combo-focused accessory! If the two of you wear these, then after one of you attacks, the other can quickly do a follow-up attack!"

"A follow-up attack? You mean...we can attack without having to chant the spell or charge the skill?"

"Cast canceling?! That's amazing! Perfect for me!"

"Heh-heh-heh. I'm glad you're happy with them... Whew. Now the children's dissatisfaction has been safely sealed away. Suckers."

"Don't say that out loud!"

"I sometimes infoorm people of things I should not infoorm them of. That is the Shiraaase seal of quality! Now, if I may..."

Shiraaase bowed her head and turned to leave.

"Oh, right," she said, stopping and fixing the party with a solemn look. "I realize this is entirely out of the blue, but given your strengths, there's a quest I'd like you to take."

“A quest? Already?”

“Yes. Assume it is a time-limited quest or a special-event quest. Naturally, we have prepared a suitable reward, so please, if you will.”

“Well! I do enjoy getting rewards!”

“It’s gonna be another reward for Mamako, right? You can’t fool me.”

“No, no, this will be something you can all use, rest assured. If you choose to accept it, please make your way to a small farming village to the west of Catharn, a place called Maman Village. I shall explain the details to you there.”

“...What do we all think?”

“The fact that we have to go all the way there to accept the quest is really suspicious,” Wise muttered. “Sounds like it’ll just automatically start when we get there, giving us no choice. I’ve got a bad feeling about it, personally...”

Shiraaase gave her a rare smile.

“If you wish to accept it, first acquire some proper equipment in Catharn before doing anything else. I highly recommend making sure you’re prepared for anything.”

With a faint trace of that smile lingering, Shiraaase left.

“That quest from Shiraaase definitely won’t lead us anywhere good.”

“I agree. But I have to admit I’m curious about the reward... Like, really curious...”

“So am I! We might get some amazing items!”

“Yes, indeed. There’s a lot to consider... But first!” Mamako clapped her hands, drawing all eyes to her. Beaming with joy and merriment and youth, she announced, “First, we go shopping! Come on! Whoo-hoo!”

No matter what followed, shopping took priority.

The party returned to Catharn. They took the huge pile of gems they’d gathered in battle to the exchange counter and turned them into a heavy bag of coins. Now they were rich. What to buy first?

“The Traveling-Merchant base skill gives a ten percent discount! Also, I have

the Appraise skill, so let me pick which items to buy! I won't let us waste a single mum."

"A mum? What's that?"

"That's the currency here!"

"Really? Well, from glancing at the prices on things, I guess one mum is about one yen...," Mamako said, looking around the open-air market they were walking through.

She was stopped in her tracks by...

"Ma-kun, Ma-kun, look! Eggs are so cheap! You can get a dozen for one hundred mum!"

"Uh, Mom, we didn't come here to go grocery shopping..."

"Hey there, young lady! Wanna try a sample? Minotaur-beef diced steak...it's really good!"

"Oh, it is good! I should get a pound!"

"No, I mean...we're not here for food..."

"Oh, lovely lady! I have just the skin-care treatment to make your skin gleam! We've got a special offer, three for three thousand mum!"

"Oh, that might be just the thing for my skin! I think I'll get some!"

"Look at the price! They're selling one for one thousand mum—you aren't even saving anything! ...Mom, calm down! Mom! Eyes on me!"

"Y-yes?"

Masato grabbed Mamako's face with both hands, forcing her to look at him. This was important.

"Mom. We are in a game. We're getting ready for an adventure."

"Y-yes... I know that..."

"You clearly don't! You don't get it at all! If you go shopping in an RPG, you buy weapons, armor, items! Those three things! You don't need to buy anything else!"

“B-but...I...I...”

“Mm? What?”

“I have to at least buy you some underwear and socks, Ma-kun!! You’re wearing the same ones you had on yesterday! You can’t just keep wearing those without washing them today and tomorrow and every day after that!”

Mamako’s voice was very loud and carried to every corner of the open-air market.

Masato...the boy wearing the same underwear and socks as the day before, the boy every single person in the market was staring at in horror...

...was left with no choice. Tears in his eyes, he said: “...Buy whatever you need.”

And so they made their way to an area filled with clothing stores. Beautiful garments hung on hangers in rows, and there were shops with bins stuffed with piles of cheap underwear. Everywhere they looked, there was nothing but clothes.

“I’m sorry, but we do need to buy your underwear first, Ma-kun. Underwear, socks, undershirts. Handkerchiefs, towels, that sort of thing. Maybe some pajamas, too?”

“...Just do whatever.”

“No, your input matters! The last time I bought some underwear for you, you got all mad about it. ‘I’d never wear anything like this!’ Remember?”

“That was your fault for picking those! No one my age would wear underwear with bears on them!”

“Um, Masato!”

“Mm? What is it, Porta?”

“I think bears are really cute! I’ve got bears on mine now!”

“Porta...”

Masato knelt down in front of Porta, giving her a kindly smile.

“You probably shouldn’t say things like that to any guys but me, okay?”

“Right! Got it!”

It was safe to tell Masato. He was a gentleman.

“Oh, one more thing!”

“Yes, Porta? What wonderful words do you have for us this time?”

“I’ve learned a number of Item Creation skills! If I have the fabric, I can make Masato’s underwear and socks! So...!”

“Very well! I shall wear your underwear!”

“Excuse me, Officer! He’s over here!”

“Correction! I shall wear the underwear you make for me!”

Whew. Close one. A simple slip of the tongue had nearly ended his life.

Chattering away, they browsed the shops.

“Oh, adventurers!” A female clerk at an armor store next to the clothing area called out to them. “Feel free to try on any armor! We’ve got a great selection!”

Outside the shop was an array of classic leather gear and heavy, high-defense metal armor and shields. Several different designs, from traditional European looks to more unique tribal patterns. A regular smorgasbord.

“Oh! We’re finally where we should be! This! This is the kind of shopping I wanted to do!”

“Then come right in! We have just what you’re looking for! For example... what about this?”

The clerk dramatically held up...a basic pair of unmentionables.

Female armor. The kind that was only technically armor, offering very little actual protection, barely concealing the chest and the area below the waist, yet inexplicably including shoulder pads.

“Oh-ho! So this is the fabled bikini armor!”

“This armor prioritizes mobility over all else! Lovely, isn’t it? Sir, I suggest you recommend this to your party members. Tell them it’s entirely functional armor, so there’s no need to be embarrassed by it.”

“D-don’t be ridiculous! You can’t have the men pushing them to wear this... And there’s at least one person in my party I reeeaaally don’t want wearing this...”

“Oh, how lovely! Mommy’s never seen anything like that!”

“Crap, the worst possible person took the baaaait!!”

Mamako took the bikini armor from the clerk, looking it over with great interest.

“Can I try this on?”

“Of course! We have changing rooms right over here, so try anything you like! We’ve got a broad selection, so try anything that catches your eye!”

“Oh, really? In that case...I guess I’ll try this here and that one, too!”

“If Mamako’s trying things, maybe I should, too...”

“Th-then can I try things, too?”

“Of course! Three ladies, this waaay!”

As Masato stared in shock, the girls took their selections and disappeared into the simple changing rooms to one side of the shop.

Masato was left standing alone.

“So I just get to wait, then?”

“That’s what happens to men in this situation. It’s important to resign yourself to it,” the clerk said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Masato sighed.

At last, the curtains were ready to part. Mamako, Wise, Porta: Three generations of women began their RPG fashion show.

“Just as a friendly reminder, if you should suffer a violent nosebleed or discharge of other bodily fluids, you will be purchasing any merchandise stained in the process, so please be extremely careful.”

“I’m not gonna have a nosebleed... Hang on—what other bodily fluids?”

“Would you like me to be more specific?”

“...No, better not.”

“Good choice. Now let’s get this show started! First up!”

A changing room curtain opened, and out stepped...

“Ma-kun! How’s this look on Mommy?”

Mamako equipped the bikini armor!

What *is* armor, really? A philosophical debate unavoidable in the presence of any bikini armor, but Mamako in such armor was definitely a sight.

The breastplates covered less than a fifth of her magnificent bosoms, which threatened to break free with each sway. With her slim waist and smooth midriff exposed and the minimalist triangular covering below, flesh was bared almost anywhere the eye could see.

Masato clutched his head, as if trying to crush his own skull.

“Nobody gets it... Nobody else knows the pain of seeing your own mother in bikini armor...”

“O-oh? I thought you’d be happy... Does it not look good?”

“It’s not a question of good or bad! I mean, it’s kinda nice, I guess? There’s just a much bigger problem going on here, so please just change!”

“O-okay... I understand. I’ll try the next outfit.”

“I meant just put your normal clothes back on!!”

Mamako went into the changing room. What horrors awaited him next?

But first...

“Next up, our two younger members!”

“Oh! That’s right! I still have them! Give me a feast for the eyes! Heal my aching heart!”

Next to emerge were Wise and Porta.

“Heh-heh! My continuous white magic will heal your body and soul! ... Kidding!”

“I’ll make you items! Lots of items!”

Wise was wearing a white Mage's robes, pure white and covered in mystical patterns. She had a pleasant smile, like an angel... Nah, that was going too far.

Porta was dressed like an item maker: a scholar's clothes, a mortarboard, and a tiny pair of glasses resting on her nose. A super-cute professor.

Masato looked at each in turn and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Yeah, that's what I was looking for. Good choices, I think."

"Ha-ha! Right? I figured it might make a good change of pace. Show off my devout side. Might get myself a few more believers, hee-hee."

"So it's a con?"

"D-don't look so serious! I'm just joking!"

"Porta's completely adorable, though. Lemme give you some tickles! Heh-heh-heh!"

"Eep, I'm t-ticklish!"

"Sir, if you get drool on the clothes, you're buying them."

Whoops, close one. He quickly retracted that other bodily fluid.

"Right, that's enough! Everyone back in their regular clothes, and let's head out—"

"Wait, Ma-kun! How's this look on Mommy?!"

"I didn't ask you to try on another outfit!!"

Mamako made her second appearance. She flung the changing room curtain back and stepped out in...

"Hi! I'm Mamako Oosuki, fifteen years old! Tee-hee! ...Just kidding!"

Mamako was dressed in a high school uniform: a blazer and a micro-miniskirt. The buttons on her blouse looked ready to pop under the weight of her chest! Every movement gave a glimpse of her panties!

Masato clutched his head as if trying to rip it off and fling it away.

"My mom cosplaying as a schoolgirl... But she looks so young that she can actually pull it off... How can I express the confusion? ...Why is that even on sale

here?”

“Oh! I do apologize for that, miss. That’s a limited item for a special event, so please pay it no mind!”

“Oh my, is it? I’m sorry. Mamako really shouldn’t have! Tee-hee! ”

“Stop doing thaaaaaaaat! Please just go chaaaaange!”

“Got it. Next one, then!”

“Nooooo, there is no ‘next one’!”

Masato’s plea fell on deaf ears. Mamako returned to the changing room, quickly put on another outfit, and reappeared.

This time...

“Mommy’s made up her mind... With this dark power, I will destroy everything!”

...she was dressed as a dark god—or rather, a dark goddess. Jet-black armor seemingly scorched by the flames of black hellfire. Her eyes had lost all light, and she had become a scourge of darkness.

Mom had turned evil.

Masato stared at her in shock, beyond all words.

“Oh, um... Ma-kun, what’s wrong? Is this too weird?”

“Huh? Um, no...”

He actually kinda liked it, but that would be his little secret.

“Well, uh... Not bad! Yeah, not bad at all! Very little skin showing! As your son, I feel safe looking at this. It’s pretty scary, though!”



“Oh, it is? Well, I’m glad you like it, Ma-kun. Next...”

“Oh, come on! Enough already!”

“Don’t say that! There’s only one more... I saw Wise changing and thought I wanted to try that out, too. See?”

Mamako held up the pure-white robe she planned to try on next. *Wait a second...*

“The same thing as Wise? But isn’t that...? What do you think, Porta?”

“Right! This is a Healing Robe, equipment for a healer or a Mage!”

“I’m a Sage, which is a kind of Mage, so I can wear it, but there’s no way Mamako could.”

“Yes! Mama’s job is Hero’s Mother, so just like a hero, she can only wear armor meant for warriors. I’m afraid you can’t equip that!”

That’s what Masato thought.

Mamako didn’t get it at all. Surprised, she held the robe up against herself.

“But... Look! It’s exactly my size!”

“Um, no, you see... Size isn’t the problem. Your job dictates what you can wear...”

“Your job has nothing to do with it. They’re just clothes! If the size is right, you can wear them.”

“No, Mom... That’s how it works normally, but in a game...”

“Don’t worry. I’m just going to try it on.”

What was he supposed to be worried about, again? Mamako was already in the changing room, though. He could hear fabric rustling.

“Um... What happens if you ignore equip restrictions and try to force it on?”

“I...I’m really not sure...”

“Hey, shop lady. Do you know?”

“I’m afraid not. No one has ever done something that reckless before...”

What was about to happen? All they could do was wait and see.

Suddenly, there was a horrible scream.

“M-Ma-kun! Oh no! Help me!”

“*Gasp!* Wh-what is it? What’s going on?!”

This sounded bad. Masato raced over to the changing room, flung back the curtains, and inside...

“Eek! What’s happening?!”

...Mamako was trying to get the robe over her head, but her hands and head got stuck inside, and she was thrashing about in vain.

The robe was wrapped around her like a straitjacket.

Since she’d been trying to get dressed, the only other thing she had on was her underwear.

Finding herself trapped in what was surely somebody’s fetish, Mamako struggled, her excessively well-endowed chest heaving this way and that, her narrow waist wriggling. What a spectacle! A thrilling half-naked dance! Sexaaay!

But this is his mother we’re talking about.

“Ack... If you weren’t my mom... If you were anyone else...I could live out a teen boy’s fantasy... Dammit...”

“Ma-kun! Get this off me! I need you to help Mommy undress!”

“Just stop talking! I’ll get it off you! Stay still!”

The son helped his mother undress. No, not like that! Get your filthy mind out of the gutter!

Children, make sure you attempt to equip only what you’re actually capable of equipping.

“*Sigh...* Having mom along is just too much...”

“Yeah. It’s hard to handle stuff like that when it’s your mom.”

“Huh? You think so, too, Wise?”

“Well, sure. If you were doing pervy stuff with a normal girl, I’d get to jump in

yelling ‘What’s wrong with you?!’ and slap you around.”

“I don’t remember appointing you to dole out punishment.”

“But when it’s your mom, I kinda feel like I can just let you go at it, y’know? It’s hard to figure out when to step in... Aaargh, I missed my chance to slap you... It was the perfect setup, too!”

“Thanks for *not* slapping me.”

They left the store that had encouraged this fashion show and headed for the next armor shop.

The new shop was stuffed with every bit as many things as the last. A real armor lover could spend an entire day browsing the selection. The grumpy clerk shot them a look that read “Help yourself.” So they did.

“Porta, sweetie, why don’t you tell us which items are high quality? That way we can pick what suits our tastes from those... There are so many here, I can’t help but dither...”

“Yeah... Go with the classic look? Strive for originality? This is a true test of a hero’s sensibilities.”

“Oh, this one could be good for you, Masato.”

Wise held up a long jacket made of black leather. There was a magical-looking pattern covering the entire garment, and the left arm was embroidered with a shield motif.

“I could tell instantly! This is Oya & Bannale. They’re a brand that makes things really strong against fire-and ice-breath attacks. And with this style, if you hold your left arm out, you can deploy a defensive wall. Pretty useful!”

“Whoa, that sounds awesome! ...You sure know a lot.”

“Of course I do! I mean, I’m wearing the same brand. See? Same logo on the collar.”

Wise pulled her collar up, showing it to Masato, so he leaned in.

Mm, she smells kinda good... No, wait.

“Hey, Porta, take a look. Is this good?”

“Appraising! ...Hmm... Light armor for a warrior type... Masato can equip it... Defense functions are as advertised... The price of thirty thousand mum is fair. Yes, I’d recommend this, too!”

“Porta-approved! Then I’ll just...,” Masato started. Then he paused. “Um, I just had a thought. If I wear this, won’t that mean Wise and I match?”

“...Wha?! Th-that would be...”

Not only were the long black leather coat and Wise’s sorcerer’s jacket the same brand, but the designs were clearly quite similar.

At a glance, it would definitely look as if they were dressing the same... Like a couple...

“Oh, Ma-kun! Look at this! What do you think?”

“Mm? Oh...”

Mamako was pulling his sleeve, dragging him after her.

She’d found two sets of armor, one for women and one for men: made of platinum, a delicate pattern over every inch, with details picked out in lava-like crimson and ocean-like blue. A design that pulsed with the very power that created the world.

“Well, these are clearly made to be worn by a hero and his mom... Like they’re begging us to put ‘em on.”

“I thought so, too! The exact same colors as Mommy’s swords and yours! Perfectly matching! And, um... What was it again? These were really amazing, right, Porta?”

“Yes! This armor can prevent all status effects! You’ll never get poisoned or confused wearing these!”

“Wow, it nulls all status effects?”

“And there’s magic forged into them that recovers injuries! It can activate once every set period of time.”

“And auto-heal?! Geez, those are some insane specs. I guess I’m sold... But this doesn’t really seem like something we can just walk out with.”

The listed price for the pair was 29,800,000,000,000,000,000 mum.

Twenty-nine point eight quintillion. Thousands, millions, billions, trillions, quadrillions, quintillions.

“They clearly have no intention of selling these.”

“Yes, they do seem to be a little out of our price range. If only they were more like 29,800 mum, we might be able to swing it...”

“It’s like the kind of price you see on an infomercial. No way we’ll talk them into it...”

The shop clerk’s eyes gleamed, and he got up from the counter. The moment he heard Mamako speak, he was already changing the price. Shaving off all those zeros, until the cost for both suits of armor was only...29,800 mum.

“What the hell?! All of Mom’s wishes come true, huh? ...How far will this world bend over backward for a parent’s whim...?”

“Ma-kun! It’s only 29,800 mum for both of them! What a steal!”

“True enough. Definitely makes it a really tempting offer. But...if we bought these...then you and I would be wearing matching armor...”

“I think it’s lovely when mothers and sons dress the same!”

“It’s not. There’s no way. I could never... Oh man, I want the auto-heal and full status-effect protection, but...”

The armor glittered, as if promising him it had no equal. But matching his mom? Masato found himself on the horns of a horrible dilemma.

And then Wise came over carrying the long black leather jacket.

“Hey! You aren’t about to spurn the one I picked and buy these, are you?!”

“W-Wise...”

“Think about it! The one I picked is plenty great! You can handle enemy breath attacks! And put out a defensive wall that protects against magic and physical attacks!”

“Y-yeah... Those certainly are astonishingly good specs. I agree it’s a great item. But if I picked that, *we’d* be the ones matching...”

“B-b-b-but! We wouldn’t match *exactly*! The designs are similar, but the colors are different!”

“Even with different colors, matching is matching,” Mamako chimed in. “Anyone looking would think as much.”

She quietly stepped up in front of Masato, staring Wise down.

“Wise, darling, if you’re so embarrassed about wearing the same look, there’s no need to try so hard to get him to wear that jacket, is there?”

“Th-that’s true, but... Oh, right! There’s a reason I’m suggesting this!”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Our party doesn’t have a tank, right? But if Masato wears this, he can tank when we need one! There’s a strategic benefit!”

“I’m not sure what tanks have to do with this, but if we’re concerned about defense, then we really should be wearing proper armor. The set I chose is much stronger.”

“Sure, it’s made of metal! But hey, I can make up the difference with magic! I’ll handle all the support spells, so there’s no problem!”

They were really going at it.

“C-calm down, both of you. No reason to argue about something as trivial as this!”

“Trivial?!” *Twitch.*

“There’s no point!” *Twitch, twitch.*

Choosing armor was a woman’s battleground—a battle to the death over who had the best taste. A carelessly voiced opinion meant death! DEATH!

But if he let them keep going at it, things were literally going to explode.

“Well, at least stop with the angry twitching! R-remember, this is *my* armor! And therefore, my decision! Okay?”

The final choice came down to the one who actually had to wear the thing. It was Masato’s choice to make: The long black leather jacket, matching Wise’s, with the shield skill and the breath resistance...

...or the clearly legendary armor, matching Mom's, with resistance to all status ailments and an auto-healing feature?

Which should he choose? Masato already knew the answer.

"We've got enough money, so why not buy both? We can use whichever is right for the situation."

Changing equipment to match the attack patterns of the enemies they were facing was common sense in RPGs. Masato's choice was the correct one.

But of course...

"Tch, coward. Took the easy way out."

"I didn't raise you to be so indecisive!"

Masato found himself bathed in disapproval. Disheartening. Even Porta's smile looked forced. At least she was trying.

But either way, at least they were done with armor...or so he thought.

The next morning.

"Mom. Explain this."

"I—I didn't mean to! It was an accident! I was just trying to make you happy!"

"And that's why you washed and dried it overnight and gave it to me like this... Or what remains of it..."

Masato attempted to put his arm through the sleeve of the jacket, but it failed to emerge on the other end. The hem had come down to his knees the day before, but now it dragged on the ground.

With the stretched-out, flabby remains of his long jacket equipped, Masato gave his mother a melancholic stare.

"Mom...you can't use fabric softeners on leather..."

"I just thought it would make it more comfortable! I thought it would make it smell nice! I didn't expect it to stretch like that! I'm really sorry."

Mamako bowed her head, genuinely apologetic. Perhaps she really hadn't intended to ruin it...but Masato wasn't satisfied.

Ah, crap... I don't like this...

What didn't he like? Himself. He didn't like where his feelings were taking him.

But knowing that didn't stop it from happening. He couldn't help himself.

"Look, Mom... Ever since we got here, you've been a little *too* happy."

"Hunh? ...W-well, I'm just glad to be adventuring with you, so..."

"Nah, not that. Like you're about to float off. Like you can't settle down for a minute. And you keep...like, doing things your way or pushing me into things."

"I don't mean to..."

"Even if you don't, you are! I mean, I want to fight, too, but you're so strong you finish everything off before I can. You're *always* the one leading the party. There's no reason for me to be here. I'm supposed to be the hero! Would it kill you to remember that sometimes?"

"Hey! Masato!" Wise said, stepping in. "That's enough. You're going too far. And drifting off topic."

"Uh, yeah, I know, but... I mean, shouldn't you also be complaining? Wise, she ruined the jacket you picked, too!"

"Yeah, and I was pissed about that! I was gonna say something, but... I don't want to be as mean as you're being."

"...I'm being mean?"

"Yeah, you are. Right, Porta?"

Wise called Porta over and plopped her down in front of Masato. "U-um...", Porta stammered, looking anxious.

Was she scared because Masato and Mamako were fighting? No, that wasn't it. Masato had been chewing his mother out. Even if Porta didn't mean it, that was definitely a reproachful gleam in her eye.

Hang on—am I in the wrong here?

He wanted to argue the point. He felt the impulse churning inside him.

But before he let it out, he realized doing so would be even less cool. He wanted to be cool in front of his honorary little sister. That urge was sad in its own right, but here it helped him get it together. *Get over it. Even if you have to fake it.*

Masato vented all his anger in one long sigh. He then turned toward Mamako and bowed his head.

“...Sorry. I went a bit overboard.”

“Hunh? O-oh, that’s okay. This is my fault. I’m sorry, too. I didn’t mean to upset you like this.”

“Uh, y-yeah...”

Apologies all around. Issue resolved. Everything back to normal... Sort of.

It wasn’t that easy, was it? Masato still felt an uncomfortable sensation clinging tightly to him, refusing to let go.

Chapter 4 Not Once Have I Ever Thought, Thank God My Mom's So Understanding.

As he looked up at the cloudless sky, a gentle breeze brushed against Masato's back, encouraging him to press on.

This was a perfect day to set out in search of adventure.

"All right, everybody! Onward! Everyone, follow me!"

"Yes! I'm right behind you!"

With these bright voices, the party left Catharn behind.

They proceeded merrily across the grassland... At least, two of them did.

"Oh, I just had an idea! Why don't we break up the journey with a race?"

"Okay! I'm in!"

"Great! First one to that forest gets a special prize!"

"Wow! I want a special prize!"

The high school Sage in a crimson jacket and the little Traveling Merchant with a large shoulder bag ran off, laughing happily. Skipping and humming, squealing with joy. Thrilling in the moment.

What are they doing?

"Sigh... Hey, Wise? And Porta? What's gotten into you? You're both acting a little weird."

"U-um... Uh..."

"Hmm? Well..."

Wise performed a graceful spin, grinning wide.

A moment later, she had a fistful of Masato's shirt and had fixed him with a glare so fierce she might have been trying to gouge out chunks of him with it. *That's one heck of a glare! Crap, she's scary!*

"U-um...Wise...?"

“Really, Masato? You don’t know why we’re acting like this? You really have no idea? Whose fault do you think this is? Who’s the one wrecking the party’s mood? Why do you think we’re trying so hard to fix that? Do you really not know?”

“Erk... S-sorry...”

“I’m not asking for an apology! I’d rather you step up and do something! Do you even have it in you? Do you?!”

“Y-yes, ma-am! I am well aware that it’s my responsibility to resolve the situation! Please have mercy!”

“Then hurry up and do it!”

She shoved him in the chest so hard he staggered back five paces, right next to Mamako.

“Oh, what’s wrong, Ma-kun?”

“Huh? Oh, um...”

Mamako was wearing light armor over her nice dress, and she spoke in her normal voice, addressing Masato in the same tone she always did.

But he caught a hint of hesitation in her expression. She looked as overwhelmingly young as ever, but a cloud was hanging over her smile; something was clearly bothering her. And he knew full well what.

He had to brush away that cloud and get her usual sunny smile back. That was Masato’s current mission.

“Um, s-so, about my equipment...,” he began.

But Mamako suddenly looked frightened and turned away. “I’m s-sorry! I’m really sorry! I can’t apologize enough!”

“You don’t need to! I’m over it! Look, Porta did an amazing job reworking it! It looks great, doesn’t it?”

Masato had equipped what was basically an armored jacket. Porta had combined the ruined jacket with the shoulders and gauntlets from the set of armor, converting it to a set of light armor, a product of Porta’s Item Creation

skill.

As a result of the merger, the null status effects had dropped down to only a resist, and the auto-heal and breath resistance were also less effective. That was a bit unfortunate.

But the useful effects were all on the same piece of gear, the design wasn't bad, and he was thrilled to have something handmade by Porta.

So you don't need to worry about it anymore.

There'd been some strange twists along the way, but all's well that ends well. Masato was glad things had turned out the way they had. He was trying hard to push that perspective to the forefront.

"I'm just really sorry. I won't do anything without asking first. I won't get in your way anymore, Ma-kun. So please...just don't hate me."

Mamako had deflated completely. She couldn't stop apologizing. An impregnable wall of *sorry*. No matter what he said, it didn't get through to her.

Masato could only back off...or he wanted to, but the second he stepped forward, Wise shoved him back, growling, "Don't you dare run! *Grrrr!*" And he was right back at Mamako's side.

"Uhhh... Well... So..."

"I'm sorry. I'm just so sorry. I won't do anything again ever. That way you won't ever get angry with me again."

"That...that isn't what... I don't want you to do nothing..."

An idea hit him just then.

"Oh, I know! Duties! What matters is that we each play our parts!"

"Our parts?"

"In a game like this, each of us has a role to play, and the whole point of a party is that each of us plays that part well. By effectively fulfilling your duties, you earn trust, and the party as a whole grows closer together. See?"

"It's important to play your part... Then what role should a mom play? Making food? Washing things? Oh, I know! A mom has to attend PTA meetings!"

“Take a step back from the real world. Think in game terms.”

“Oh, th-that’s right... We’re having an adventure inside a game!”

“And that means...”

What would be the best assignment for Mamako?

Masato knew just the thing.

“Come to think of it, Mom, you’ve got a guidebook, right? Is there a map of the Wandering Woods where we’re headed next?”

“A map...? Oh, yes, I think there was one. I made sure to check that out. I even folded the corner of the page so I could easily find it again!”

“Good, good. Then your first responsibility can be as our guide. These woods are called ‘wandering’ because it’s easy to get lost and wander around for hours. But if you help us navigate, we can get through it in no time, and we’ll be at the next town before you know it. This is your chance to shine! We’re all counting on you!”

“You are? Well, I’m going to do the best job I can! You can count on Mommy!”

She brightened up considerably.

“Great, that’s the spirit! Let’s enjoy this!”

The sun overhead or Mamako’s smile, motivated anew—if asked which was more blinding, Masato would probably have said the latter. Although the fact that such an embarrassing thought had even crossed his mind was definitely something he planned to keep to himself.

Why did people get lost in these woods? There were two main causes: First, paths ran this way or that, and it was impossible to tell whether they were animal trails or human roads.

Second was the way the trees grew. Featureless, unremarkable trees sprouted uniformly across the forest, so whichever way you looked, everything looked the same, as if the forest itself was designed to get travelers lost.

With Mamako in the lead, the party stepped into the Wandering Woods.

And about thirty turns later, they were back at the entrance.

Or, rather, before they knew it, there they were again.

“Ha-ha! Well, it certainly fooled us! Any ideas, Mom?”

“I’m sure we were going the way the guidebook said... Ma-kun! Give Mommy another chance! I want to play my part!”

“I believe in you. Let’s get going!”

The party set out into the woods. Straight ahead. “If we pass through this thicket, we should turn right.” They passed through the thicket and turned right. “Next, we go left.” They turned left and followed an animal path. “Straight ahead.” They hopped over a fallen tree. “Left!” They passed between two rock pillars and...

...were back at the entrance. *We’re home. Long time no see.*

“So...you can’t even guide us...,” Masato grumbled.

“I-I’m sorry! I’m really sorry...,” apologized Mamako, bowing her head repeatedly.

Masato hadn’t expected his mother to take it that badly, so he hastily added, “Oh... Uh, no... You don’t need to apologize...”

He’d done it again. And here he’d sworn he was going to be more careful about this sort of thing.

Mamako had shriveled up once more, so he took the guidebook from her and looked it over himself. Based on the map, the route Mamako had taken them definitely should have been the right one.

So if they still couldn’t get through the woods...

“Do we need some sort of special item? Or do we have to trigger some sort of event? No, if we did, the guide would say... Is it a bug, then? Argh... This is useless...”

“I-I’m sorry... I’m a useless mother...”

“Not you! I wasn’t talking about you!”

But it was too late. Mamako wouldn’t look up to meet his eye.

A hand grabbed a fistful of Masato's hair, dragging him aside.

"Ow... Wh-what?"

There was only one person who'd do something like this. He turned around and glared at Wise.

But Wise didn't say a word. Instead, she just produced Porta and pushed her forward. Those innocent eyes stared up at him, endlessly sorrowful. And stared. And stared.

"A-all right! I'll do something! Trust me!"

But what could he do? He was out of ideas.

Just then...

"...Um, Ma-kun? Can you come here a moment?" Mamako called out to him timidly.

She knelt down in the shade and patted her knees.

"...Sure?"

What was she up to? Confused, Masato tilted his head to one side, but Mamako pointed at the tree branches. There were two birds sitting there, tweeting away.

Oh... Okay. So that's what's up.

Masato knew exactly what his mother was trying to say. But...

"No, Mom, not happening."

"R-really? I thought it might work... I guess I was wrong..."

"Hey!" Wise shouted. "Enough family telepathy! Explain so we can understand. What's going on?"

Porta peered up at him with great curiosity, so Masato reluctantly explained.

"Look, it's a dumb story... But when I was little, I hated getting my ears cleaned. It tickles, you know? But then Mom said..."

"I said, 'If you get your ears cleaned on Mommy's lap, you'll hear what the animals are saying.' Ma-kun got all excited and let me clean his ears! Hee-hee..."

That sure takes me back. Was that just last week?"

"That was ten years ago! I figured out you were lying before I hit first grade!"

"I don't care if it was a week ago or yesterday. So what are you saying?!"

"Basically, Mom's saying if she cleans my ears on her lap here, I'll be able to understand what the birds are saying, and that might give us a hint to get through the forest. Doesn't make any sense, but that's your idea, right, Mom?"

"It is. Wouldn't it be nice? ...I mean, my body started glowing out of nowhere, right? So I thought maybe, just maybe..."

"I know you've developed some pretty crazy abilities, but this one seems a little too far-fetched. There's just no way."

"R-right... I'm sorry I said something so silly..."

"Argh... Would you please stop apologizing?"

Mamako just hung her head.

He was sure she'd been frantically racking her brain for something she could do. She was desperate to redeem herself, and her son had just rejected her efforts without a second thought. He felt a pang of guilt.

Someone slapped him on the back. He turned and saw Wise and Porta staring at him reproachfully and sorrowfully, respectively. Silently. Pushing him.

He had to do it.

"U-um... Hey, Mom. Can we, uh...?"

"Yes...?"

Masato sat down and put his head on her lap and felt the warmth of her thighs against his cheek. He closed his eyes.

"Um... Ma-kun?"

"Can't hurt to try. So, like, just go ahead and clean my ears real quick."

"O-oh! Okay! ...Porta, can you look after my things?"

"Yes, right away!"

"And I'll just stand right here and watch. Get a load of this teenage boy letting

his mother clean his ears in front of us! Heh-heh-heh.”

“Oh, God! Please! Just go away!”

This was probably someone’s fetish but not his. He was just enduring it. Against his will.

“Now then, Ma-kun. Don’t move.”

He could hear the glee in her voice as the tip of the ear pick entered his ear canal.

The tip was hard but also gentle, peaceful. It scraped here and there, tickling him. This was what Masato had hated so much. He still wasn’t a big fan.

But if he was being honest, he rather liked the feel on the other side of his head, of the ear that wasn’t being cleaned pressed against her lap. Soft. Warm. Maybe a little too high, which strained the neck. But still very comfortable.

He let himself be honest.

“Mom’s lap...”

“That’s right, sweetie. You’re in Mom’s lap.”

“Erk...”

He hadn’t meant to say that aloud. It was pretty mortifying.

Even so, lap pillows were hardly fair. If you just needed to lie down on something, a foam pillow was way better. But there was something far more fulfilling about the lap pillow, a primal urge no other pillow could ever satisfy.

There was definitely something special about this one in particular—his mother’s lap pillow.

Something that made even the most obstinate heart yield.

I’ve got to say it now. This is my chance.

Only now did Masato feel ready to say what had been on his mind for a while.

“...Hey, Mom.”

“What is it, darling?”



“I’m sorry about everything. When I’m dealing with you, I keep saying things I don’t mean... I’m really sorry for making you feel bad.”

“Ma-kun...”

“I don’t really think you’re useless or in the way. You’re a huge help... No, that’s not right... I don’t know what I’d do without you. Even now, I mean... I can’t clean my own ears, so without you...”

“My, my. Am I your own personal ear cleaner, then? Is that my sole duty?”

“No! No, no, that’s not what I meant!”

He tried to sit up and protest, but she pushed his head back down. “Hey! Don’t move!” Then he felt her hand brushing against his hair, again and again. Soothing him.

“You know what I love more than anything, Ma-kun? When you’re being nice to me. When you’re being considerate.”

“Thanks... Also, you’re really bright...”

She was bursting with light from sheer joy. Masato closed his eyes to avoid being blinded by it.

Feeling incredibly awkward, he drifted off to sleep...

When Masato woke up from dozing on his mom’s lap, shame erupted within him with such force, he nearly died on the spot.

“D-don’t get me wrong! That’s just the effect her lap has! It’s like a special skill that puts people to sleep!”

“Yeah, yeah, go on. You had a little nap time on mommy’s lap.”

“Ack... I regret everything...”

“But I think it’s amazing that getting your ears cleaned lets you understand what the birds are saying! Now we can get through the forest!”

“Yeah, I’m amazed, too. I never thought it would actually work... Mom, you’re amazing. Your power is limitless!”

“Well, hearing you say that makes Mommy very happy! I feel so much

better!” Another flash of blinding light.

Masato could now hear what the birds flying overhead were chirping: “Go up, go up, go down, go down!” “Go left, go right, go left, go right!”

If he did exactly as they said, the party should have found themselves back where they started again, but...

...when they cleared the underbrush, they weren’t back at the entrance. Or in any normal forest, for that matter. Every branch and trunk had thorns growing out of it, like a prickly torture chamber.

Standing in the center of it all was a person. It appeared to be the Mysterious Nun Shiraaase.

“Oh! Travelers! This way! Come to my side! Never fear, this is not a trap! Heh-heh-heh! Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

Yet, this Shiraaase was, for some reason, smiling like a knockoff Virgin Mary doll at some sketchy souvenir stand. She waved her arms comically, like a marionette, as if beckoning them to leap into her embrace.

She put on a performance so terrible it was kind of impressive.

“No need to wonder if this is suspicious, huh? Clearly a trap.”

“We’ve met before, yet she’s addressing us as ‘travelers.’ And she’s acting all weird. She’s gotta be broken.”

“U-um... I can see a tree root or something stabbing Ms. Shiraaase in the back... It seems like it’s invaded the rest of her body, too...”

“Goodness gracious! We must save her!” Mamako immediately tried to run to her but suddenly realized something and stopped in her tracks.

She turned and stared at Masato.

“Goodness gracious!” she said again. In the exact same tone. “We must save her!”

“Uh, sure. You’re giving me a turn at being the one to run in first, huh? But... this is such an obvious trap...”

“Then I’ll go! You take another nap on mommy’s lap! *Pffft.*”

“Oh? All right, Ma-kun, come on over.” Mamako sat down and patted her lap.

“You’re just on standby now?! ...H-hey, Wise!”

Wise had left them in her wake. As obviously unnatural as Shiraaase was, Wise approached her and grabbed her hand. A moment later...

Chomp. They were eaten.

“...Uh... Seriously...?”

Literally eaten. The entire party was swallowed up, ground and all.

The entire area they’d found themselves in had been part of something like a giant bear trap. The second the prey touched the baited switch, the trap closed.

The ground around them lifted up and folded in half, and the thorn-covered trees began crunching together, exactly like chewing teeth.

“Heh... Just as I suspected! I knew this would happen!” Wise scoffed proudly.

“Then take care of it before setting the trap off! Geez... You ready, Mom?”

“Let’s do this! ...Except there’s one problem... I can’t seem to stand up.”

“Huh?”

Had she actually been injured? Masato quickly turned to see, and...

“...Zzz...”

...Porta was sound asleep on Mamako’s lap, taking the turn Masato had rejected.

“Look, Wise! Look, look!”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it!”

Mom’s lap really did have a soporific effect.

“Hardly the time for it... But well done, Porta! If Mom can’t move—”

“Then it’ll always be our turn! Let’s not waste this chance, Masato!”

“Yeah! It’s the perfect opportunity to try out this combo effect, too!”

“I agree! Let’s go!”

Masato put his ring on the middle finger of his left hand. Wise put hers on the

middle finger of her right hand. The moment they were on, the Aderire Rings adjusted their sizes to fit and flashed once, the effect activated. Their combo attack was primed.

Masato took a firm grip on Firmamento, ready to start things off.

“...What should I be attacking, exactly?”

“I was about to ask the same thing!”

The folded ground. The gnashing trees. All they could do was blindly attack everything in sight.

“Forgive me, ground! Forgive me, trees! This hero isn’t eco-friendly! ...Wise, your turn!”

“Okay! *Cast Cancel! Bomba Sfera! And! Fuoco Fiamma!*”

Masato’s slash was followed swiftly by Wise’s incantations. Everything around them was cut in half, exploding, or on fire.

“Wait till my turn’s ready!”

“Hurry up!”

A brief rest.

“All right, let’s go!”

“Got it! *Cast Cancel!*”

Cut. Explode. Burn.

They lashed out at everything in sight, but while the combo effect was clearly working, they didn’t seem to be accomplishing anything else.

The giant earth mouth was still chewing away, and it looked as if they would soon be crushed to death.

“Uh, this is bad! We’re really gonna get eaten!”

“I know! But what are we supposed to do? Attacking everything is getting us nowhere! Like, the only thing we haven’t attacked yet is...Ms. Shiraaase...”

“R-right... She does seem like the obvious weak point... But...”

An unfortunate accident was one thing, but facing her head-on and attacking

was... Well...

“Huh? Where is she?”

They turned to look, but there was no sign of her. Where could she be?

“...Zzz...”

There. Shiraaase was right next to Mamako. Sound asleep on the side of her lap Porta wasn't using.

““Wow.””

The parasitic root monster inserted into her back appeared to be asleep, too.

“Is this actually...one of Mom's new skills?!”

Mamako had acquired the skill **A Mother's Lap**, which allowed her to put a maximum of two people, enemy or ally, to sleep at the cost of falling asleep herself.

“She even put a boss-level monster to sleep... Mom's lap is a force to be reckoned with.”

“This is our chance! The root sticking out of Ms. Shiraaase is definitely the weak point! While it's asleep and helpless, we can gang up on it and cut, burn, and destroy it!”

“Don't say it like that... You make it sound like we're gonna do something really terrible to it...”

“S-sorry...”

But that was precisely what they did. (*Note: It's a monster.) Masato slashed the hell out of the sleeping, unmoving opponent. (*Note: It's a monster.) Wise then chain cast until the defenseless enemy was charred black. Both expressed concerns about their actions but didn't diminish their onslaught one iota.

“Masato! Finish it!”

“Leave it to meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Firmamento, the Holy Sword of the Heavens, sliced deep into the root at Shiraaase's back, and the battle was done. **The Devil Root was defeated!**

The Devil Root had run deep and wide, and now it all crumbled away. The ground returned to normal, and Shiraaase's body was free.

"She seems sort of...burnt?"

(*Note: She died the moment the parasite got her. It's not my fault.) No penalty.

In commemoration of the victory, the results screens appeared! At the same time, a series of level-up screens began popping up.

"Awesome! My level shot up, and I got a ton of SP! I bet I can learn a good skill now... *Whew...* That was...a really uncomfortable fight, but we persevered and emerged victorious! This is our win! This proves our strength!"

"You're right. Mamako definitely set the stage, but it was our power... By the way, Masato, you were only executing one attack to my two, so technically, two-thirds of this victory is mine."

"N-no need to split hairs... Just when I was enjoying myself..."

"Yeah, yeah, sorry, sorry. Anyway... Shall we?"

Wise held out her fist. They'd been interrupted several times now, so damn straight he was going for it. To celebrate their victory, they bumped fists.

Meanwhile...

As they cheered and shouted, someone was watching their revelries.

"...Perhaps this is a mother's role," Mamako murmured before closing her eyes yet again.

"Spara la magia per mirare... Alzare! And! Rianimato!"

Wise's chain casting: an awakening spell to rouse Mamako and Porta and a revival spell to bring Shiraaase back from the dead. The stoic nun sat up immediately.

"Why, hello. We meet again. I am Shiraaase the Mysterious Nun. Shiraaase will not be infoorming you exactly *how* I am mysterious."

She was back to being her normal baffling self. Far better than the creepily friendly version. Masato breathed a sigh of relief.

This meant...

““Ms. Shiraaase! Fork 'em over!””

Masato and Wise both held out their hands with big, expectant grins on their faces.

“...Fork what over? What are these hands for?”

“Obviously, the reward! There is one, right? The quest reward?”

“I mean, we beat the boss. You said there'd be a reward, right?”

“I see... Then I must infoorm you of some sad news. The Devil Root is merely the forest-area boss and not the completion condition for the quest I requested you undertake. You haven't even started that quest yet!”

““What? ...Seriously?””

“Seriously. However...it does seem to have appeared outside of the area it was supposed to...and the design for the forest itself seems to have changed... and my own condition a moment ago seems like account hacking... There's a strong possibility a certain someone was involved.”

“Um... Ms. Shiraaase?”

“What are you muttering about? I can't make out a word!”

“Do excuse me. I was just talking to myself. Now, then...” Shiraaase put her hands together in prayer. “Let us be grateful for our blessed reunion. I will now formally give you your quest.”

“So what is this quest?”

“Using your unparalleled parent-child bonds and the power derived from them, I wish you to resolve the events unfolding in Maman Village.”

Cool.

“So, uh... No details at all, then?”

“Inquire about those once you reach the village. Gathering information is part of the quest structure.”

“It'd be so much quicker if you just told us. Quit beating around the bush!”

“There’s a certain beauty in anything this formulaic. Now, let’s get moving! I’ll accompany you as far as Maman Village.”

“Oh? You’ll be joining our party, Ms. Shiraaase? I’m touched!”

“I think it’s great that we’re getting another member! I’m touched, too!”

“Um, honestly, I’m not thrilled with the idea...”

“I’m fine either way. If she’s in, she’s in.”

Mysterious Nun Shiraaase joined the party.

Shiraaase sidled up to Wise.

“I just said I’m not thrilled about this! Why are you standing right next to me?!”

“Oh, just messing with you. Heh-heh-heh.”

The others watched over them warmly, knowing full well that was the sort of person Shiraaase was.

“Let’s head out, shall we? ...By the way, Mamako. How are you enjoying this lifestyle? If anything is vexing you—anything at all—we’ll handle it immediately.”

“Hmm... Let me see... I mean, I’d love it if Ma-kun would let me dote on him a little more... We hardly ever get to cuddle these days!”

“In that case, how about enjoying mixed bathing in the Maman Village hot springs? The family that bathes together stays together. I’m sure Masato won’t be able to hold out for long... He’ll be all over you before you know it! You’ll wind up dangerously close!”

“Oh my goodness! That might be a problem!” No, no. Too much!

“That’s not what she’s saying! She means something illegal!”

“There’s also the option of dosing him with select pharmaceuticals. The antidrug ordinances in the real world don’t apply here, so you can use any you please.”

“Is it okay if there aren’t any antidrug laws in this world?”

“It’s not okay, but if the laws did apply, the restrictions on item usage and sales would be severe, so we had no choice in the matter.”

“Ohhh... Guess I never thought of it that way. Even the recovery items we use all the time are technically drugs.”

The conversation veered away from the more dangerous implications of this world’s drugs, and the party headed out of the forest.

As they left the trees behind, they could see the village laid out ahead of them: a few scattered houses between vast fields, narrow farm roads with cattle ambling along them, pleasant sunshine, a pleasant breeze, the pleasant voices of the children playing in the fields of grain. This was Maman Village.

“I’ll take my leave here. I will never forget the number of paces I walked with all of you.”

Shiraaase left the party.

“What? You’re bowing out already? You’ve only been in the party for, like, thirty steps!”

“Twenty-eight, to be strictly accurate. I only promised to accompany you as far as Maman Village. Keeping promises to the letter is the Shiraaase code of honor.”

“Ms. Shiraaase, won’t you stay a little longer? I’d so love to talk with you a bit more.”

“I am flattered you would say so, but I’m afraid business calls. Please forgive me. And with that... Oh, but first...”

Shiraaase leaned in and whispered in Wise’s ear.

“Your mother is nearby, so I think this would be a good opportunity to talk to her. I could take you to her, if you’d like?”

A suggestion uttered in confidence. Masato just happened to overhear it but pretended he hadn’t.

Wise considered the suggestion for a moment but eventually turned her back on Shiraaase.

“...Just leave. I’ve got nothing to say to her.”

“You’re sure? Well, it’s your decision... Very well, everyone. I’ll take my leave here. Until we meet again, I wish you good health.”

Shiraaase bowed low and headed toward Maman Village.

Wise was staring fixedly at the horizon, which worried Masato, but...

“So, uh... What now?”

“Well, if she had business to take care of, then we’d best leave her to it. It’s a shame to lose Ms. Shiraaase so soon, but let’s head to Maman Village ourselves.”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

They would miss her, but it was time for them to enter town.

That meant, however, that they were all going in the same direction, so they were basically just following Shiraaase anyway. They were, like, two yards behind her. Having made such a show of parting, though, it seemed weird to say anything to her.

S-so awkward...

The thought crossed everyone’s mind, Shiraaase’s included. Their walk to the village passed in suffocating silence.

“I hate to interrupt, but do you have a moment?”

“Mm? Oh, you look like adventurers. Did you make it through that forest? Wow, that’s amazing! And with so many young girls!”

“Oh my, I’m hardly that young! I’m a mother with a fifteen-year-old boy! This is my son, Ma-kun. Say hi, Ma-kun.”

“Mom! Stop introducing me all the time! Like I keep telling you!”

“Whaaaaaat?! I could have sworn you were fifteen yourself! Never in all my days have I seen such a young-looking mother!”

“Why, thank you... Do you have a few minutes to chat?”

While they talked to the villagers, Shiraaase quickly put some distance

between them, for which Masato was very grateful. He settled in to hear what the villagers had to say.

It seemed there was trouble brewing in Maman Village. Since everyone told them it would be best to talk to the elder about it, they headed for his house.

“Sheesh, how long are they gonna drag this out? Just tell us already!”

“I was thinking the same thing, but it is what it is. This is the formula, after all. Those villagers were well trained.”

“I wonder which is the elder’s house...?”

“I’m sure it’s that one! My eyes are never wrong!”

There was one house near the edge of the forest that was noticeably bigger than the others. Someone in town must have relayed a message, because an old man with a cane was standing outside, bowing.

The elder led the group inside. He explained that this was both his home and the town hall. Since this village didn’t have an inn, he also had rooms available for travelers.

In the mansion’s dining room, the party quenched their thirst with a purple drink that resembled *shiso* juice, and at last, the elder explained the situation.

“The other day, a demon arrived in town, calling herself the Queen of the Night.”

“A demon, you say...”

“She appeared out of nowhere and used her tremendous power to bend us to her will, giving us one dreadful command: ‘If you value your lives...provide me with a sacrifice.’”

“She didn’t ask for the most beautiful maiden in the village, did she? Because that would be way too cliché.”

Masato was downright furious. He felt that a true hero would be angry here. Right? Yeah. But...

“Oh, no, no, she didn’t want a girl. I mean, she is a queen.”

“Oh, right. I guess that’s more of an evil-guy thing...”

“Indeed. In fact, she insisted she didn’t want to see any maidens at all... What she demanded of us was ‘the village’s hottest host-club-type male, slim but muscular, so I can spend the whole day tracing his pecs and abs with my fingers and not get bored.’”

“Uhhh... She sounds like some particularly dim-witted cougar...”

Masato glanced at the rest of his party. Mamako was wincing, Porta didn’t seem to know what that meant...and Wise was clutching her head, groaning. It certainly was a request that would provoke a reaction like that.

The elder continued, clearly distressed.

“We’re scheduled to offer the sacrifice tonight. We’ve no more time, no means of resisting, and no one in the village matches her description... We were desperate. And just as our desperation reached its peak, you arrived. I’m not sure I know how to ask you this, but...”

“Oh, I know exactly what you have in mind. Lay it on us.”

“Very well. I’ll smile and say, ‘Please forget all our troubles and enjoy your stay here!’ Then, I’ll offer you free meals, rooms, and use of the hot springs, prolonging your stay by any means necessary before arranging for you to accidentally bump into this queen.”

“Okay, not exactly what I expected. So rather than asking for our help, you’re planning on tricking us into it with a smile... That’s fine, I guess.”

Either way, they’d already accepted the quest.

Darkness fell early in the tree-lined Maman Village. The lower the sun dropped, the longer the shadows of the trees grew, like night stealing in ahead of schedule. As nighttime approached, so did the time the demon known as the Queen of the Night was expected to appear.

But first, the party needed to wash away the fatigue of their journey and recover their energy.

“Ahhh... This feels so goood... What a great bath... *Mamamaaaaan.*”

Masato had a large outdoor bath made of stone all to himself.

This was the Maman Village hot springs, also known as Maman’s Warm Milk.

When he saw the sign for the hot springs located behind the elder's home, Masato hesitated, well aware of what dangerous situations might erupt from using these facilities. But it was a real hot spring. Stripped of his pride and his clothes, submerged to his shoulders, he was the water's prisoner.

"Soooo good... *Mamamaaaaan!*" he said again. "Oh man... I feel like I'm getting more beautiful by the minute..."

He scooped a handful of the milky-white water and splashed it against his cheeks. His skin felt so smooth. "Heh-heh... I'm almost scared to look in the mirror later," Masato said, giving himself a thorough face massage.

"Wait, no—I'm not doing this!"

This was no time for spa treatments. He had something he needed to make sure of.

Masato called over the wall between the male and female baths.

"Hey, Mom! You there?"

"Yes, dear? What is it?"

Her answer came from behind him.

He spun around. He'd hoped she wouldn't be there, but she was: hair pinned up and splashing herself with water as if she belonged there and it was only natural.

And in a similarly natural fashion, she was wearing nothing at all. The milky-white water ran from the nape of her neck down her slim waist, tracing the line of her body until it dripped off the round end of her behind.

Not that he was looking. He wasn't!

"...Uh, Mom, what are you doing here?"

"Well, I just thought I'd join you. We're family, after all! You don't mind, do you?"

"Maybe if this were a family hot spring, I could understand that, but I'm afraid this is a public bath. The whole village uses it!"

"I talked to the elder, and he said it was only for us today. So it's fine."

“Argh, did he have to...?”

“With that in mind... Come on in, you two! Ma-kun can’t take his eyes off my body, so now’s your chance!”

“I’m not looking at you! ...Wait, what? They’re coming in, too?”

“Now, now! Don’t you go turning around, Ma-kun! Keep your eyes this way! They’re both developing young ladies, so you have to respect that.”

She grabbed his chin to prevent his head from turning.

“...But no respect for your developing young son?”

While Masato’s head was held firmly in place, a pair of large breasts right in front of him, he heard a splash behind him as someone took a running jump into the bath.

“S-sorry for the delay! It comes up to my shoulders, so I’m fine!”

Porta was in the water.

That left Wise...

“A-are we seriously doing mixed bathing?! Is this some sort of sick joke?! I can’t believe this!”

“Goodness, Wise, is it wrong for parents to bathe with their children? If you can’t join us, I guess there’s no way you’d ever become my daughter. Such a shame.”

“No, wait! I didn’t say that! If that’s still on the table, I’m coming in! If I can be Mamako’s daughter, that’s really my best option... Especially after hearing that story...”

She trailed off into a grumble.

“Then come on in! And I’m sure you’re perfectly aware that it’s terrible manners to enter a hot spring in a towel. I’m a stickler for manners!”

“I know! I don’t need this stupid towel!”

She took the towel hiding what few curves she had, flung it to the ground, and stomped on it, haughtily making her way into the water... At least, that’s the impression Masato got, based just on the sounds.

“Masato! Look this way and you die!”

“Now, now, Wise. I’m not fond of children who talk like that!”

“Erk... I—I won’t do anything even if you do look, but...try not to abuse that privilege!”

“R-right...”

That amounted to permission to look a little bit.

Soaking in the hot bath were Mamako, her breasts floating on the surface; Porta, with her precious shoulder bag resting on her head; Wise, submerged up to her nose, on high alert; and, somehow or another, Masato, on his knees.

The four members became a mixed bathing party!

Masato received the personal title Mixed Bather Level 1!

“Mom... What were you thinking...?”

“Like Ms. Shiraaase said, the family that bathes together stays together. I thought that was a lovely idea. So here we all are, together. Aren’t you glad you have Mommy on your side?”

“Gah... Geez... For the love of... Aaargh...”

He couldn’t exactly complain, but neither could he express gratitude. Masato drove all thought from his mind, sinking deeper into the water. The first part proved impossible.

“Now, what should we talk about? Ma-kun, do you want to discuss this fight with the Queen of the Night? Am I right?”

“Yes, that! Exactly!”

Masato splashed some bathwater on his face, trying to get it together. This was a serious conversation about battle strategy. He could do this.

“The elder made her sound like a demon, but I’m not clear if he was being literal. I’d like more information... How strong is she? What attack patterns does she use? Was there anything in the guidebook, Mom?”

“About that... There’s a lot of monster data in that guidebook, but there aren’t any demons named the Queen of the Night.”

“If there’s nothing in the guidebook, then that means...”

Was it accidentally left out? Alternately, it could be a recently added monster. The game they were all playing was still in beta and would be receiving regular updates during the prelaunch testing process, so that was certainly possible...

Then...

“The Queen of the Night is a Mage. Offensive, support, recovery, whatever. She’s got a Cast Cancel skill, so there’s no cast time for you to try to hit her. And she’s got multi-hit absolute defense, so to do any damage to her at all, you have to hit her more than three times in a row. She’s a giant pain in the ass.”

This font of information was Wise. Mamako and Porta both looked super impressed.

Masato took it differently, though. It just made him curious.

“...You sure know a lot.”

“Yeah, of course. I mean, she’s my... Uh...”

“Your what?”

“Uh... Um... Well... Oh, y-you know... Th-the thing with that... Uh...”

Wise looked as if she were doing an impression of a suspect in police custody, glancing this way and that. Then she changed the subject. “Hey! D-don’t look at me, you perv!” she yelled, splashing some water at Masato.

But Masato wasn’t about to stop glaring because of a little water. This was the perfect opportunity to catch an eyeful of her slightly flushed collarbone and the complete lack of curves below—or rather, the perfect opportunity to press his point.

“Yo.”

“S-so... There’s no weird reason or anything! I just... It was all stuff I learned before I met you! I heard rumors about someone like her! I just heard people talking!”

“And you want us to believe that.”

“Yes! We’re friends, right? You can’t even trust your friends? You’re full of

crap!”

“Whoa, too far! ...All right, I’ll drop it. We’ll go with your version. For now.”

“You do that! Ugh... *Whew...* It’s hot. Maybe I’m overheating. Does this water feel hot to anyone else?”

Wise stood up and sat down on the edge of the bath. Her skin was definitely red. Maybe not the fault of the bath, though. She fanned herself with her hands, trying to cool down...

...and only then did Wise realize she had just put her entire body on display for Masato.

“...Wha...?”

He could feel her getting ready to explode.

Nevertheless, Masato remained surprisingly calm. He had been well aware this would happen eventually.

“H-hold on, Wise! Give me a chance to say my last words... Mom, as punishment for seeing a maiden’s skin, I’m about to die a horrible death at the hands of her embarrassed-reaction magic. Possibly several horrible deaths. But don’t worry. She’ll bring me back to life afterward.”

“That’s right. This is a game, after all! Ms. Shiraaase came back to life any number of times. So I’ll believe you’ll come back, and I’ll watch over you until you do.”

“I can go get some recovery items just in case! Don’t you worry!”

“Thanks, Porta... Very well, Wise. Do your worst.”

Masato angled himself so the forest was behind him, hoping to minimize damage to the village. However...

“H-humph! D-d-don’t get ahead of yourself! If I punished you here, a weirdo like you would just get off on it! A-a-and I’m not giving you the satisfaction!”

“Whaaaat? No punishment? Are you...okay with that?”

“Ha! Are you frustrated? Does that frustrate you? If it does, just go dig yourself a hole somewhere and shout ‘Thank you!’ into it over and over, like

you should have in the first place! Heh-heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha... Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Wise ran for it. She abandoned her retribution and just fled.

Having narrowly escaped with his life, Masato whispered, “...Thank...you...!”

Thanks for letting him off the hook. Thanks for not causing him a lot of pain. It was an appropriate response to either, but the wind carried the words away.

Meanwhile, in the forest behind the elder’s home...

In a place where neither birds nor insects dared to sing...

“It doesn’t make sense... By now, that hot springs scene should have ended with Masato being flung all the way out here... How odd.”

Shiraaase clicked her tongue. This was completely unprecedented.

A commotion like that would have been a perfect distraction, the perfect opportunity to steal someone away. But with the village remaining silent...

“Something wrong?”

“...No, never mind.”

The second voice was filled with such bliss that Shiraaase elected not to turn around.

She was better off not facing the source. The scene behind her... Well, some might find it resplendent, but to those of other persuasions, it was downright repulsive.

There were five very beautiful young men, each of them half-naked. One was on all fours, serving as the seat. One was standing upright, forming the backrest. Two stood on the sides, hands outstretched, forming the armrests. And the last was curled up like a turtle: the footrest.

Poised atop the man-chair formed by these handsome youths sat the Queen of the Night.

Tan skin, voluptuous body, and on her head, curly ram’s horns... This diabolical monarch made no attempt to adjust the evening dress that had slid to quite a scandalous angle. Thoroughly enjoying both her wine and her

luxurious man-chair, she turned her bewitching gaze to Shiraaase.

“Well, what? Is there something you’re here to say?”

“No, I’ve heard enough. I believe I understand your intentions perfectly.”

“Then whatever shall we do?”

“Your actions are a significant departure from the intent of this game. We consider this a violation of the initial contract and have no choice but to forcibly terminate your service agreement.”

“Oh my. What a shame. But I’m afraid I’m just not that reasonable. I will contest this.”

“It won’t work. We’ve already prepared the means to render you powerless. In light of which...”

Shiraaase waved a hand. That was her signal.

The management team monitoring the situation responded, using their admin rights to terminate the account. The queen was forcibly logged out.

Or, rather, she should have been.

“...Huh?”

Nothing happened.

The queen leaned back in her man-throne, still right in front of Shiraaase.

“Heh-heh-heh. What’s wrong? Did you try to eliminate me system-side? That won’t work. I have special powers.”

“Special powers? How...?”

“That would be telling. Is that all you have for me? I think it’s time we wrapped this up.”

The Queen of the Night’s eyes narrowed, and she gently pointed a finger at Shiraaase.

“.....!”

This simple gesture robbed Shiraaase of her freedom. She couldn’t move a muscle.

She's...she's hacked me! Is this the power she mentioned?

Shiraaase had no way to fight it, and her opponent was prepared to eliminate any resistance.

Her only outcome was death, yet Shiraaase remained calm. She had a hunch.

“If I may just verify one last detail...”

“Very well.”

“Do you have no intention of repairing your relationship with your daughter?”

“None. I wish to live free. I refuse to spend another moment with that child.”

“And that’s your final answer?”

“Of course it is. Don’t make me repeat myself. That girl is a fool. And in her place... Look! I have all these sweet children. They do exactly what I say! So clever. My lovely sons. I always wanted children like these.”

“What mother treats her children like furniture?! ...No, there’s no point in saying anything to you.”

“Indeed not. So you can go away now. Good-bye!”

The Queen of the Night snapped her fingers. The resulting shock wave expanded, rocketing forward...and Shiraaase was flung backward and slammed against the tree behind her.

Shiraaase took a calm look down at the branch impaled through her back. She closed her eyes.

Their plan to render the queen helpless from outside the game had failed.

But they weren’t finished yet. They still had hope inside.

When my eyes next open, I’m sure I’ll see that mother and son looking down at me...

Their power would right all that was wrong here.

With this conviction in her heart, the coffin lid closed over Shiraaase.

Chapter 5 Kids Are Kids and Parents Are Parents (but Also Human Beings), and It Takes All Kinds, but They Get Through It Together, Right?

Masato got out of the hot springs and went to the changing room.

There he found...something likely provided by the elder. Something dangerously appealing.

“...‘Maman’s milk’...?!”

No, wait. Phrasing. It was just the classic postbath drink, a nice cold bottle of milk. So named only because it was produced in Maman Village.

Drink Maman’s milk?

“Argh! Stop that! That’s not what it is! This is to build a strong body!”

Masato put a hand on his hip and chugged the bottle of milk. *Pfffahhh!* Delicious.

“Masato, I know you’re in there! Got a second?”

It was Wise’s voice, coming through the changing room door.

“S-sure... I’m in here, at least... Did you change your mind about the punishment, ma’am? If so, at least let me get dressed first. I’d...rather not get flung out of here naked...”

“‘Ma’am’? But no, this isn’t about that. I just want to talk.”

“Y-yeah...?”

It could have been a ploy to get his guard down before flinging him out into the woods. Masato decided it was best to get dressed quickly. He put on the teddy-bear-print underwear Porta had made for him and his shirt.

While Masato was changing, Wise kept talking, choosing her words carefully.

“So, um... I’m going to...go out for a bit.”

“Huh? Out? Out where?”

“Where...? You know, the woods. Like, for a walk. I guess?”

“Seriously? We’re about to get into a boss fight here, and you wanna take a walk? In those woods? After dark? That’s, like, really dangerous. There are monsters in there. You shouldn’t go alone.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s all true... Ugh... Then will you come with me?”

“Whaaa? Why should I?” The words slipped out before he could stop them.

Wise was silent for a long moment, as if thinking. Then she replied, softly, “... Okay, then. Bye.”

“Huh? Wait, what? You’re acting weird. Uh...”

He hastily finished up and opened the changing room door, but she was already gone.

He looked toward the forest and saw something crimson vanishing into the darkness. Wise must have gone into the woods. Was she really going for a walk there? And right into the thicket, not even following an animal trail?

“Something’s going on with her... Should I go after her? Hang on—why am I even stopping to wonder? Geez.”

Masato grabbed Firmamento off the wall and dashed out of the changing room.

But perhaps it was a little foolhardy to impulsively chase after her.

“Crap... I should’ve brought a light with me, at least... I screwed up there...”

This forest was already infamous for getting people lost, and now he couldn’t even see what lay at his feet. Masato stumbled blindly forward, tripping on tree roots, catching spiderwebs in the face, searching for Wise.

“I bet she’s lost... And now I am, too... The blind leading the blind... Gimme a break... Heeey, Wiiiise! Are you there? Answer me! Please be close by...”

He picked up a stick and started using it to feel the ground, hollering for Wise as he forced his way forward. “Yikes! Pill bugs everywhere!” There shouldn’t even have been any! But for all his searching, he found no sign of her. Time

passed in vain.

After a while, Masato gave up and stood staring up at the heavens. Through the tree branches overhead, he could just make out the moon hanging in the clear night sky.

And a shadow crossing it.

“Mm? Something’s up there! A monster? Uh... Wait...”

He was staring at the soles of someone’s boots. He’d seen those boots before, somewhere. They came falling silently down and once again landed right on Masato’s face, shoving his head into the dirt.

There was only one person who would do this to him.

“*Sigh...* What now? Is this the punishment for earlier? Didn’t we agree to forgo that?”

“This isn’t a punishment. Just a landing. It’s your fault for standing where I was trying to land.”

“Goddammit...”

Wise stepped down off Masato’s face and stood next to him, skirt fluttering in the breeze.

“...Tomorrow’s pair is pink, then?”

“Did you say something?”

“Nope, nothing.”

While Masato caught several more unobscured glimpses of tomorrow’s panties, she looked down at him, shaking her head.

“So why are you even here?”

“I could ask you the same thing. Why were you even that high up to...? Hmm...”

Halfway through, he remembered Shiraaase whispering something to Wise and how she’d acted when she heard the description of the threat to Maman Village. He had all the evidence he needed to explain what was going on. Masato felt pretty confident his theory was correct.

But just to be sure.

“So, Wise... I think I’ve figured it out, but...would you rather I not ask about any connection you may have to the Queen of the Night?”

“Right. Better you don’t know. That’ll make it easier for you to fight her.”

“I’m not seeing how that would make a big difference, really...”

“Then, what? You want to force me to admit that the woman demanding a pec-and-ab puppet from the village is my you-know-what? I’m already about to puke blood at the thought. I bet I could cry blood, too!”

Wise glared down at him, eyes wide with fury. They did look pretty red. Like, inches-away-from-blood-just-gushing-out-of-them red. Yikes.

“Uh, yeah, right. I get it. I won’t say anything.”

“Mm. Good. Thanks.”

Wise slapped him on the shoulder. Didn’t seem like the most normal way of expressing gratitude, but since it felt sort of nice anyway, Masato went with it.

“So you were gonna meet with her in secret and try to talk her out of it? That about it?”

“Yeah. Couldn’t just do nothing, you know? Not like it’s none of my business.”

“But you got a little nervous about it, so you wanted me along for moral support.”

“What? No, that’s not it! I didn’t want you with me because I was nervous or anything. I’m not nervous at all! Not in the least! Who do you think you are? Do you want me to chain death spells at you?!”

Even in the darkness, he could tell Wise had turned beet red through this string of denials, so Masato elected to take her at her word.

“Not nervous, not nervous at all! I just want to bring you along for, like, insurance purposes!”

“Insurance purposes...?”

“She might not listen, you know! It’s entirely possible she’ll just attack on sight! That’s just who she is! And if we do end up fighting her, we need to hit

her three times in a row to do any damage. We'll need the combo attack you and I can do. That's the only way to break through her invincible defense!"

"Makes sense. So you need me—or at least my combo ring."

"Yes. These!"

Both fished out their Aderire Rings. Wise put hers on her right ring finger.

"You, too."

"R-right..."

Masato did the same. No deeper meaning.

A thought struck him. "If we do have to fight, wouldn't Mom's firepower be a big help? You sure we shouldn't call her?"

"No, don't. I'd definitely prefer we don't have Mamako with us."

"Why not?"

"Sure, she'd be great in the fight, but the idea of my god-awful mom being in the same place as a much younger and prettier mom would be, like...a live demonstration of the discrepancies between our families, and I'd really prefer to avoid that, if that makes sense. If it doesn't, figure it out!"

She glared at him fiercely, eyes bloodshot again.

"O-okay, I get it!"

Having a mom like Mamako made him a fortunate son, and there was nothing Masato could say here that wouldn't backfire on him. They would have to roll her way.

"So we'll take a run at her with just the two of us, then. First goal is just to talk sense into her. If diplomacy fails, we'll have to fight. Agreed?"

"Sure. But before we meet the idiot, we oughta check if our co-op strategy works... Oh, perfect."

Shadows were approaching through the trees. This forest was filled with monsters. Defeating the forest boss hadn't reduced their number at all. They were raring to go and came charging straight at the adventurers.

“Do I need to explain how this works?”

“Nope, not at all. I got the idea.”

“Cool, let’s do this! Knock one out!”

“Hell yeah! First, I’ll...tank this!”

A wolf, a deer, and a bear—a pack of sinister animals, eyes flashing, came running straight at them, and it fell to Masato to meet them head-on.

Masato jumped toward the enemies, pulling all their aggro to him. He held out his left arm, deploying the shield wall built into his armored jacket. The enemy’s first attacks all bounced off it.

“Unh! But I held my ground! Now...”

Forcing the enemy back with the shield, Masato pulled out Firmamento.

The wolf was closest, so he slashed at it, cutting it down. Next...

“Wise! Combo!”

“Cast Cancel! Bomba Fiamma! And! Bomba Fiamma!”

Two successive explosions burned the monsters to cinders. An overwhelming victory!

“Cool!”

“Collection time!”

Both scurried around collecting gems. Earning money was important.

Anyway, that’s how it worked.

“Masato, your shield worked out pretty well. Made the fight easier. I think we’re a good pair.”

“Yeah. Mind healing me, though? I took enough damage that the armor’s auto-heal can’t keep up.”

“When we fight the idiot, you soak her attack while I wait, charging power. Then the next turn, you attack, I’ll combo off that, and we’ll knock her flat.”

“Uh, no, we need to add a heal in here. Without healing, the one who gets weak and dies is the tank. I’ll die even faster than a lonely, abandoned rabbit.”

“Apparently, rabbits don’t actually die if they’re left on their own.”

“What, really? I didn’t know that... But it’s beside the point. Heal me.”

“Okay, okay, hold your horses. We’ll play it by ear on that point.”

They finished gathering gems.

“So I’d love to suggest heading on over, but...where are we going?”

“Don’t worry. The elder gave me a map of where they’re supposed to hand over the sacrifice. Leave the navigating to me.”

“Got it. Then let’s go.”

They fist-bumped and headed deeper into the woods. Deeper into darkness.

“...Feels like we’re almost there.”

“I think so, too. Stay sharp.”

They advanced carefully through the brush, avoiding the main paths. Parting the branches ahead of them, they found a clearing with something moving inside.

Shadows set against the moonlight. A whirlpool of swirling darkness.

“Um, what is that...? It’s all writhing... I’ve seen warp holes like that in other games...”

“That’s exactly what it is... Here she comes.”

The dark swirl suddenly spun faster, expanding.

When it was as large as a door, the area suddenly filled with the overpowering smell of perfume. It seemed something was headed their way.

A moment later, it revealed itself: A curvy woman with a deep tan. Her body wrapped in a sparkling evening gown, top-heavy, slim in the middle, and round where it counted. Every inch of her walk oozed eroticism.

What caught Masato’s eye most were the two horns on either side of her head. Hideous, twisted horns that were clearly not at all human.

She actually is a demon... This is the Queen of the Night?

He knew she was a certain someone’s mother and that she was a beta tester.

This queen must have been using some magic to change her form. He glanced sideways at Wise, noticing a resemblance around the eyes, and then looked back at the queen.

Fully emerged from the portal, she snapped her fingers. Five half-naked men came running out of the swirling darkness, forming a throne with their bodies. She sat down on this man-throne with a bewitching smile.

“Heh-heh-heh. Today is a day to remember. The day I obtain a sixth son. I wonder what he’ll be like? ...Oh! I know. I’ll have him form a bridge, and I’ll use his stomach as a table. Won’t that be nice? I can put him right by my hand and stroke his abs whenever I pick up my wineglass. Heh-heh-heh! What luxury!”

The woman laughed, clearly enjoying herself to the hilt.

Yep. Definitely wouldn't want anything to do with her.

Masato had no idea how to process this spectacle except stare in horror, while Wise...

“That absolute dumbass... Just how stupid can one woman be...?”

...was about to snap. Like, literally, the veins in her head were ready to burst. Visibly pulsing.

“C-calm down, Wise! First, we gotta talk sense into her! Diplomacy, remember?”

“This is no time for diplomacy! Having that for a mother is sickening! I’m gonna kill that bitch and then myself!”

“I said calm down! If you start yelling, she’ll—”

“Yes, I have already noticed.”

““!””

The queen was staring in a random direction, but she already had a thick, luridly decorated magic tome in her hand.

She was about to attack.

“Whoa, whoa, she’s already on the offensive! Not even giving us a chance to talk!”

“Then change the plan! First, we beat her into submission; then we yell at her for, like, an hour straight! Go on, Masato!”

“There’s no other choice. Let’s do this!”

But just as Masato and Wise were about to spring out...

“Tacere.”

...the queen attacked first. With her Cast Cancel skill, her spell went off instantly, hitting both of them. But Masato was unaffected.

Wise’s magic was sealed!

“Okaaay, we’re done here. Retreat! Nice try. Argh, I can’t keep doing this...”

“Yo, wait a minute! Man, you’re useless. Giving up already?”

“Morte.”

As Wise collapsed in a sulking heap, the queen cast another spell. A reaper swooped at them, and Wise died instantly, a coffin appearing around her.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Show a little mercy! Crap... I guess I’ve gotta handle this alone...”

There didn’t seem to be any point in calling out to her. Like Wise had said, first win the fight and then try talking to her. In which case...

Masato shoved his qualms aside and took a bold step forward, moving within range of the queen in a single bound. He roared and swung the Holy Sword of the Heavens, the blade gleaming in the moonlight.

A beam shot out of it, striking the queen...but all it did was shatter one layer of the veil of darkness surrounding her. It really didn’t damage her at all.

On top of that, the shattered layer quickly repaired itself, and her double defense was fully active once more.

“Tch...” So that’s your multi-hit absolute defense! What a pain in my ass!”

“Heh-heh-heh... Sorry for being invincible. By the way, who *are* you? Swinging a sword at someone without even saying hello is hardly good manners.”

“My deepest apologies... I’m in the same party as the Sage who’s currently

dead. She said she wanted to talk sense into you, so I gallantly agreed to help. I'm your average busybody hero!"

"Oh, I see..."

The second he started talking, her eyes narrowed with displeasure. Like she could barely tolerate this.

"*Sigh...* How completely stupid. How utterly pointless."

"She's not pointless! Wise has her issues, but she was genuinely—"

"Stupid."

The Queen of the Night bent her index finger and flicked it forward. Instantly, unseen pressure erupted, and Masato was abruptly knocked several feet back.

"Guh?! Wh-what the...? What was that magic? Didn't seem like..."

"I just flicked a finger. That's all. Heh-heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

With a dramatic wave of her arm, the queen warped the air around them with a loud screech.

The gale from a single finger had been enough to send him flying, and now an unseen force several times more powerful struck Masato. Before he could even scream, his back slammed into a tree.

He lay there, unable to move.

"Ugh... Wh-what the hell?! Is this...some sort of stun effect?!"

"Yes, exactly that. I believe you'll be unable to move for some time. Something like that anyway... I only received a cursory explanation myself, so I hardly remember the details. It is quite useful, though. All I have to do now...is this."

The queen bent a hand. The swirling darkness behind her transformed into a cone, the point of which was pointed at Masato. Aimed right on course to run him through, with him unable to dodge.

Prepared to eliminate the hero for good, the queen spat, "You have a lot of nerve. Showing up after all this time? Did you actually believe you could appeal to my emotions? What a fool. Children are nothing but a thorn in one's side..."

Sigh. Oh well. If I don't like something, I just need to rid myself of it. And since you're with her, you share her punishment. Begone!"

"Guh... Is this the end?!"

Unable to take a defensive stance, Masato could only wait for defeat.

But just then, the ground began swaying to vibrations that swelled steadily in intensity.

"An earthquake? ...No, it feels different..."

"Wait... She couldn't be..."

She was. The ground in front of Masato erupted, a giant pillar of earth sprouting forth.

He'd seen this before. The support skill that allowed Mamako to find her son wherever he might be—**A Mother's Fangs.**

Which meant...

"Ma-kun! Are you there? I'm coming!"

Mamako had arrived. She came swooping in with that platinum armor on over her dress, Terra di Madre in her right hand, Altura in her left, and Porta hiding behind her.

In the moonlight, she was a sight to behold, like a hero arriving to save the helpless in their hour of peril.

"Mama! I'll look after Wise!"

"Please do, Porta. I'd like to do the same for Ma-kun, but it looks like someone else demands my attention first."

"Oh? You wish to fight me now? Do you know how strong I am?"

"Strength has nothing to do with it... Anyone being cruel to my beloved child will pay! On my honor as a mother!"

"Wha...?!"

It happened in an instant. Mamako was already right in front of the queen, and she swung both swords, aiming directly for the queen's neck.

The attacks themselves were blocked by the veil of darkness. But several of the stone blades and water bullets that followed the swings grazed the queen's skin, giving her some very mild scratches.

"Guhhh?! Wh-what?! You actually struck me?!"

There was no significant damage, but her attacks definitely got through. Reeling, the queen quickly cast a spell.

"Barriera!" She desperately buffed her defense.

"I'm not done yet! Here I go!"

"Wh-what in the...? How do you have so many attacks?! This is absurd!"

In fact, the bulk of Mamako's damage wasn't from the swords themselves but from the subsequent hail of stone blades and water bullets.

But the queen's damage negation counted only individual hits. Whether the swords did damage or not, if they struck with enough force, they counted as an attack, and one of her veils would shatter.

"I'm definitely still a little jealous, but...damn, my mom's incredible! Too strong for this world."

With overwhelming speed, Mamako destroyed defense after defense, while the queen threw up protective walls as fast as they came tumbling down. The battle of offense versus defense raged like a storm. Mamako's AOE shock waves were particularly intense, ripping up trees and causing the ground to explode. Like a war zone.

Masato could only watch in awe.

Then Mamako saw him staring.

"Gasp! Oh no! My duty!" she cried. One final blow to knock the queen back, and she came running to his side.

Huh? What?

"U-um, Mom? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Ma-kun! I know Mom's part is just to support what you're doing, but I got carried away! But I realized in time! I know what I need to do now!"

She gave him a particularly gentle smile and waved a hand at their enemy.

“Go on, Ma-kun!” *Take your turn.*

“What are you doing? You can’t let me have a turn now! I can’t even take it! Look—I can’t move a muscle!”

“Oh no! Then what should I do?!”

“That’s what I wanna know! Don’t worry about me. Just take care of the queen before she... Ahhh?!”

He’d glanced toward the queen, who was expanding the dark swirl, muttering, “Drat! I’ll have to ask them to raise my specs again!” Leaving the human chair behind, she fled through the portal and was gone in the blink of an eye.

Their encounter with the Queen of the Night had ended in failure.

The battle was swiftly followed by a postmortem.

“Look, in that situation, you should’ve gone after her, Mom! Just kept your firepower on her as hard as possible! You could have defeated her for good! Why’d you stop?!”

“B-but... Ma-kun...”

“What?!”

“I really don’t have any fire powers. I’m not a Bunsen burner!”

“How many times do I have to explain this extremely common word?! Firepower just means your attack power! Learn that already!”

“R-right, I remember now. Sorry. Mom’s got a mind like a sieve! I’m really sorry...”

Mamako made to bow her head apologetically.

But before she could...

“Ah! No! Back up a second!”

Masato grabbed Mamako’s face with both hands, keeping her head up.

“Mmph? Ma-fun?” she queried, her face smooshed.

“Too much force!” he said. But at least he’d maintained eye contact.

Had he caught it in time? He kinda felt like he hadn’t, but at least he’d realized at all.

I can’t just vent my frustrations on her like last time. Can’t repeat the same mistakes.

That wasn’t right. It wasn’t what he should be doing. It wasn’t what he wanted.

He had to talk to her. She was right here, trying to listen, so he needed to take a deep breath and communicate what was on his mind.

“Um, uh... That’s not it—that’s not what I meant... I didn’t mean to chew you out. I just wanted to point out what you... To propose a better alternative. Like a mini-lecture, I guess?”

“I know that. You’re trying to tell me something important, and you’re doing it for me.”

“Basically, yeah. So I shouldn’t be screaming at you like a dumb kid. Um. So my point is...next time, let’s all do better. I’ll make sure to say what I want, too.”

“Okay. I can do that!”

Mamako beamed, and Masato nodded. He was relieved to see her smile. This was what he wanted. This was how things should be. It was the right path. He’d pulled it off.

He felt as if he’d grown as a person, and this pleased him.

“...Now, for the main point,” he said, turning to where Wise sat a short distance away.

She looked extremely peeved. Like a sulky toddler squeezing the life out of a stuffed animal. She had Porta on her knees, arms tight around her, her scowling face resting atop Porta’s head.

“Yo, Wise. First, let Porta breathe. She’s not your teddy bear.”

“She doesn’t mind! Do you, Porta?”

“Y-yes! I am totally fine! I’ll be her teddy forever!”

“Well, I’ll take your word for it, Porta... Anyway, Wise. We’re all here, so I think we deserve an explanation.”

“You just made a big deal out of how close the two of you are, and you want me to share *my* mess? Out of what, spite?”

“No, nothing like that... Like I said, I’ve pretty much figured it out, but I think Mom and Porta deserve to know. We’re all in this together. Can’t really keep it from them, you know?”

“...*Sigh*... Fine. I’ll tell them. Okay?”

Wise exhaled dramatically and fixed her gaze on the moon.

“That Queen of the Night lady... She’s my mom.”

Mamako was aghast. She turned white as a sheet.

“Whaaaat?! That’s your mother?! ...Ma-kun, is that true?!”

“Yeah, apparently. She might look like a demon, but I think she’s just changing her appearance with magic.”

“She is. My mother’s definitely human. She doesn’t actually have horns. And her tits aren’t that big. She went way over the top there. How vain can one woman be?”

“Oh no... Wh-wh-wh-what now...? I actually fought her!”

“Nah, don’t worry about that. It’s totally fine. I was gonna kick her ass myself. You pretty much have to if you wanna knock any sense into her, ’cause she’s such an idiot. She’s the worst!”

Wise stroked Porta’s head gently, finally letting her pent-up resentment fly.

“My mom’s always been obsessed with host clubs. She just wouldn’t stop playing around with men. I mean, my real name is Genya. She named me after the work name of one of her favorite hosts.”

“Whoa, seriously...?”

“She gave her own daughter a host’s name...?”

“Wise’s real name is Genya...”

“Yep... It is... Argh...”

Genya was doing her best not to burst into tears. So much anger and frustration bound to that name... It’s probably better to just keep calling her Wise.

“And because she’s like that, we’re always dirt poor! She wastes every single penny! She even spends her daughter’s lunch money on hosts! When she got that bad, Dad couldn’t put up with it anymore and got a divorce. Naturally, I went with him. I thought that settled things... But then she just showed up out of nowhere one day.”

“Wanting to rebuild your relationship?”

“That’s what she said. I was super against it, but she told me about this game and said it would help us get closer... And then the second she realized how much power she had and how quickly she could rake in the cash, she said she had to blow off steam and started fooling around with guys again. Treated me like I was just in the way. Can you believe it? We had a huge fight about it, and then it was good-bye.”

Wise snorted loudly.

Then she turned toward the party, a fragile, hopeless smile on her face.

“So that’s my sob story. I’m done.”

“Done...how?”

“You saw! Not only will she not listen to a word I say, the second I’m about to show myself, she casts a death spell on me. She doesn’t care about me at all.”

“U-um, I don’t think that’s true...!”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. You don’t need to try to make me feel better, Porta. I don’t care about her, either. We’re not even mother and daughter anymore, if you ask me.”

“That’s not true,” Mamako said firmly. She came over to Wise and looked her right in the eye. “That can’t be true. That kind of relationship can never truly end. Mothers are connected to their children forever.”

“Uh, Mamako... Why’re you so serious all of a sudden—?”

“Because this is a serious topic. Parents and children have a connection beyond genetics or family trees, one that can never be completely severed. That bond is eternal.”

“Yeah, well... You and Masato are super close, so I’m sure you feel that way. But I don’t—”

“You do, though. Deep down, I’m sure you feel the same. You might not be conscious of it, but it’s there—I know it... May I?”

Mamako took Wise’s hand, brought her to her feet, and pulled her in close.

She wrapped Wise in her tight embrace.

“Wha...? Mamako, what are you—?”

“Now, Wise. Here I am, hugging you. How does it feel?”

“How do I feel...? ...Mamako, your chest is so big and soft, and...you smell good...”

“But it doesn’t feel right, does it? Kind of like something’s a bit different?”

“Yeah... It’s, like... It isn’t what I’m used to, I guess? The smell isn’t right. Not in a bad way—it’s just...different...”

“Different from who?”

“Who else? My own mom, duh... Oh...”

Realization dawned.

Who knows when it had started? It’d been there as long as she could remember.

A feeling with no real shape or form...but she couldn’t deny its existence.



Something we all have for our mothers.

“See? It isn’t ‘done.’ You still have it... See?”

Mamako glanced at Masato and cracked a smile.

What did that mean? He didn’t need to ask.

“Let’s take another stab at this.”

They weren’t trying to save the world. They were doing this for someone close to them and to repair a bond that had gotten twisted out of shape.

This was the beginning of a battle the Normal Hero could not afford to lose.

“D-don’t get the wrong idea, though! This isn’t what I want, but Mamako insists, so I’ve agreed to meet my mom one last time! I guess if we were somehow able to patch things up, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.”

“Yeah, yeah, say what you like. Aren’t you glad my mom gave you a big ole hug?”

Wise’s flood of excuses showed no signs of abating, but Masato ignored them.

They were on the trail of the Queen of the Night.

“How we doin’, Porta?”

“I think the smell of her perfume is getting stronger! This way!”

“You’re really amazing, Porta! You can track scents?”

“Scents are very important when appraising items, so I make sure to keep raising that skill! Leave this to me!”

Her little nose twitching, Porta led the party into the depths of the woods.

The farther into the forest they delved, the more branches appeared overhead, diminishing the quantity of moonlight that filtered down to their level. The more they advanced, the deeper the darkness. But they pressed on, deeper and deeper.

At last, Porta found something.

“Oh! Something’s here! ...What is that?”

In front of them was a strange sight: there was a coffin stuck to the side of a tree trunk. It seemed someone had died here.

“I only know one person who regularly shows up in a coffin.”

“There’s just one person I can think of, too. I’d better bring her back... *Spara la magia per mirare... Rianimato!*”

Wise cast a resurrection spell, the coffin vanished, and the nun emerged from within. It was her, all right. The self-described Mysterious Nun they all knew and tolerated, Shiraaase.

“...Hello, everyone. You’ve saved me once again. I do apologize for the constant inconvenience.”

“Nah, we’re used to it at this point. Don’t worry.”

“However... I would have preferred it if you’d pulled me off this tree branch I’m impaled on first... I can infoorm you...this rather...hurts...”

“Oh, sorry about that!”

Shiraaase died again. It was easy enough to bring the dead back, but it was definitely better to remove the cause of death first.

“Masato! You take this end!”

“Got it!”

They pulled her off the branch and brought her back to life yet again.

Once more, they were reunited.

“As I suspected. I knew that when my eyes opened again, I would see your smiling faces looking back at me. Would you mind apprising me of the situation? How is the quest progressing?”

“It’s progressing. The Queen of the Night got away, and we’re chasing her.”

“I see... Have you learned anything about her?”

“She’s got Cast Cancel magic, multi-hit absolute defense, and is a real pain in the ass. Also—”

“I told them the queen’s my mom,” Wise cut in.

Shiraaase looked faintly surprised. She raised her eyebrows slightly but soon resumed her usual expressionless cool.

“Then I believe I can fill you in on the rest. As one who led you to this, I can inform you about a number of things related to the queen. As my name is Shiraaase, I live only to inform.”

“Well, at least you’re consistent.”

“First...the Queen of the Night, Wise’s mother...her real name is Kazuno.”

“Kazuno? How lovely. We’ll have to get properly acquainted the next time we meet.”

“Yeah, but do that *after* we fight her. I dunno if I can endure a long mom talk before the battle even starts.”

“Kazuno is, of course, a beta tester, but she has elected to play the game purely for her own interests and desires. Despite us knowing full well who she is, she appears to have no shame.”

“Aaargh... She’s a disgrace to my whole family...” Wise was seething again.

“W-Wise! Please calm down! You look like you’re about to transform!”

It was bad enough her mother had turned herself into a demon. They didn’t need the daughter doing the same!

Shiraaase was just getting to the point.

“As for her stats, like Wise, she took the Sage job, and her first-login bonus was a magic tome that allowed her to start the game with access to all spells. Like Mamako’s swords, this was an official tool provided specifically to mothers.”

“Wise... I feel so sorry for you...”

“It was awful! I had to burn SP like mad trying to learn any magic, and she was just full throttle from the get-go! She handled every fight herself, and I never got to do a thing!”

“Meanwhile, Kazuno earned herself an enormous pile of SP and used those points to buy the Cast Cancel skill. That about covers the queen’s combat skills.”

“Uh... No, wait. How?” No explanation for the most problematic part. “Ms. Shiraaase, what about the queen’s absolute defense?”

“That ability has not been given to her, nor does it exist in this game.”

“Huh? Doesn’t exist how?”

If the queen was using a skill that didn’t exist, then...

“...She’s using a hack?”

“Hack? What’s that? Ma-kun, what’s a hack?”

“Uhhh... It’s kinda like cheating. A cheap trick. But a hack like this isn’t so cheap.”

This was clearly not allowed. It was actively harmful to the game, posing a real threat to the game’s continued existence.

Shiraaase nodded gravely.

“As you say, Kazuno appears to be employing some sort of cheat tool. We checked the logs and were able to verify that a suspicious program was sent in from external sources.”

“From outside the game?”

“The exact point of origin is still under investigation, but there remains a strong chance this was sent to her without her knowledge or influence. The tool functions allow her that invulnerability, let her task NPCs with behaviors for which they were not programmed, and make possible actions we consider to be account hijacking. Quite versatile. We believe she was unable to resist the temptations it dangled before her. It’s like a drug.”

“Once you try it, you can’t stop, huh?”

“That idiot... What is she thinking?! The one thing she shouldn’t be doing...”

“Indeed. I assure you, we are taking this very seriously. Use of cheat tools is strictly forbidden. Should any damage be done to game operations, management will not hesitate to press legal charges against her.”

“You’re going to sue her?”

“This game is sponsored by the government. It is planned for a nationwide

rollout, and preparations for that are proceeding steadily... If this issue causes a delay, we could suffer hundreds of millions of yen in losses.”

“Wh-whoa... There’s no way my mom can pay that...”

“Whether she can or not, she will. The laws are very clear on this point.”

“But...but... Then what’ll happen to her...?”

Wise’s hands were shaking, clutching at the air...and suddenly, they found Masato’s arm. Her thin fingers took a tight grip on him, as if begging for help.

Despite her denials, deep inside her, she was clearly still concerned about her mom.

I know. It’s gonna be okay. Don’t worry. I’m... We’re with you.

He wasn’t smooth enough to whisper anything like that or even place his hand on hers, but he meant it. In that moment, Masato made up his mind.

“That definitely sounds serious, but we still have time, right? Surely there’s still something we can do, can’t we?” he asked.

Shiraaase thought for a moment, choosing her words carefully.

“This would be extreme, but...if we destroy the computer Kazuno is using in the real world, that might resolve the issue. That’s one way of handling things.”

“But solving it by force like that would light a fire. There’d be consequences.”

“You are correct. If the situation leaks, the government managing this game will be flooded with complaints. That would severely damage operations. Worst of all, if the computer being used as a full-dive intermediary is destroyed, we cannot guarantee Kazuno will emerge unharmed. For a government to harm a citizen is out of the question. Therefore, we’re unable to take this approach.”

“So this can only be solved inside the game?”

“Yes... Inside the game, per the rules. The best solution would be to somehow engineer an emotional resolution, a means by which the bonds between parent and child can be restored as a result of this dire incident. If that occurred, we could file a much more positive report. So...”

“That settles it, then.”

In the end, it would be up to Wise, but they could lead her to that point. They could fight and win. They could stop the queen. That was the first step.

Now that they knew what they had to do, Masato looked around at his party.

“I don’t need to ask if you’re in, Wise.”

“Of course not! I’m obviously in!”

“Cool... And Porta’s noncombat, so...”

“No! I want to help! I’ll do whatever I can!”

“Mm, okay. Wise’ll get her magic sealed and then die, so we’ll need Porta’s items.”

“Wait, don’t act like that’s inevitable! I’ll do my damndest not to be deadweight!”

“Please do... What about you, Mom?”

“Well, I do feel it’s awfully nosy to pry into another family’s business, but given the circumstances, it’s high time we interfere. Full mom firepower! Let’s burn this baby down!”

“I’m not even gonna question that phrasing... So it’s settled, Ms. Shiraaase.”

He looked her right in the eye—a look that said, “Leave this to us.” A display of their will to take on these odds.

Shiraaase surveyed the would-be warriors and nodded.

“Understood. Then I shall use the forbidden power vested in me to guide you all to the queen’s location.”

Shiraaase turned toward the forest depths, placed her hands together, and prayed.

“You know where she is?”

“Yes. The queen is hiding herself in another dimension, a space that should not exist. She is attempting to raise her power to still greater heights.”

“...‘Another dimension’?”

“If I may be blunt, she’s opened another window and is busy making

inappropriate system changes. I just received word from the system engineers a moment ago.”

“That’s pretty blunt. Way to ruin the whole mystique.”

Even in a game that didn’t allow multitasking, with a cheat tool, you’d be able to have multiple screens open on your computer and run multiple copies of the same game.

Where normally you’d have to use your limited time and focus on either quests or crafting, this way you could perform both at once, giving you quite an advantage.

But this sort of activity was strictly forbidden.

“Queen of the Night... If this is how you want to do things, we’ll show no mercy. Let might meet might. However much power you give yourself, you’ll get what you deserve. We’ll connect to this other dimension so we can drag you out to face your judgment!”

Shiraaase raised her voice, chanting.

“I call upon the Power of the State! Authoritative Magic: Account Ban!”

“Yiiikes, they didn’t even bother giving that spell an in-world name...”

With that, the greatest power available in the online game *MMMMMMORPG* (working title) was activated.

The forest in front of them distorted...and when the distortion resolved, they were in the exact same place.

Except different.

The smell of perfume only Porta had been able to detect was now so strong they all choked on it. This was clearly the queen’s doing.

“Flusso di Lava!”

The queen’s voice echoed, and the dark forest turned red. A gush of molten rock came toward them, burning the trees and swallowing everything whole. Immediately, their surroundings transformed into a sea of fire.

Impossible to dismiss as a mere effect.

“Ugh, she’s already starting! ...Masato! You’re up!”

“To be totally honest with you, I wanna cry, but if I don’t handle this, I can’t call myself a heroooooooooooo!”

Masato leaped toward the edge of the molten flow, held out his left arm, and deployed the shield wall. Could it hold the lava back? Even if it couldn’t, he would! The heat alone was roasting him, but he resolutely stood his ground, keeping the lava from his party.

“I think I’ve stopped it, but at this rate, I’m gonna get boiled alive! My HP’s draining fast!”

“Then I’ll cool you down! *Spara la magia per mirare... Vento Neve! And! Ghiaccio Grumo!*”

Wise chain cast a blizzard that swirled around them, lowering the temperature, and massive hail fell, hardening the lava. Once it cooled, they could pass over it.

Beyond, a woman stood calmly with a magic tome in her hand.

“Mom! I’m coming for you, so stay right there!”

“Ah! Hey, Wise!”

The second she saw the queen, Wise broke into a run, racing ahead of the others. Masato tried to hurry after her...

...but he heard something beside him slicing through the air before falling to the ground.

“What? A monster?!”

He jumped, dodging to one side...but it was a tree branch.

A tree monster? No. Just one of the trees growing around them.

The trees around them, ordinary ones, were moving across the ground, spinning their branches or falling directly toward them. It was uncanny.

“Is...is she manipulating the terrain objects to get in our way? Urgh, this is gonna be trouble! We’re in the middle of the forest—she has all the trees she could want!”

“Leave this to Mommy! No matter how many trees there are, I’ll attack them all!”

“Thank God for your multi-target attacks! You handle this—I’ll go after Wise! Porta, you stay at Mom’s side!”

“R-right! I’ll be with Mama!”

“Ms. Shiraaase, you go and— Huh?”

There was no sign of Shiraaase.

...Oh, there was a coffin underneath one of the fallen trees.

“I’ll revive her!”

“Cool. She’s all yours.”

Porta had that situation covered.

Having unleashed her first wave, the queen quickly summoned another dark vortex and stepped inside it. Heedless of her surroundings, Wise plunged in after her.

“Dammit, Wise! I know how you feel, but don’t run off alone!”

Masato kicked a tree out of his way, vaulted over the trunk, and jumped into the dark whirlpool after her.

Fighting the murky stream, he ran through the hideous swirl. On and on.

When he finally reached solid ground again, Masato stopped.

“...Where the hell am I?”

It was a perfect cube: six flat surfaces. The walls and ceiling were made of frameless monitor screens covered in lines of some programming language—a very tech-heavy room. But he didn’t have time to gawk.

Masato quickly ran to Wise’s side, drawing Firmamento.

“You’re late, Masato!”

“You ran out ahead! ...So what’s going on here?”

“Literally nothing worth mentioning.”

Wise glared at the queen, who scoffed, then turned her gaze to Masato, looking him over.

“Humph... Not a very impressive boy. Neither his face nor his body are at all memorable. Your boyfriend?”

“No! And don’t inflict your awful taste in men on him! That’s not what I’m here to talk about! ...First, answer my damn question! What is this place? Explain!”

“*Sigh...* Blah, blah, blah, blah! Don’t you ever shut up? Honestly, I don’t know where we are. I don’t know anything.”

“Huuuh?! The heck?! Don’t pretend you’re innocent now!”

“But it’s the truth! I don’t know what this place is. I found a gift from an unknown sender in my item storage, and when I opened it, this room appeared. All I know about it otherwise is that if I make a wish here, it will always be granted.”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. I say I want to make some particular stud mine, and they tell me how to control him at will. I say I want to be strong, and they give me a veil that prevents attacks from hitting me. I say I want to defeat my enemies without using magic, and they give me the ability to slaughter my enemies by waving my arms or pointing at them. Simple.”

“H-hold up... I’m confused...”

“No, wait. You mean...?”

This was the cheat tool the queen was using? They were inside that program?
Someone else is operating it in response to her requests? Creating the effects she wants?

But then...who?

He could think about that later. The queen was done talking.

“I’ve answered your questions. Time for you to leave... Coniglio, Orecchio, Tifone. Come forth.”

At her request, three beings materialized: A rabbit with blue fur. A butterfly with an earlike pattern on its wings. A whirlwind with precious gems swirling within.

Flanked by these three strange creatures, the queen smiled, as if she had everything the world could ever grant her.

“I got these little ones in this room, too. They’re excellent. As long as I have this place, whatever I desire is mine. It’s so easy to stand atop this world. So simple to control everything. And...I might even be able to control things in the other world, in the real one.”

“Whoa, what the hell’s she going on about? She’s nuts!”

“It’s the truth. I mean, I asked, and they replied, ‘It’s possible.’ This game is run by the Cabinet Office, so they just have to network in and... Well, whatever... They can make it happen.”

The Cabinet Office—the heart of the Japanese government. The very core of the country.

“If I say ‘I want top secret government intel’ and they get it for me, how much do you think I could sell that for? If I can bend the public institutions to my will, they’d do anything to avoid disaster!”

“Whoa, stop! Do you have any idea what the consequences would be? This mess is dangerous enough already! Think for a second!”

“I have thought about it. This is entirely possible. No, this is what I will do! I’ve made up my mind. I will become the ruler of everything! Everything will turn out as I please. So don’t you get in my way! Get out of my sight! Your presence alone makes me ill.”

“Is that any way to talk to your own daughter?!”

“I’ll talk to you any way I want. You’ve never been anything but a thorn in my side.”

The queen glared at Wise, clearly disgusted, and muttered.

“You know, I really did try. I really thought this game would let us make a fresh start... But I’m done with that now.”

“Uh...”

“Children are pests. They only think about themselves. They make your life hell. They do nothing but destroy your peace and freedom... That’s why I’m done, Genya.”

“W-wait! Wait, Mom! Just one more—”

“No more. I don’t need you. Get out of my sight.”

The queen pointed her finger at Wise. As the same time, the ear-patterned butterfly shot forward, too fast for the eye to follow, knocking Wise back. Before she even had a chance to scream, she was flung back through the swirling darkness.

Leaving Masato with a horrible rage boiling up inside him.

He didn’t need to stifle this anger. His grip tightened on his sword.

“Hey, lady... What made you like this? Are you even a mother?”

“Oh, you’re going to lecture me? Spare me. You’re just like that brat, aren’t you? You don’t give a second thought for your mother. You just say and do whatever you please.”

His ears stung a little. Her words had definitely found their mark.

Masato knew he’d done just that.

“...I’ll admit it.”

“Heh-heh. Of course you do! That’s just what children are.”

“Yeah, you’re right... My dreams came true, and I was sent into this game world but so was my mom. I was so mad about it. I just kept yelling at her.”

So much he’d made Mamako cry.

“And once we actually started adventuring, I didn’t like what Mom said or what she did, so I kept going off on her. Chewing her out for everything.”

Mamako had grown so despondent, she couldn’t look at him.

But.

“But...my mom never talked like you do.”

He remembered it clearly: Mamako's expression after the tears stopped.

No matter how selfish her son was, no matter how he hurt her, she forgave him, and her old smile returned.

Mothers forgave and accepted.

Masato knew this.

"I know we can be totally selfish... But you gotta accept that children can be like that sometimes."

"Do you have any idea how much crap I put up with? I can assure you she's unbearable."

"Even then. Try to accept her anyway. She said she wants to try to fix things..."

"Sigh... This is a waste of my time."

She heaved a disgusted sigh, completely exasperated.

"This is why I can't stand children. They only think about themselves! Did you think this self-centered nonsense would actually work?"

"I know it's crazy, but it's the only thing I've got."

"No. I'm not some merciful god. Look, see? I'm a demon. I have no intention of forgiving some selfish child..."

"I'm sure there's a part of you that wants to. No matter what you say, you're still a mother. If you can't find it yourself..."

"You'll what?"

"I'll strip you of that demon form and make you remember. By force."

Ready to fight, he pointed his Holy Sword at her.

The demon stroked her voluptuous figure, cackling.

"Oh my, you're going to strip me naked? Heh-heh-heh! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Go ahead and try. Let's see if you can."

The queen's mouth twisted manically. Time remaining before a magic spell passed between those smirking lips: zero.

Battle start.

“Bomba Sfera!”

“That spell’s a small-range explosion! I can avoid it by jumping backward!”

“Vento Neve!”

“That’s an AOE! I can’t dodge it, but I can defend!”

A blast of heat and then a harsh chill. She was humming as she cast, forcing Masato on the defensive.

But he’d avoided a clean hit. Taken no unnecessary damage.

“You handled that well.”

“I guessed right! You’re using the same spells as your daughter! Parents and children do think alike, even when it comes to attack patterns!”

“Humph. You little snot.”

He’d gotten under her skin with that one. She waved an arm. The shock wave that hit him was something other than magic.

“Here comes the rough one! Guh...!”

This attack was invisible and un-dodgeable. Masato made the snap decision to guard, but...

...he was unable to absorb the full force of the gale, and his feet were lifted off the floor.

When he found his footing again, it was on ground that smelled of dirt and grass. He’d been sent tumbling through the dark vortex, stopping only when his back hit something hard.

“Guh...! Ow... Wh-what the hell...?”

The scenery around him was totally different. What had once been a gloomy forest was now an open space with almost no trees in sight. There was a coffin impaled on one of the few remaining trees, but... Was that Wise? Porta was trying desperately to pull it down.

Masato had come crashing into a pile of wood made from all the trees that

had once surrounded them.

“...Ma-kun! ...Are you out there?!”

He heard Mamako’s voice inside the coffin.

“Mom? ...Are you trapped in here?!”

Masato swung Firmamento, striking the mountain of trees with all his might.

But it remained unblemished. He didn’t even make so much as a scratch.

“Yo, what the hell? You were able to destroy the Adventurers Guild, right? I thought we could attack and destroy objects...!”

“You’re right. Thanks to a bug, we could. Until now! ...Looks like they finally fixed it. Your mom isn’t getting out of there! I’ve successfully sealed away the bulk of her firepower. Heh-heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The queen came striding out of the darkness, doing her best evil laugh.

“You look so desperate to save her... What? Do you need Mommy’s help? You treat her like she’s in your way, but the moment you’re in trouble, suddenly you need her.”

“That’s not it! I just want to save her! Any normal kid would want to save their parents if they were in trouble!”

“Excuses, excuses. You just borrow her power when it’s convenient. Ugh! No more! All children are selfish! I’ve had enough! I’m sure your mommy has, too.”

“My mom isn’t like you!”

“Sure she is. We’re both mothers. So I’ll tell you how your precious mommy feels. About how her child tries to use her...”

The queen raised a hand and insta-cast.

“Luce della Dannazione!”

As her voice echoed, a lightning bolt shot down out of the sky, and electricity coursed through Masato.

Masato had raised his left arm in time, and the defensive wall was active, but he took a lot of damage.

“Ow...! That...was...pretty effective...”

He tried in vain to keep his knees from buckling and hit the ground.

“Well? Did you get a taste of how mothers feel? We’re all angry. And this is the hammer of anger! Heh-heh-heh!”

“I understand being angry, sure. But this...”

“Not just anger! Failure, disappointment, remorse... No mothers in the world are happy with how their children turned out. They’re in our way. They’re nothing but trouble. We wish to be rid of them.”

“That’s not—”

“To a parent, children are mere shackles! A burden that prevents them from being free. Nothing more. Heh-heh-heh-heh, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The queen’s screeching laughter filled the air. Masato tried to argue, but...
...then he felt it; the ground moved.

He’d felt this enough by now to know what was coming. He was sure of it.

Mother Earth was responding to a mother’s call.

In a show of mercy, Masato warned the queen.

“...Hey, this is your last chance to rethink this whole thing.”

“Hunh? What are you talking about? Everything I said is the truth! A mother’s truth! There’s nothing to rethink.”

“All right... Just be ready for the consequences.”

Masato shouted with all his might.

“My mom’s here with me, and she’s nothing like you! Right, Mom?”

A moment later, the ground jerked violently.

The shaking was so strong that not only could they not stand, they couldn’t even manage to stay on all fours.

A massive chasm split the earth around the mountain of trees, which was subsequently washed away by the ensuing torrent of water.

When the deluge finished raging, there stood Mamako, holding both the Holy Sword of Mother Earth and the Holy Sword of Mother Ocean.

There was no trace of her usual smile.

“B-but... How? ...They’re indestructible... You couldn’t have gotten out!” the queen spluttered. But she couldn’t deny the truth.

Mamako caught the queen’s gaze, held it, and slowly approached.

“I’ve never once forgotten...the moment my child was born! So many times I have genuinely felt that I would die for him. The day my child first smiled, the day he first called me Mama... I could never forget those, either. Because I’m a mother.”

Her tone was as measured as her pace.

“How could anyone forget such joy? ...Nothing could ever replace it. That precious bond between mother and child, unique to the two of you... How could anyone ever try to rid themselves of that? ...I cannot fathom it. The very idea makes me angry...and terribly sad.”

A glimmer of pity crossed Mamako’s face.

At the end of her gaze, the queen stood steadfast.

“But I have faith,” Mamako continued. “If you are a mother, you will remember... No, we’ll make you remember. For the sake of your child, Wise, no matter what it takes!”

“Humph. You needn’t bother. I’m against it. I have no interest... I don’t need children. I am doing just fine all on my own. I have power. Nothing can get in my way. I have the strength to bend the world to my will...”

“Then that strength you dismissed will defeat the power you’re so proud of. And that will make you see the light.”

“What nonsense. You think you can do that?”

“Yes. I know I can. Because I have my beloved son with me... Right, Ma-kun?”

When she called his name, Mamako turned toward Masato...and she looked just as she always did. That smiling face, too young to ever be a mother’s, yet

unmistakably his mother's.

Maaaaan... After she builds me up like that, I gotta deliver.

Masato forced his aching body upright. He puffed out his chest, gripped his sword, and ran to Mamako's side, battered but ready to go.

And then he softly said the one thing he knew he needed to tell her.

"I'm sorry for all the selfish things I've said and done. But...thank you. I'm glad you're my mom."

"You're welcome!"

Mamako wiped a tear away before it fell.

This was it. Mother and son united together against a common foe.

The queen had her magic tome in hand, ready for anything. She seemed ready to cast at any moment, but before she could...

"Masato! Here!"

A voice called to him from behind. He turned around, and Porta tossed him a small orb.

"Throw that up in the air! That'll activate it!"

"R-right!"

As instructed, he caught the orb and immediately threw it as high as he could.

The dimly glowing sphere released a strange pulse, almost like vibrations. These pulsations rained down on everyone.

Masato was unaffected. Mamako was unaffected. Porta and Wise (still in her coffin) were unaffected.

The queen's magic was sealed.

"Wha...? What the...? That's not..."

"For all you deny it, you're exactly like your daughter! ...Porta, nice one! Gold star!"

"Thank you! Glad I could help!"

“Well, Mom, shall we? Let’s teach her what being mother and child is all about!”

“Yes! Let’s do it!”

Even standing was hard, but Masato forced his body into a run. They couldn’t blow this chance. Take the advantage—press it.

Masato attacked first. As the queen struggled to recover from the shock of having her magic sealed, he stepped right up to her and swung Firmamento. One layer of the darkness veil shattered.

“*Tch!* Sealed magic can be easily fixed...!”

“Not if we don’t let you! *Hyah!*”

Mamako’s attack followed Masato’s. She swung Terra di Madre down, and rock spikes shot out of the ground, all aimed at the queen. The second veil shattered.

Mamako went to strike again, but before she could, the queen called out, panicking.

“W-wait! You there... Mamako, was it? You’re this boy’s mom?”

“Yes! I am Ma-kun’s mother! What of it?”

“Then doesn’t it bother you? Getting dragged this way and that by your selfish kid? Hasn’t it been a struggle?! I know it has!”

“Well...”

Mamako’s hand faltered. Wondering how she would answer, Masato paused, too.

But Mamako’s maternal heart didn’t waver at all.

“That’s true. There were some very sad times. Some very hard times... But I understood. That’s all part of having a child.”

“But that...that doesn’t justify...”

“I entirely agree with what you’re saying. I have felt the same way sometimes. Parents are only human. We can’t remain unshaking, unhurt, and all-forgiving no matter what is said to us. We’re not gods.”

“R-right! Then...!”

“But think about it. Think about what you get from them. All the things you can only have when your child is by your side. All the moments that only exist in passing. Treasures only a parent could ever obtain. That’s why...!”

Mamako finished Altura’s swing. The water it spawned fired liquid bullets, riddling the queen’s body mercilessly.

“Gaaah?!” Damage taken.

“That’s why I accept everything about my son. That’s why I embrace the good with the bad. No matter what happens, I will never abandon him.”

A torrent of words following a rushing attack.

The queen went pale, howling.

“T-to hell with that! I don’t believe you! That’s nothing more than a pipe dream! Reality doesn’t work like that! ...I’m in the right, here! I’m the one justified! Children are selfish, self-centered pests!”

The three strange creatures appeared before her: the blue rabbit, the ear-patterned butterfly, and the bejeweled whirlwind. She had summoned them to serve as her shield.

But this was a desperate last move. Masato attacked.

“Cut the crap, lady! Your kid is trying to get through to you, desperately trying to reach out! Listen to her!”

The blue rabbit jumped at him, but his beam cut it down. Two to go.

Mamako followed suit.

“I know only too well how you feel! But the only one who can accept her is you, her mother! So stop running! Face your own daughter!”

Mamako’s turn. Terra di Madre’s stone spikes pierced the whirlwind’s jewels.

And now her second. Altura’s water bullets fired. But the ear-patterned butterfly darted around, dodging all of Mamako’s moves.

And then.

“Spara la magia per mirare... Bomba Fiamma!”

A fiery explosion hit the butterfly, and it fell, burning.

“And! ...Indebolito!”

Another spell lowered the queen’s defense.

Wise had chain cast. Revived by Porta’s items, she’d finished the last enemy off and successfully debuffed the queen.

“Mom! It’s over! I’m gonna hit you once real hard, cool your head off, and then have a long chat with you! ...No matter what you say about me, I just can’t bring myself to totally hate you. I’m still your daughter!”

“Genya... You...”

“Now, Masato! Mamako! Don’t hold back! Get her!”

“I—I won’t let you! ...Come!”

At the queen’s beckoning, the dark swirl moved. It sprouted two large, twisted wings and attached itself to the queen’s back, flying her into the air, high into the sky. She must have thought she’d be safe from attack up there.



But she wasn't. In fact, this was in their favor.

"This is your chance, Ma-kun! Go for it!"

"Yeah! Flying enemies are miiiiine!"

The anti-air Holy Sword howled, and the beam it fired sliced off one of the queen's wings.

The one-winged demon plummeted toward the ground.

"Mom! Finish her!"

"Full mom power! ...I'll make you remember that you're a mom, too!"

Mamako's double attack: stone spikes and water bullets.

With the full weight of her desire behind them, every assault hit home. The queen's body was riddled with holes and impaled on a spike through the belly.

She was finished.

"Urgh... H-how...could I have lost...?"

Defeated, the queen tumbled downward. Her eyes barely open, she clutched at the pain in her gut.

But just before she hit the ground, she slowed down.

Someone caught the queen.

"Huh...? ...Genya...?"

Her daughter wrapped her arms around her from behind, squeezing, her forehead pressed against her mother's back. Just standing there, saying nothing.

The queen stroked her daughter's hand and let a single tear fall.

Smiling as he watched, Masato said, "Nicely done, Mom."

"Yes. You too!"

So as not to interrupt them, Masato and Mamako very quietly high-fived each other.

"Um, um, can I do that, too...?"

“Oh, sure, Porta! Didn’t mean to leave you out.”

“Good job, Porta, sweetie!”

All three high-fived.

And with that, their battle was over.

Epilogue

“Ughhh, you’re so annoying! What? What did I do? What does it matter what I do? We’re inside a game! Let me do whatever I want!”

“And look where that got us! You went around causing trouble for everyone! And what was that crap anyway? Using hot guys as furniture? How stupid can you be?! I’d rather you were still wasting money on hosts!”

“Really? Well, I’d love to, Genya. Are you gonna pay for it? You had a part-time job, right?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Are you, like, hell-bent on being the worst mother of all time? Just stop already! Just...stop!”

“Oh, shut up! Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah! You’re always like this, Genya! From the moment you popped out of me! ‘Waaah, waaah, waaah!’”

“‘Popped’?! Ewwwwww! And stop calling me by my real name!”

“What’s wrong with Genya? It’s a nice name! Ohhhh, I wish I could see him again... Genya number one... I wonder how he’s doing? Next time I’m at the club, I’ll have to buy him a bottle.”

“Taste the rage of this daughter you named after some dumb host!”

“I’ll pay that right back, you silly little girl! I’ll pound that flat chest of yours even flatter!”

“And I’ll kick your ass for those crappy genetiiiiiiics!”

Wise raged out with demonic ferocity and attacked.

Meanwhile, the Queen of the Night, a.k.a. Wise’s mother, Kazuno, had dropped her transformation, returning to human form—she appeared to be a very ordinary housewife—and was fighting back with all her might.

They grabbed and headbutted one another, grinding their heads back and forth. Kazuno gained the advantage, forcing Wise down, and soon had her pinned, but...

“...Oh.”

“Mm? What? What now?”

“Um, well... It’s just... It smells like Mom, I thought.”

“Wh-where’d that come from, Genya? ...Although, I suppose this odor does remind me that you’re my child as well.”

“Humph. I feel like that phrasing could be improved. You’re implying I stink!”

“Oh, you’d noticed? You reek of sweat.”

“So do you! You stink, mom! You smell like an old lady!”

“Take that back! You know I’m sensitive about that sort of thing!”

They went on like this a while more.

Masato and Shiraaase were watching from a distance.

“Well, it appears the emotional reunion scene has become something of a full-on brawl. I suppose one could consider them close, in a manner of speaking. What do you think?”

“Yeah... I mean, they say you only argue with those you’re close to. And as long as their fight doesn’t bother anyone around them, I guess it’s okay?”

That was another way to be parent and child, so maybe that was how it should be. Probably.

“So what’ll happen to Wise’s mother now?”

“We’ll have her log out and question her thoroughly.”

“And then a strict punishment?”

“We can’t overlook the use of the cheat tool. However, if she confesses to everything and is able to provide us with information that would benefit future administrative decisions, we could see our way to softening the punishment. Despite all this, it seems she is still a mother.”

“So then, um... What about Wise?”

“Participation in this game is fundamentally done in pairs of one parent and one child, so depending on Kazuno’s attitude, there is a danger that Wise will have her account suspended as well, but...”

Shiraaase glanced sideways, staring at the ring on Masato's right ring finger.

"We aren't cruel enough to tear two young people apart. Don't worry. Frankly, if a new parent-child relationship happens to occur within the game, we would consider that an entirely positive result. However, we do ask that you stick to the laws concerning legally marriageable ages."

"Hmm? Huh? What? You've lost me..."

"Well, that aside, you and Mamako certainly were the stars today. The power of your bond truly impressed us all. Well done."

"Thanks. The aftereffects appear to be kinda severe, but..."

Masato glanced behind him.

"Mama! You're glowing! Like the sun! It's blinding!"

"Too bright? I'm sorry... I'm just so happy I could fight alongside Ma-kun... Goodness, my heart's still pounding!"

Mamako shone even brighter. She was laughing about it with Porta, but **A Mother's Light**, which she'd accidentally activated in her excitement, was now so dazzling it was literally impossible to make her out. The light blinded anyone who looked.

"I think you might need to adjust my mom's skills a little."

"Yes, perhaps so. I'll file a report on our test players' opinions. Anything else we should know?"

"Anything else... Hmm... Anything else..."

Masato tried to think, but all that emerged was a yawn. They'd restored his HP, but that didn't make him any less tired.

"You seem rather fatigued. Masato, you and Mamako should return to your lodgings and get some rest. This screaming contest seems like it's going to take a while longer, so go on ahead."

"Screaming contest'? ...But yeah, I think that's best. Porta, you coming?"

"No! I can read the room! I wouldn't get between you two now!"

He'd wanted her along precisely because he had grave concerns about the

implications of being there along with his mother. He couldn't bring himself to argue, though, with her pure intentions.

And Masato was no longer that opposed to the idea of spending time with Mamako.

"Well, Mom. Should we head on back?"

"Yes. We're leaving, everyone! ...Oh, right, Ma-kun. What shall we do when we get back? Hot springs? Dinner? Or would you rather sleep with me? Oops! ☆"

She got even brighter, somehow.

"Don't get carried away. And stop glowing! Can we have udon for dinner?"

"Sure thing. Mommy will cook whatever you want! ...Eh-heh-heh."

"Wh-what's that laugh for?"

"It's been so long since you actually told me what you wanted to eat! At home, it was always 'Whatever' or 'The usual.' It made me so sad!"

"S-sorry..."

"But here you are saying what you'd like and talking to me so much! Mommy's so happy... *Sniffle...*"

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Wh-why are you crying?! That's not something to cry about!"

"Hee-hee. You're right. Mommy's being weird and crying out of nowhere."

"Sheesh. *Sigh...* I will never understand moms..."

"Maybe not. Maybe boys never do. But that's okay. You don't need to! As long as you know your mom is your mom, that's enough."

"...It is?"

"It is."

As they chatted idly, Masato and Mamako found themselves naturally walking side by side.

The sight of them together was blinding in its own right.

The next day.

Masato's party got ready to leave Maman Village, basking in the glowing smiles of the elder and the villagers.

"Thanks to your defeat of the Queen of the Night, our village is back to normal. The young men she had bewitched have regained their senses and returned to their homes. We cannot thank you enough. As a small token of our appreciation, we'd like you to accept this."

The elder handed over a URL. Yes, that kind of URL. He held out a string of letters, numbers, and symbols.

"Um... What is this? Some sort of bug?"

"If you access this from your smartphone, you can download a coupon for a free night's stay at any participating National Hot Springs Association resort. I hope you all enjoy!"

"A free stay!" **Wise was super impressed!** ☆

"What a lovely gift!" **Mamako swooned!** ☆

"Try to rein it in a bit. It ain't that great."

"But it is!" the elder insisted. "This is a wonderful reward. A test pilot for a program to have quest rewards be useful in the real world. Please accept it."

"Whoa... Well, in that case, sure, I'll take it... Porta, can you put this in the bag for me?"

"Yes! I'll take care of it! I'll place it in the party storage!"

Porta shoved the rod-shaped URL code into her bag. And so...

...they headed out.

It was a beautiful day. A pleasant breeze was blowing. The perfect day to seek a new adventure.

"...Um, so, Wise..."

"Mm? What?"

"Why are you here?"

“Hunh?! Why do you ask? Are you implying I’m a problem?!”

“No, not at all... Just, you were only with us because you had that fight with your mom and wanted to become my mom’s daughter to beat the game, right? But now you two have made up. So the reason you were with us is gone.”

“Oh, yeah... That’s true, but...”

“So I’d just assumed you and your mom would be logging out, and you’d go back to your life in the real world.”

“Uhhh, yeah, well... We did talk about it, but...I just felt like I wanted to be here a little longer. I mean, I finally have a chance for some proper adventures.”

Wise clasped her hands behind her back, fiddling with the ring on her right ring finger.

She herself wasn’t really conscious of the implications.

“So don’t try to kick me out of the party, okay? Besides, you totally need me. You need my amazing Sage powers!”

“We have an urgent need to raise your defense against getting your magic sealed and dying, then.”

“I—I know! I’m raising it!”

“Cool. Then let’s find this next adventure!”

They set out in search of a new adventure.

New adventure... An adventure?

“...Oh? Hey, Ma-kun...”

“Mm? What, Mom?”

“What should we be doing now?”

“What? What do you mean?”

Mamako just blinked at him. He glanced at Wise, but she just gave a “Don’t ask me” shrug. Porta looked blank. Even her blank expression seemed worth preserving forever. He could go without three—no, four and a half—meals on that look alone.

Just then, a giant screen materialized in the sky, and you-know-who appeared, as deadpan as ever. Eyes that never betrayed the slightest hint of anything but calm stared down at them.

“Good morning, everyone. I am the Shirase always lurking in the corner of your heart.”

“I’d like to kick her out of there.”

“You can try! But I must inform you I will just sneak back when you aren’t looking... That said, you were all a great help with this quest. In light of which, we have decided you are worthy of entrusting with our next task. Are you on board?”

“Another quest? Uh... Sure, why not?”

“Wait, Ma-kun! Mommy was just wondering if we shouldn’t leave this game soon. I mean, you have to go to school, don’t you?”

“...Erk...”

She might have a point there. How long had they been in the game? And he’d definitely missed a few days of school. If he missed too many more, he might not meet the required minimum attendance.

“You need not worry about that. Your participation here is at the behest of the Japanese government. The nation itself has invited you, and you are testing a special program at the government’s request. Not only are you exempt from attending school, but we’re also covering your income and looking after your home for you. We leave no stone unturned.”

“Oh my goodness! You are? Well, that’s a relief!”

“Talk about customer satisfaction! Japan’s really got our backs on this one.”

“We would like your continued help with problems—hereafter known as quests—that management is having trouble handling. Naturally, we will repay your efforts in kind. Heh-heh-heh.”

“You didn’t need to say that much...”

“Now that your concerns are alleviated, I can inform you of your next destination! As my name implies! ...Ha!”

The giant Shirase in the sky glanced sideways, and a beam of light shot out of her eyes, showing the direction in which they should proceed.

“You really oughta do something about that presentation.”

“I am quite fond of it, myself!”

Well, if she was cool with it, whatever.

And thus...

“Well, everyone, let’s...”

“Well, everyone, let’s head out on our next quest! Yay!”

“Mom! I wanted to say that! ...I’m the hero! I’m the party leader! Got that?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, dear. But the early bird catches the worm! Right?”

“Sheesh... All right, then.”

It didn’t really matter. Not worth complaining about every time. He could overlook this much.

“Then let’s go! Yay!”

“I’m coming, too! Yay!”

“Yeah, yeah, let’s do this.”

“Repeat after Mom, Ma-kun! An adventure with Mommy! Yay!”

“Okay, don’t push your luck, Mom.”

Mamako was waaaay too excited about this. Laughing at her, Masato started walking.

As he did, Masato remembered something: If you went on an adventure with your mom, would you become closer?

Before coming here, he’d answered that question on a survey.

How would he answer it now?

“...Like, I kinda am? I guess.”

Not really that different from before the adventure began.

Masato set out after his mother, oblivious to the smile stretching across his

face.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, everyone. I am Inaka. Dachima Inaka. I could not be more grateful for your decision to pick up this novel.

This book has a mom as its main heroine. My editors warned me that this was a pretty thorny idea.

I guess it is! Light novel heroines are generally created for the fans to fall head over heels in love with. For the heroine to be a mom... Well, you'd have to be pretty far gone to go for that.

But that's the point!

Mamako isn't a heroine you'll fall in love with, just one you'll love! One who accepts everything about you with a mother's all-encompassing affection.

For those of you going, "I prefer this other one..." feel free to hide this in the corner of your bookshelf. We won't get in the way. Mamako will watch over you as you flirt with all those other heroines.

What? Is that awkward? Well, certainly. But do what you can. Hang in there!

I'd like to take a moment to thank a few people.

My deepest thanks to the judges who selected my work for the 29th Fantasia Grand Prize.

I'd also like to thank the illustrator, Iida Pochi., and everyone involved in the publication, including my editor, K. I hope I can continue to receive your support.

Finally, I'd like to dedicate this work to my mother, who's over fifty but got herself a forklift license and is driving one around for her current contract job.

I'm sure that as someone with a grandchild already, you must be surprised to have a light novel dedicated to you, but... Wait, you want to read it? Really?

Then go ahead. But please don't tell me what you think of it in person.

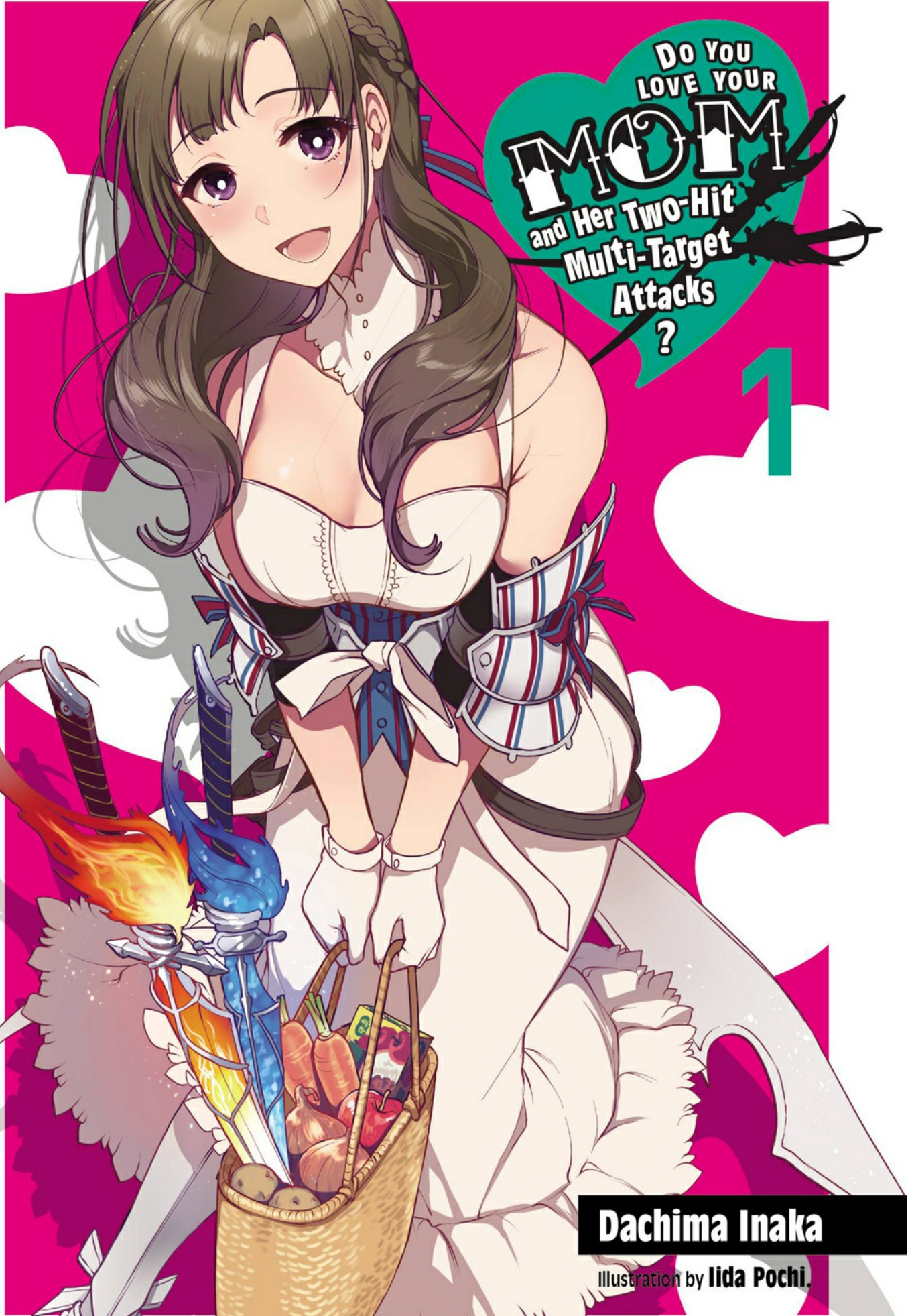
Fall 2016, Dachima Inaka

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink



DO YOU
LOVE YOUR
MOM
and Her Two-Hit
Multi-Target
Attacks
?

Dachima Inaka

Illustration by **Iida Pochi.**