

Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension

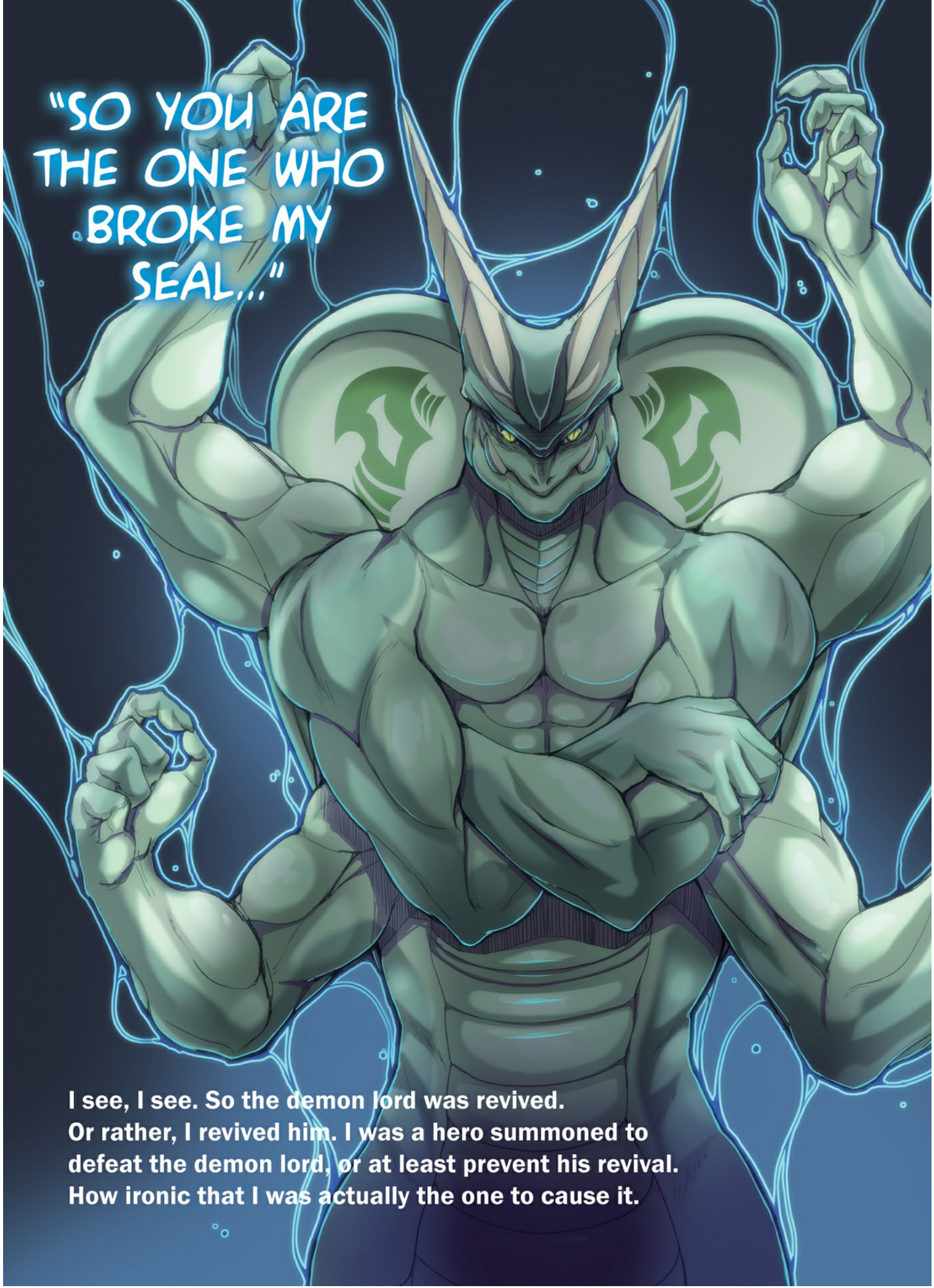
The Alluring Cave Baths

6

Volume Six



Nagaharu Hibihana
Illust. = Masakage Hagiya



"SO YOU ARE
THE ONE WHO
BROKE MY
SEAL..."

I see, I see. So the demon lord was revived.
Or rather, I revived him. I was a hero summoned to
defeat the demon lord, or at least prevent his revival.
How ironic that I was actually the one to cause it.

**MIXED BATHING WITH THE
BIG SISTER GODDESSES!**





A woman appeared from another room with a wand in her hand. She shot two fire arrows, but Haruno stepped in front of us and the arrows vanished before they could hit her. That was her gift, Unlimited Reflection. The woman froze when she saw her spell vanish into thin air. Roni used that opening to dash up to her and strike the wand out of her hand while Rulitora circled around and pinned her arms behind her.



**HARUNO
SHINONOME**

A HERO SUMMONED FROM
ANOTHER WORLD LIKE TOUYA.
SHE AND TOUYA HAVE REUNITED.



TOUYA HOUTOU

A HERO WITH A GIFT CALLED THE
UNLIMITED BATH, GETS FIRED UP AT
THE THOUGHT OF MIXED BATHING.



YUKINA

TOUYA'S YOUNGER SISTER,
REINCARNATED AS A DEMON
THROUGH THE HERO OF
DARKNESS SUMMONING RITUAL.

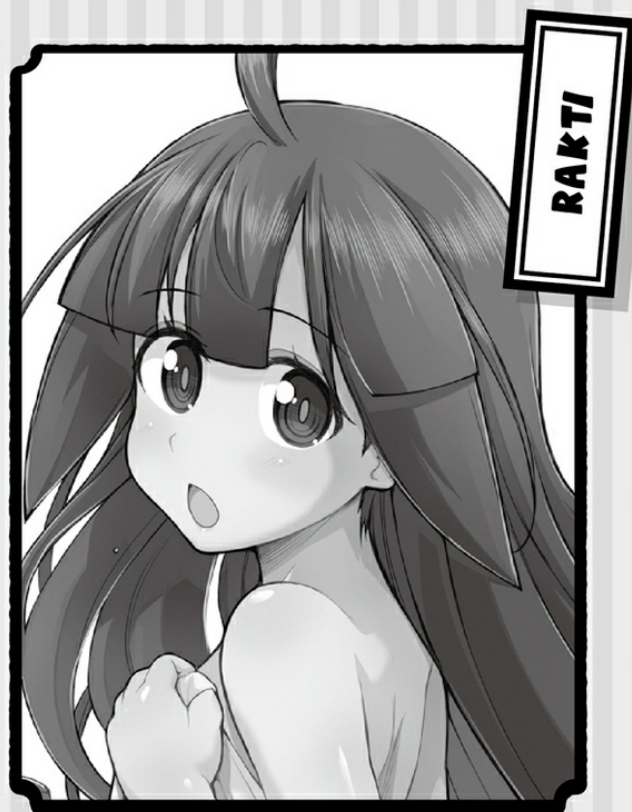


CLENA

A GIRL TRAVELING WITH
TOUYA, ON A QUEST TO
FIGURE OUT HER ORIGINS.



CLENA'S ATTENDANT,
A LYCAON, A WOLF
DEMI-HUMAN.



THE GODDESS OF
DARKNESS. YOUNGEST OF
THE SIX GODDESS SISTERS.

WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR

TOUYA HOUJOU IS SUMMONED TO A PARALLEL WORLD TO DEFEAT THE DEMON LORD. HE'S GRANTED A SPECIAL POWER, BUT IT'S... THE POWER TO OPEN A DOOR TO A BATH ANYTIME AND ANYWHERE, THE UNLIMITED BATH. AFTER RECEIVING A MESSAGE FROM THE GODDESS OF WATER, TOUYA'S PARTY HEADS TO THE WATER CAPITAL. THEY REUNITE WITH HARUNO BUT SUDDENLY GET ATTACKED BY THE DEMON LORD'S ARMY. THEY FEND OFF THE ATTACK WITH THE HELP OF THE GODDESS OF WATER AND TAKE ONE OF THE FIVE GREAT DEMON GENERALS, THE DEMON DOG, PRISONER. HE TELLS THEM THAT THE DEMON LORD IS SEALED IN THE COUNTRY OF ARES, WHERE THE PARTY HEADS NEXT.



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Presented by Nagaharu Hibihana / Illust. = Masakage Hagiya

Pre-Bath – Prologue We’re at a good stopping point, so let me introduce myself again. It goes without saying that by “stopping point,” I meant our reunion with Haruno and her party.

Anyway, my name is Touya Houjou. I was summoned to this parallel world by the sacred family and the temple of light of this kingdom called Jupiter, and now I’m on a journey to prevent, or at least suppress, the revival of the demon lord.

Well, I *was*, at least.

Just a few days ago, I learned from one of the Five Great Demon Generals, the Demon Dog, that the demon lord had only been trying to improve his country’s economy. Since then, I haven’t been able to believe that the demon lord was completely evil.

Of course, I thought it was pretty harsh to instigate war on a country just over their economy. But they introduced the famous *rakuichi rakuza* system, or free market system, and banks. These ideas were so unprecedented that other nations could barely even understand them, much less compete. As a result, the neighboring nations that were driven to the brink of financial ruin instigated the war. I couldn’t proclaim that they were entirely in the wrong, either. It’d be absurd to expect them to sit and wait to collapse. Thus, my current evaluation was that neither side was completely at fault.

This decision played into how we interacted with the Demon Dog, too. He was behaving rather obediently—likely due to the high chance that Clena was the demon lord’s granddaughter. Thanks to that, we’d been gradually making our way through the depths of the sea without incident and were finally close to reaching Ares, the country located on the Dragon’s Tail Peninsula. Sitting on the southern side of the bay, it was the southernmost nation within the Olympus Alliance. Neptune was located on the north side of Talon Peninsula, acting as a border between the mainland and the bay.

We finally saw land, so I let the Grande Nautilus float up to the surface. I was pretty sure we had traveled in the right direction this whole time, so we should be able to spot the port city of Ares any time now. We'd been eating nothing but fish for the past several days, so I was thinking we'd dock and have some meat for lunch, but... something felt strange. We were getting closer and closer but still saw no signs of a port.

When we finally landed, we were met with a barren desert. Emptiness as far as the eye could see. Nothing but arid, reddish-brown earth surrounded us. The girls gathered around the deck of the ship after noticing we had reached land, but they also seemed taken aback at the unexpected sight.

"Did we get the wrong place?"

"We were moving along the sea floor the whole time... Maybe we went in the wrong direction at some point?" Haruno replied, sounding as doubtful as me.

Looking east, I could see a hill. Maybe Ares was on the other side?

"Hey Touya, why don't we ask the Demon Dog?"

We'd learned from the Demon Dog that the demon lord's army was based in Ares. This was convenient, since we had been planning to head to Ares either way. Just in case, I asked Rulitora to bring him to us.

Ares—the last nation to remain allied with Hades in the war 500 years ago. Even now, they had no temple of light, and it was often rumored that demons lived in hiding there. According to the Demon Dog, those rumors were only half right. Demons indeed lived there, but they had no need to hide. When the capital of Hades fell 500 years ago, the residents all fled to Ares. Since Ares was their only remaining ally at the time, they had no other choice. The Olympus Alliance took issue with Ares taking in the escapees, and the sacred family of Jupiter and the temple of light had demanded that they turn over the demons to them.

However, the Ares royal family, who had observed the rapid development of their nation after allying with Hades, staunchly refused. Ever since, both countries used every possible opportunity to quarrel. That was likely also the reason why Ares didn't have a temple of light.

Before long, Rulitora brought the Demon Dog to us. We hadn't restrained him at all since he could easily break free anyway.

"We've reached land, but I don't see anything that looks like a port. The only landmark is that hill over there."

The Demon Dog stood at the edge of the deck, looking eastward at the hill and nodded in slight amusement. "Ah, yes, that hill. You are not wrong. This is the port of Ares."

"...Huh? What do you mean?" I looked again and still couldn't see anything.

What did he mean? Everyone looked at Clena, since she was the most knowledgeable about these sorts of things.

"Um, sorry. Knowledge about Ares doesn't often travel north."

That was true, come to think of it. We knew that Neptune traded with them, but besides that, all we'd heard were rumors that demons lived in hiding there. If even Clena didn't know, we had to raise the white flag.

"Is it past the hill or something?"

"No, under it."

"...‘Under’?"

Everyone stared at the Demon Dog, which made him jut out his chest for some reason, proudly proclaiming, "There is a cave underneath that hill, and the port is located there."

"What is this, a secret hideaway...? Was there a reason they couldn't build the port outside?" Like monster attacks, or something.

The Demon Dog laughed and waved his hands, denying my speculation. "No, it is just more convenient for them that way. The cave leads directly to the town."

"If it connects to a town, then that doesn't make it a cave, does it?"

"It is a cave. All the cities in Ares are underground—it is a kingdom of caves!"

"A kingdom of caves?!"

I looked around again. I still saw nothing but wasteland. I just couldn't

suddenly accept that there was an entire nation under all this. Come to think of it, Ares was home to the main temple of earth. Maybe it did make sense, considering that.

Ares—the home of demons and the base of the demon lord’s army. The kingdom of caves below this barren wasteland would be the stage for our next adventure.

First Bath – Welcome to the Goddesses' Hot Springs Hotel

We followed the Demon Dog's directions and sailed along the coastline toward the hill, eventually spotting a cave entrance. It could be accessed from the sea and was big enough for a large boat to enter with room to spare. Inside, we saw several piers. The underside of this hill really was a port.

Apparently this cave entrance could be sealed with magic when the waters got rough. They used earth cleric magic to raise the seafloor to act as a cap. It was similar to how I was able to block the dragon's attacks back in Hephaestus.

In any case, this cave sure was huge on the inside. There were structures by the water. Maybe that was the port? When we made our way to shore, everyone in the area stopped what they were doing and stared at the Grande Nautilus. It wasn't every day they saw a ship in the shape of a nautilus shell, so I couldn't blame them.

The crowd was made up of a wide variety of races. The most numerous were dark elves, who had blueish-black skin. They were all fairly petite compared to the Dark Giant we had fought at the water capital. I guess they called him a "giant" in comparison to the rest of the elves?

The next most common were either the dolphin demi-humans called gillmen or the dog demi-humans like the Demon Dog called lycaons. I couldn't tell at a glance. The lycaons were also fairly small in stature compared to the Demon Dog. They looked nearly identical to a normal dog, so they were smaller than even Roni. They were basically just medium-sized dogs standing on two legs.

Besides them, there were lizardmen like Rulitora, but more slender and with green skin. Haruno told me that they were called 'marsh lizardmen.' She had come across them in Athenapolis. Rulitora told me that they liked water, unlike sand lizardmen, and could swim well. As one could guess from their slender builds, they weren't as strong as sand lizardmen, but in exchange, they were much more dextrous. You could say that the sand lizardmen excelled in power while the marsh lizardmen excelled in technique. The Demon Dog also

explained that they were often employed as crew members in Ares since they could swim back up to the surface by themselves on the off chance that the ship capsized.

Last, the rarest race I could see were humans. Most of them looked like merchants. The type of merchants who would visit Ares were not prejudiced against demi-humans, so many of them employed demi-human ravers since they were relatively cheaper. That probably made the ratio of humans at this port even smaller. As such, there were a variety of other races in the crowd, but the majority of them seemed to be the merchants' ravers.

Hephaestus only had ketolts, so this was the first time I was seeing so many different races in one place. Was this a so-called multinational city? Although 'multinational' felt like the wrong word—I'd be better off saying a *multiracial* city.

In any case, now that we were finally on land again, I wanted to take the opportunity to have maintenance done on the Grande Nautilus. I mean, an entire wall had collapsed on her back in the water capital and all. We borrowed a dock and anchored the ship there. This dock was used to build medium-sized ships, so our Grande Nautilus looked miniature in comparison.

Next, we needed to book an inn. This was both for the ketolts, who would be performing maintenance on the ship, and for the glaupis and other refugees to have a place to rest. Apparently, it would take over a day to walk to the city center, where the royal palace was.

This port had enough inns to accommodate visits from large merchant ships, so we had no trouble finding one for us. They had their busy days, but otherwise didn't get much business, so we were able to rent out an entire building. I wondered which was the more comfortable place to stay for them—an inn with private rooms and bedding, or the Unlimited Bath with its baths but having to sleep outdoors. In any case, that ate up a large chunk of our funds. Haruno was very apologetic, but she didn't have to worry since this was all cash we earned from looting the demon lord's castle.

I started wondering how the temple of wind was holding out right now. It would take a while to investigate. I could see a lot of work ahead of us, so we'd

better start thinking of a plan. However, the problem at hand was that we couldn't find an inn big enough to accommodate the cyclopes. Apparently, the city center had larger inns, so it looked like we would have to take them with us until we got there. I didn't mind traveling at a slower pace for their sakes, but we couldn't take them with us forever, so we really needed to think of a plan for them.

I gave the ketolts and glaupis enough money for the inn and general expenses. The rest of us, including the cyclopes, would leave for the city center. The cyclops group included three grown women, two adolescent girls including Prae, and seven children—four boys and three girls. There were so few left because when Jupiter attacked, they had all banded together to fight back. I could only pray that the rest of them had escaped safely.

The road from the port to the city center was apparently a cave passageway. It was still morning now; considering how long it might take to reach the other end of the cavern, we might as well take a break here and have lunch before heading out.

“How long is that cave road?”

“Oh, it's not all cave. There is a temple town on the way.”

“‘Temple town’? What's that?” Clena and the others tilted their heads at the unfamiliar term.

“Assuming it's the same term from our world, it's a town that was built around a temple, shrine, or other religious building,” Haruno responded.

“So in this case... that would be the temple of earth?”

“Yes, it is located between the port and the city center.”

The temple of earth was built there originally, then the town slowly developed over hundreds of years. Apparently, it was still expanding to this day.

I wondered how they had managed to build such a large town from nothing, but earth cleric spells likely had something to do with it. Now that I thought about it, earth spirit summoning was originally used for civil engineering. I was just using it for attack spells by pumping an enormous amount of MP into it.

“If we leave now, I think we can get there by lunchtime.”

“Even with children with us?”

Those words made Yukina and Rium pout at me, but I was referring to the cyclops children, not them. And Rakti? She was more the type to be excited about being treated like a child.

In any case, I was told that it should be fine, so we got going. Normally I would equip a tuna knife around my hip and dress to look like the young master of some merchant family, but this time I put on the Magic Eater for safety's sake. Walking around in this for a long time would tire me out, but this was a precaution. There was a nonzero chance that another demon general might try to reclaim the Demon Dog from us, after all. My appearance would of course stand out, but that was already the case with the Demon Dog in our group. He was famous in this country.

After hearing that we would be visiting a temple, Yukina changed into her sailor uniform. Schoolkids normally wore their school uniforms to formal events like weddings, so I guess this was a similar occasion for her. But then for some reason, Rium and Rakti came out in their sailor uniforms as well. I glanced at Clena and Roni expectantly, but they dismissed my hopes with a firm “Safety first.” Haruno looked a little bewildered, so I explained what had happened to Yukina before middle school and she sympathized immediately.



Anyway, now we were all set to depart. Haruno and I were immediately followed by Clena, Roni, and the Demon Dog in the front. Guarding our rear were Rulitora, Sandra, Rin, and Lumis. We'd all make sure that no one went astray from our group. Oh, Daisy came and sat herself on my shoulder, so that was one more member in the front line.

We arrived at the gate before the passageway and found that it was more than big enough for the cyclopes to walk through. Goods of all sizes were transported between the port and city center through this road, so they needed the space.

They of course didn't have any street lights, so it was dark inside. You had to borrow a torch at the gate. The passage also widened at set intervals as rest stops. I guess they functioned as *ichirizuka*, historical Japanese distance markers, too. Though I think these were built after the demon lord's era. With all these furnishings in place, I wish they'd also provide a bus—err, a horse-drawn carriage, but the cyclopes wouldn't be able to ride in it so we'd end up walking either way.

On that note, the carriages in this kingdom were not horse-drawn, but rather gembolic-drawn. Yes, those same gembolics I fought back in the void. Their horns were cut off, of course. Apparently, those monsters were raised as livestock here. There are as many customs as there are countries, I suppose. Maybe this was only possible because the demon lord's army was based here.

We borrowed two torches for the front and the back of our group and entered the passageway. The rock walls inside weren't jaggedy like I was expecting but rather smoothly polished. The semicircular shape reminded me of the tunnels back in my world. There were even gutters built into either side.

This sure was well-maintained. I had expected it to be similar to the ruins of Hadesopolis, but I was wrong. This wasn't like the underground shopping centers I knew, either. A mysterious world spread before my eyes. I'd describe it as a "futuristic fantasy world." The Kingdom of Ares seemed more advanced than any other place we had visited so far.

We passed the first rest stop and took a break at the second. The children still had plenty of energy left in them, but I could tell that the mothers were starting

to get tired.

“I-I apologize...”

“Don’t worry. We’re not in a rush or anything.”

She seemed really apologetic, but I didn’t want them to feel guilty about it. We’d been living under the same roof ever since our time in the water capital. Though I wasn’t sure if a ship counted as a roof. Anyway, we were comrades, and I was going to take care of them. I really didn’t want them to hold back. I wasn’t the type of person who could ignore children when they needed to be looked after, either.

I didn’t know what our whole plan was for them yet, but that was something we’d figure out together. Our topic of conversation during our break was exactly that.

“What do you think our options are?” It was an awfully vague question, but I couldn’t think of a better way to approach the subject. I thought that I’d gotten used to this world by now, but in reality I’d only been hopping from journey to journey. I had no idea what it meant to settle down in one place.

“I want to take everyone to the temple of wind, but... I’m not so sure.”

“Why not? Because it would take too long?”

“No, because then their location would be leaked to Jupiter...” Haruno said, her voice trailing off.

I see; even if we could bring them back, they still ran the risk of getting attacked again. I hadn’t considered any potential challenges other than the long journey.

“Should we make this our main base? We can find a place where everyone can live.”

“Touya... Oh, right, you have citizenship.”

“...I do?”

“You wouldn’t be able to employ a raver otherwise.”

I hadn’t thought about it before, but apparently both Haruno and I had

citizenship with Jupiter. It was marked on our status cards. It was apparently granted after we were recognized as heroes.

“Then maybe that’s an option we should seriously think about.”

If it really would be too dangerous to return to the temple of wind, as Haruno said, then making this multiracial kingdom of Ares our new home was a perfectly valid option. The ultimate goal was to return them to the temple, but they needed a place to live in peace until then. Of course, one of the problems was the sheer size of our party. I asked the Demon Dog for his opinion, but he said that it was something we would have to discuss with a bureaucrat. Even though the demon lord’s army had their base here, they didn’t run the kingdom. The rulers were the Ares royal family.

“They are on good terms with the demon lord’s army, though,” the Demon Dog chuckled.

In that case, we need to learn more about this kingdom. I wanted to find out more about their relationship with the demon lord’s army. We should hurry things up a bit. We ended our break and continued along the passageway until we finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

“The temple town is just a bit ahead.”

“It looks pretty bright. Are we finally going to be outside?”

“No, but there is a skylight. Once we get there, it will be very well-illuminated.”

Our party proceeded with a spring in our steps. We finally exited the passageway, and before our eyes was—nothing?

“This is a town...? I guess it is.”

I had imagined rows of buildings within a cave like the port city, but that wasn’t the case here. The passageway had become about twice as wide, and what looked like shop fronts were lined along either side. It looked like an underground shopping mall made of stone. The area was bustling with activity. I saw several varieties of demi-humans just like back in the port city. Passersby kept staring at us, perhaps because the cyclopes were a rare sight.

“Where’s the temple of earth?”

“Do you see that large gate up ahead? That’s the entrance.” The Demon Dog pointed to a gate as wide as the whole road. Maybe the passage in this temple town had been built to match the width of that gate.

The only way to reach the city center was to pass through the temple. This was a defensive measure, in case anyone tried to invade through the port. However, apparently an invasion had yet to ever reach as far as this town.

If I requested a blessing ceremony here, then I would finally have all the blessings from each of the goddess sisters. The Unlimited Bath would grow even further and be granted a sixth gift as well.

“Oh, do they sell fruit baskets for donations near the gate?”

“That shop over there sells them. You actually pay mind to those formalities?”

First impressions were important. According to the shopkeeper, it was more common to donate a gem known as a “rainbow opal” rather than fruit baskets here in Ares. Rainbow opals were gemstones mined in Ares. The higher-purity gems sparkled with all the colors of a rainbow, hence the name.

“‘Iridescence’ is the term for the effect.”

According to Haruno, gemstones from our world had similar properties.

The gems themselves were common enough to be found within the walls of Ares homes, but they were worth virtually nothing if they didn’t give off that rainbow glow. I see, so the quality of the rainbow opal you could donate differed based on your social class. The shopkeeper said that for a “young master like me,” he would recommend a rather large stone.

Why of course—the Goddess of Earth had done me plenty of favors, after all. However, I absolutely would not buy the gold chain pendant that the shopkeeper recommended along with it. If the Goddess of Earth were to wear such a long chain, then the rainbow opal itself would be buried well within her cleavage. Hmm, but maybe that could be a good way to symbolize this town underneath a cave?

...I should stop my thought process there. If I continued this train of thought

in my dreams, she would read my mind and then lightly berate me. I'd be happy about that, but at the same time I'd want to run far, far away.

"Should we really be giving them accessories as a donation, anyway?"

"It's not the best practice, but followers of the Goddess of Earth aren't that finicky," the Demon Dog explained, tail wagging. He said that out of all the faiths he'd had to interact with until now, the people of the temple of earth were the easiest to deal with.

Rakti got a little teary-eyed at that statement, but I think his impression of the temple of darkness was more tied to that goldfish, the Masked Cleric. Anyway, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Let's pick out a large rainbow opal to donate. Of course, it wouldn't be an accessory. I didn't like the idea of donating one of those to a temple. Though if I was gifting this directly to the goddess in my dreams, that would be another story.

"Touya, what do you think of this one?" Haruno picked out a large frame with rainbow opals embedded into the shape of cacti. Each of them glistened with a rainbow light.

"That's so pretty!" Clena and the others exclaimed positively.

"It's nice, but... Why cacti? Do they grow around here?"

"There are cactus farms above ground."

They were apparently a staple food in this region. The void also had cacti—I wondered if they were originally imported from Ares. Anyway, this frame was a good pick. We purchased it and made our way to the temple.

When we greeted the temple knights standing guard at the entrance, they were wary of our party size and the presence of the cyclopes, but their attitudes did a one-eighty when they saw the Demon Dog and they welcomed us through.

"You sure are popular around here."

"I've lived here for quite a long time."

It had been 500 years since he escaped Hades. I guess anyone would become pretty friendly with the locals after that much time.

Back to the present, there were two temple knights on both sides of the gate, and all of them were dark elves. I was a little cautious of them at first since we had just fought some in the water capital. Perhaps sensing my apprehension, they told me in a very proud manner, “Dark elves are common in this kingdom. We’re very sociable, unlike those light elves who seclude themselves in the forest.” Maybe they had a bit of a rivalry as fellow elves.

We went through the usual formalities and entered the temple. What immediately caught my eye were the walls. Unlike the smooth walls of the passageway behind us, the inside of this temple was left as natural rock. The temple knights explained to us that a natural cave was considered “blessed land” and was treated as more luxurious than the manmade caverns built with magic. The temple of earth was the only building here originally, but the town around it had gradually expanded into the shape it was in now.

Since this was a natural cave, there were places too small for Prae and the other cyclopes to pass through, but we could navigate while avoiding those routes.

“This was originally a rainbow opal mine. Eventually, the abandoned portions of the mine turned into homes for residents to live in. Perhaps it was easier than living above ground at the time.”

“It does seem like it can get pretty hot.”

“Indeed, it does. Please take care when you travel to the surface.”

Clena scowled when she heard Haruno’s words. She was probably having flashbacks to our time in the void. Her expression made me recall the time I treated her burn wounds, and then she gave me a frank stare, as if she could tell what I was thinking.

Ahem, let’s get back on topic.

The cleric who guided us was a lycaon. He was awfully cordial with us, perhaps because the Demon Dog was of the same race, but more likely because the Demon Dog held a position of respect in this kingdom. Maybe it wasn’t the Demon Dog himself, but the entire demon lord army that was revered here.

The cleric led us to the chapel, which was also a natural cave. The walls

glowed faintly, which made the room feel warm and inviting. However, in contrast to the jagged walls, the interior was neatly lined with smooth, polished benches. The mismatch felt a bit odd, but this might just be the norm in Ares.

At the end of the room was a statue of the Goddess of Earth. It was a beautiful, pure-white sculpture. This resembled the goddess a lot more than the reliefs I had seen in each of the other temples.

First, I offered a prayer to the Goddess of Earth. I could meet her in my dreams, but I wanted to do things the proper way here. After that, I requested a blessing ceremony. I wanted to update my status card too, but the card was issued by the temple of light, so unfortunately that service wasn't offered here.

When I told the cleric that after this ceremony I would have the blessings from all of the goddesses, he became more than eager and started the preparations immediately. The temple in Ceres had apparently already sent them a message. The temple elder there had done us a favor and put in a good word for us. Thanks to that, we were able to get started with the ceremony immediately.

“Daisy, stay here and watch everyone, okay?”

“Tch!” Daisy was trying to sneak her way in with me, perched on my shoulder, but I handed her off to Yukina.

This chapel was plenty big, so Prae and the others should have no issues waiting here. I asked Clena and the others to reserve our rooms for the night while the ceremony took place. We had a large party, but all we needed was a place to open the door to the Unlimited Bath. There was no point in hiding its existence when the Demon Dog was already aware of it. Considering the Demon Dog's social status here, I figured it would be best to reserve him a VIP room rather than lock him in our tatami room like before. I left that to Clena as well.

At any rate, after I returned from the ceremony, it would be time to take a tour of my newly evolved Unlimited Bath.

The cleric led me out of the chapel and down a zigzagging side path. The ceremony would be conducted in a place that was “closest to the goddess.” I noticed that the path was descending ever so gradually. The place “closest to

the goddess” was probably the lowest location in this temple.

After walking for a while, we reached a narrow dead end. If it weren't for the dark elf wearing a robe and holding a staff, I would have thought we had taken a wrong turn. He was the temple elder—petite, but sturdily built. I started flashing back to the ceremony at the temple of fire after seeing him, but there was probably nothing to fear. There wasn't even enough space to dance here.

I was unsure if the temple elder could sense my worries when he started talking.

“Please sit here.”

I had wondered why we would conduct the ceremony in such a cramped space, but after collecting my thoughts, I realized that this pocket of space deep underground might be considered the holiest land to them.

The cleric who had guided me left, and I followed the elder's instructions to sit with my back to the wall. He then stood before me, sprinkled what appeared to be ground-up rainbow opal over me, raised his staff, and started chanting a ritual prayer.

A rainbow light shined behind me. The light formed a magic circle on the rock wall. This was the same magic circle that was drawn on the ground back during the ceremony in Ceres.

It might be more efficient to have my back touch the wall here. I sat up straight, pressed my back against the wall, and closed my eyes.

Then the ceremony ended without a hitch. I silently clenched my hands into a fist.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it just feels a little different from usual...” A feeling of completion welled up in my body. But I couldn't tell why, exactly. HP, MP, STR... I went through every stat listed on my status card, but none of them felt like the cause. Something *else* was coursing through my body. The only thing I could say for sure was that it felt like a good thing. My body didn't feel weary—rather, it was in better condition than ever.

I wanted to get back to everyone quickly. The temple elder and I proceeded back up the steady incline. We reconvened with the cleric halfway, and the three of us returned to the chapel.

“Welcome back!!” Yukina leapt into my arms as soon as I stepped inside.

Rakti and Rium soon followed and tackled me, but I embraced all of them without faltering. I’d gotten into pretty good shape ever since coming to this world—this was nothing I couldn’t handle.

“Hey now, restrain yourselves when you’re out in public.” Clena peeled the three of them off of me. The clergymen smiled as they watched us. The Demon Dog also looked at us with a big grin. He said that it was great how Clena and I were so close to each other. He was probably thinking that he could bring a hero over to his side if Clena was the demon lord’s granddaughter. I didn’t think Clena would be so naïve, though.

“...And what are you doing, Haruno?”

“N-Nothing...” Haruno’s face was bright red, her fingers raised up and quivering. She must have been debating whether she should jump onto me too or not. Hey, I was open anytime. But we couldn’t act like this wherever we went, especially with the temple elder present. I corrected my posture and we all thanked the elder again.

“It was my pleasure. But also...”

“‘Also’?”

“The gift that the goddess has blessed upon you... May we see it as well?”

“...Uh?”

I had noticed that the elder and the cleric were whispering about something on our way back; it must have been about this. Clena probably brought up the Unlimited Bath when she was reserving our room. I couldn’t blame them for being curious. It would be weird to turn them down, so I agreed, adding, “But keep in mind that I can’t just show this to anyone.”

The place that the temple showed us was something like a garden. Although there was no greenery, there was a water fountain and a canal as well as many

engravings on the walls. It was both wide and tall—plenty of space for me to deploy the door.

“I’ll be using this wall,” I said, then opened the door to the Unlimited Bath.

What appeared inside was another door the same size as the gate to the temple. Well, I guess it was a gate now too. It didn’t have a tiled roof like the gate to the temple, but it was still an impressive wooden gate the likes of which you could find in front of big temples or old dojos in Japan.

Thinking back, after I underwent the blessing ceremony back in Ceres, the bathtub had changed into a cedar wood tub. Now that I had been granted the blessing from the head temple of the Goddess of Earth, the entire space had adopted the wooden theme.

“Ohh! Astounding!” The Demon Dog raised his voice in awe. I could understand where he was coming from. This must have been a nostalgic sight for him.

However, I was surprised to hear other voices expressing similar feelings of awe. The stares I felt from behind me made me a little nervous, but we couldn’t just stare at this gate forever. I regained my composure and gathered strength in my arms to push the doors open... or at least that was the plan, but my hands were greeted with air. The doors opened automatically before us. The motion was smooth, as if the doors were weightless.

Gates that opened by themselves? This was yet another new feature. I took a big breath, passed through the gate, and looked up at the building before us.

“...I see.”

Across the neat stone pavement was a large wooden building. The white walls from before had transformed. The building had a tiled roof, and judging by the placement of the windows, it now had a third floor. The windows were plain before, but now they were covered by shoji paper in a lattice frame.

Haruno stepped up beside me and said earnestly while looking up, “This... is almost like a historical *ryokan*, huh.”

Indeed, the building had evolved, but appearance-wise it now had the old-fashioned atmosphere of a Japanese inn. The Unlimited Bath received blessings

from the goddesses every time I powered up and gradually became more convenient, but now it had finally made the dramatic transformation into a hot springs hotel.



Yukina flew up to the roof above the entrance and looked around. “Hey Touya, don’t the second and third floors look pretty far away?”

“Really?” She was right, the floors above the first were much farther away than before. I was so taken aback by the dramatic transformation that I hadn’t noticed, but the second and third floors hadn’t expanded as much as the first floor had.

Daisy flew up next to Yukina and also inspected the building from above. “What’s all this? It’s all mismatched.”

The two of them described several one-story cabins surrounding the main three-story building in the center. Oh, so we weren’t looking at one building, but a bunch of new ones surrounding the old one. They were all connected by walkways to form a single connected property. The cabins each had different sizes and heights. That was what Daisy must have meant when she said everything was mismatched. The three-story building in the center was about the same shape as before, though. Alright, let’s split our manpower and get exploring.

“Rulitora, take Prae and the other cyclopes with you to look around outside.” I asked the bigger people to investigate the outer garden. I could already tell from here that it had increased in size about as much as the building itself had. I also asked Yukina and Daisy to go along with them, since they could observe from above.

“Roni’s team will investigate the cabins.” Roni, Rium, Sera, Sandra, Rin, and Lumis were assigned the cabins around the building. “And Rulitora, make your way clockwise starting from the right side.”

“Did you see something there?”

“No, but there used to be nothing there. There should be an earth altar taking up that space now, like the other altars.”

Looking to the right past the building, I could see the fishing pond. The windmill was on the left-hand side. If they followed the same pattern, then a new altar should have appeared deeper on the right-hand side.

“If you find something, bring the elder and cleric over there.”

“Understood, I will do so.”

The temple members were teeming with curiosity at the entrance.

Now then, the rest of us would investigate the center building. The earth gift should be somewhere in there. Rakti, Clena, Haruno, and I went inside, along with the Demon Dog who we couldn't let roam free just yet.

The first thing we saw past the front door was a spacious, lavish entryway with wooden flooring. On either side was a large wooden shoe cabinet and a duckboard. This was exactly like a typical hotel front lobby, minus the reception desk of course.

The ceiling was high enough for the cyclopes to stand up straight. The luggage we had left at the entryway before was still here. This was essentially the evolved version of the entryway we had before. The last time I received the Goddess of Earth's blessing in Ceres, the bathtub turned into a cedar wood tub. The fact that so many things had turned wooden here must have been a direct effect of the earth blessing.

“Um, Touya, what are these?” Roni asked and pointed to a row of slippers that filled the shoe rack. This was commonly found in ryokan as well.

“Sandals? But they look like they'd fall off really easily.” Clena picked up a pair of slippers, looking confused. The Demon Dog was also tilting his head next to her.

Oh yeah, indoor slippers in this world were often fastened together with string. I had forgotten since we could walk around the Unlimited Bath barefoot.

“They're indoor shoes. You should wear them inside except in the tatami-floored room.”

“They seem difficult to run in...” grumbled Clena. You're not supposed to run indoors.

The slippers came in all sizes, suitable for anyone from Prae to Daisy. There were also clogs, which we could wear around the garden outside.

The Unlimited Bath really is cool. Though I'm not sure if I should be saying that about my own gift.

Anyway, we all changed into slippers and parted ways with Roni's team. They were going to investigate in a counterclockwise direction to sync up with Rulitora's team.

My team went straight in, down the hallway, and into the center building. There was an inner courtyard between the surrounding cabins and the center building, but still no plants. It was a rock garden. The Unlimited Bath couldn't sustain plant life, so there was nothing we could do about that.

"It's like a castle."

"Huh?" Clena couldn't empathize. Haruno was talking about the old castles of Japan as she looked up at the center building. The only people who knew what she was talking about were not from this world—Yukina, the Demon Dog, and I.

"Don't you think so too, Touya? The top looks like a castle keep."

"It really does..."

White walls with a tiled roof separated each floor. Something that looked like *shachihoko*, those tiger-carp statues, were perched on top. The design did remind me of a castle... Were they actually shachihoko, though? Something definitely sat on both ends of the roof. In Japanese castles, those would be where the shachihoko were attached. The two sides were sized differently—the left side was bigger.

"What are those on the roof?"

"They look like... statues of women."

The Demon Dog, using his keen sight, revealed their identities. Sometimes you would see a female statue as the figurehead on a ship, but in place of shachihoko on top of a building? What was going on with this gift of mine?

"Are those... the Goddess of Light and the Goddess of Darkness?"

"Oh, you're right. The bigger one might be my sister..."

So that was it. When I was granted the blessings of fire, water, and wind, I received not only a new gift but also an altar of sorts. Prae and the other refugees had been praying in front of the windmill every day. Maybe the third floor of this building was also an altar? Did it materialize because I now had the

blessings from every goddess? That was a possibility. I decided to wait until after finding my new gift to check it out. We entered the center building as I mulled over my thoughts.

“The layout hasn’t changed from before.”

“Though it’s gotten a lot bigger and had some remodeling done.”

Just as Clena pointed out, the flooring was all wood now; it resembled a dojo. We could tell it had gotten bigger because of the extra space between the bookshelf and the wall. The space in between was exactly how much the room had expanded from before. We’d have to organize everything again after we completed our tour. We made sure to keep tidy on a regular basis, though, so that should be a quick task.

All that aside, first was the gift. There was a new door on the far right wall, making for six doors in total. Each of the six doors had a distinct look. In the middle was the sliding door leading to the Light bath, covered by a *noren* curtain with the hiragana “*ð*” written on it. The door to the tatami-floored Darkness room was a *fusuma*, a sliding screen door featuring an elaborate painting. The Fire kitchen on the left had no door, just a *noren* you could easily pass through. In contrast, the Wind refrigerator was secured by a heavy door. That was probably to prevent the cold air from escaping. The room with the Water faucets on the right had a lattice door. And last, the new door, which would lead to the earth gift, was made of wood but reinforced with metal; it appeared sturdy.

“It looks pretty rigid.”

“It feels like the door to a vault.”

“Yeah, it really does.”

I had only seen them on TV, but I knew what Haruno was talking about. As much as it looked like a vault, it was not locked with a heavy key, so we simply opened the door and went inside. I turned on the lights and saw a bunch of empty shelves.

“There’s nothing here...”

“Is it a storeroom?”

It did fit the image of the door behind us, and this would certainly be a convenient room to have, but was this really the gift? No, there might be something deeper inside like the faucets that produced udon broth and orange juice. I looked around keeping that in mind and found something at the other end of the room.

A stone bowl with a deep bottom was sitting below a thick stone disc in the shape of a bundt cake, except it didn't have a hole at the bottom. This hole-less bundt cake was split into two plates, and the top plate had a handle attached so that you could spin it around. Only the plate on top had a hole in the center.

When I picked up the bowl, I realized that it wasn't made of stone but rather some kind of surprisingly light material. There were a few more spare bowls next to it.

"What's this?"

"I think it's called a quern-stone."

I had seen this on TV before. I recall it was a special feature on a restaurant that made handmade soba noodles. The hole on top was for pouring in ingredients like wheat, rice, or beans, which would be ground into a powder. If this was the gift, then it would be the Goddess of Earth's quern-stone. But all things considered, I doubted that this was an ordinary quern-stone.

"Um, Touya, I see buttons on here."

"Oh?" I looked again to see six buttons on the upper plate. As soon as I did, the manual on how to use this quern-stone popped open in my mind. I carefully pressed one of the buttons, then turned the handstone. White granules start pouring out from between the two plates.

"Is this being generated from your MP, like the soap?"

"Yeah. Try tasting it, you'll know what it is," I said. Clena gingerly dipped her finger in some of the powder, then licked it.

"It's sweet! Is this sugar?"

I hated to cut this short, but we still had a lot more to go. I pressed the next button, turned the stones, and another white powder came out. This was salt.

With the next button press and stone turning, a light amber-colored liquid came pouring out—vinegar.

“Oh, it’s the five pillars of Japanese cooking...”

I could always trust Haruno to pick things up quickly. The fourth button produced a dark liquid, soy sauce. The fifth gave us miso. It was pretty surreal to see these liquids just pouring out from between the two stones.

This was like one of those magic items you heard about in fairy tales. It was a quern-stone that produced an unlimited amount of condiments. We could have as much seasoning as my MP could handle.

“Th-This is giving me so many cooking ideas...!”

“M-Miso... It’s been 500 years...!”

Haruno’s and the Demon Dog’s eyes sparkled as each of the condiments poured out. The miso was especially exciting since there were no substitutes for it in this world, like how soy sauce could be replaced with fish sauce. I’m sure Yukina would be pleased too. I’d need to show this to her later.

Meanwhile, Clena was astounded by the pure white sugar, which was a rare sight in this world. It was covered in vinegar and soy sauce and miso now, though, so we’d need to wash this bowl off later.

Rakti, who had been fidgeting alone in the background, realized something. “There’s one more button, isn’t there?”

Good job noticing that. She was right, we still had one more button to try. The true worth of this gift was about to be revealed. I switched over to a new bowl, pressed the last button, and turned the handstone. White grains started pouring out from the center.

“T-Touya! Is this...?!”

You bet.

“Is this... rice?!”

Yes, this was rice. White rice. An essential part of a wholesome meal. I kept turning the handstone until the bowl was filled to the brim with rice. Ohhh, now *this* is what I call a gift! We definitely had to eat rice tonight...! Though

unfortunately we didn't have an electric rice cooker.

"Do you think we can boil it in a pot?"

"You can even simmer it in a slow cooker."

"...Really?"

"I think so."

Haruno clearly knows more about it than I do, so I'll let her handle this.

"I'll make miso soup, too. And plenty of side dishes, since we have the seasoning for it."

"Please do! Use as much as you want! Run my MP dry!" I was willing to offer my entire being for this. I mean, I wouldn't be able to move at that point, but we could deal with that when the time comes.

In any case, I wanted to eat onigiri. We didn't have seaweed so it would have to be salt onigiri... No, now it would be possible to make some fillings for it. I could tell that I was getting a little *too* elated. It hadn't crossed my mind until now, but evidently I had been starving for Japanese food this whole time.

The Demon Dog was the same. He was wagging his tail hard. "Oh, I'm looking forward to this~"

"...Huh?" Wait a moment.

"Huh? What do you mean, 'huh'? Are you going to starve a prisoner of war?!"

"If we treated you like a prisoner of war in this country, then we'd be the bad guys."

"Well, I can't deny that..."

"And that's why we reserved the VIP room in this temple for you..."

"....."

"They're probably preparing a feast for you, since a demon general is a pretty special guest...?"

The demon generals were revered in this country, so we couldn't treat the Demon Dog like one of our prisoners. That's why we never had him chained up

while he was with us. Maybe he'd forgotten by now, but we did keep him locked inside the tatami room at first. And that was all the more reason why we wanted to treat him to some hospitality by reserving the VIP room here now...

"Nay, take pity! To have come this far and have white rice taken from me! Thy cruelty is unjust!!" The Demon Dog groveled at my waist, all his shame and respect thrown to the wind.

"Woah, don't cling onto me! And did your way of talking just become completely different?!"

"Thou art bearing witness to my true self!"

Apparently he had been speaking the way he had before to maintain appearances as an emissary.

"Prithee, spare me thine white rice!!"

"Alright, alright, I get it! I'll talk to the temple elder about it!!" I gave in to the Demon Dog's whimpering and let him stay with us for tonight. Well, at least we now knew that the demon generals might be weak to this new gift.

Next, we checked the tatami room from the gift of darkness.

"The number o' tatami has increased."

The room had grown slightly more spacious. Did this mean that the blessing of darkness inside me had increased in power as well? The room itself was now bestowed with several effects: "a good night's sleep," "a quiet sleep," "good dreams," "a peaceful awakening," and "accelerated recovery from fatigue." The perfect setup to help any one of us recover from exhaustion. I expected nothing less from the goddess of night and serenity, Rakti. She was meant for healing.

"Do you feel okay, Touya?"

"He's all right. The room just got a little bigger is all! And the blessings from my sisters have all gotten stronger too!" Rakti exclaimed, puffing out her chest. She said that this would have no effect on the suppression of my demon transformation.

The part about the other blessings getting stronger caught my attention, though. We went over to the faucet room and immediately noticed that there

were six taps now. Each of them stood separately, like they were six small altars. I could tell what would come out of each of them by looking. Each tap had a relief that depicted the Goddess of Water holding something. The first two were the same as before—udon broth and orange juice. I understood the latter, since the relief depicted a fruit. But the carving on the udon broth tap was a little surreal—the Goddess of Water was holding her chopsticks wrong.

“This one’s apple juice.”

“It’s been a while. There aren’t any similar fruits around these parts.” They might grow in colder places like Clena’s birthplace, the northern kingdom of Juno. This relief depicted the Goddess of Water holding an apple. She looked dignified.

“Touya! This one’s fizzy!”

“Oh, it’s carbonated water.”

The Goddess on this relief looked majestic, wearing a dress that evoked the image of European nobility. The carbonated water might be tasty mixed with some other drinks. This would take some experimentation.

“This one’s... red?! Blood?!”

“Calm down, Clena. That’s tomato juice.”

Clena realized that she misunderstood, which made her face turn as red as the tomato juice as well. You could tell by looking that the tomato juice was thick. It didn’t look that much like blood, but I couldn’t blame her for being surprised by this liquid suddenly coming out of the faucet and jumping to conclusions. The Goddess of Water here was wearing a chic evening dress. Was it just my imagination, or did she look a little like a vampire here?

“And this last one... Ho, this relief may be mine favorite.”

“It’s... hot! Is this tea?”

The last altar gave us green tea. It wasn’t hot enough to burn me, but I was still surprised at the unexpected heat. The Goddess in this relief was dressed in a kimono, maybe to signify the green tea. I could understand why the Demon Dog liked this one the most. That aside, the Goddess of Water sure enjoyed

getting into the spirit of things.

“But why did you get so many? Is it because you have blessings from all of the goddess sisters now?”

“Maybe, but Sister Earth is also the goddess of good harvest, so I think that has something to do with it.”

“I see, that makes sense...”

In that case, the other gifts might have powered up too. We went across the hall to the Goddess of Wind’s refrigerator. As we suspected, this one had transformed too. There were new compartments inside. I opened one compartment and was met with even colder air stinging my face.

“...This is a freezer.”

Only Haruno and I knew what this was. This refrigerator used cold winds to maintain its temperature, but this new section inside contained even colder winds, cold enough to be used as a freezer.

“Um, I don’t totally understand, but this shelf is what you call a ‘freezer’?” Clena asked as she looked at the refrigerator.

There were five compartments in total. Besides the freezer, there was a crisper for keeping vegetables fresh, a meat zone to keep fish and meat fresh, a partial-freezing zone, and a cooling zone. It would take too long to explain each compartment one by one, so for now I just gave her an affirmative reply.

This room had transformed in another way—there was a new door that led to the Goddess of Fire’s kitchen. This wasn’t the most exciting change, but having direct access between the refrigerator and kitchen would be very convenient.

And thus, we went through the aforementioned door to the kitchen. The kitchen had also become larger and was now equipped with even more appliances. The stovetop was the same as before, but the oven and microwave had combined into a single appliance and now had a steaming function too—a microwave steam oven. There was also a rice cooker, a pressure cooker, a blender, and even a large brick oven. Needless to say, they were all powered by my MP. If I wanted to, I could make that blender crush even bone.

“A rice cooker... Nice timing!”

“We can make rice without having to boil it ourselves now!”

Haruno and I were getting excited; I was looking forward to tonight’s dinner even more. After we finished jumping for joy, Rakti came at me with a barrage of questions. The kitchen was her primary battleground, so she wanted to learn everything she could.

I explained how to use each and every item to her. As I showed her around, I saw that we had multiple rice cookers ranging in size from common household ones to large commercial ones. We’d have no problem cooking for the whole family.

The brick oven was the only thing that looked out of place. Knowing the Goddess of Fire’s personality, she probably wouldn’t be satisfied with just making everything more convenient. I couldn’t say for sure, but that was my hunch.

“I think I can guess how to use that big oven, but everything else...”

“Let’s teach Sera and the others too when they get back.”

Of course, no one knew how to use these appliances besides Haruno and Yukina, so we’d have a class on it later. Although, I had no idea how to use a brick oven. That should be something more in Clena and Roni’s area of expertise.

At last, it was time to check on my very first gift—the Unlimited Bath. This had transformed the most out of any other room.

First, the door didn’t lead directly to the bath anymore, but to another walkway in between. The walkway also branched out to the outer cabins, so you could come in from there as well. I wasn’t expecting all this. This extra space was behind the building, so we hadn’t seen it from the entrance. The space that the Unlimited Bath occupied was much bigger than I was expecting.

“Is this the annex?” asked the Demon Dog, scratching his head. Would that mean that the main building was behind us? But this dimension was originally supposed to be the “Unlimited Bath,” so did that mean that this was the main building, and the annex was behind us...? Well, for simplicity’s sake, let’s say

that the main building was the bigger one.

“The bath has finally become standalone.”

“Is that entire building the bath?”

Clena, who had been with us ever since the original days of this bath, had a conflicted expression. She didn’t know whether to be more surprised or bewildered. I bet my face looked similar right now, too.

Anyway, time to explore this annex building. We were walking down the covered walkway when we ran into Roni’s team, who had been exploring the perimeter of the building.

“Sir Touya, why are you here? Did you need something?”

“No, but the bath seems like it’s become its own building over there, so we were going to check it out.”

“Huh?” They all replied in unison. Yeah, it was pretty surprising.

I took the opportunity to ask Roni’s team what they had found so far. The cabins of various sizes were joined by a covered walkway that formed a perimeter around the main building. Each cabin had different floor plans. Some of them were just one big room, and others were split into several smaller rooms. I asked them to explain the details to me later.

They hadn’t found anything with special powers that could be a gift, but the cabins with a single room were big enough for the cyclopes to sleep in. They also had verandas, so they could enter from the other side as well. Perfect, I could let the cyclopes stay there starting tonight.

They also spotted the earth altar from the covered walkway. It was apparently a tree made of rainbow opal. Rulitora’s group had already guided the elder and cleric there, and they immediately started conducting some sort of ritual. I guess I shouldn’t expect less from them? It didn’t sound like I had any reason to stop them, so I let them be for now.

“Okay then, shall we leave this big building to your group, Sir Touya?”

“Sure. I’ll leave the rest of the buildings to you.” The other cabins didn’t seem like they contained anything special, so they should finish up quickly. I asked

them to come find me when they were done. I wanted to have enough time to explain the new gifts to everyone. We also still needed to check the second and third floors, so I might leave those explanations to Haruno.

We parted ways with Roni's team for the time being and entered the annex building. The first room past the door wasn't the usual changing room but a lobby. There were other entrances on the left and right so that you could enter from the outside as well. The lobby was outfitted with a break area containing sofas and tables. It also had massage chairs in various sizes. There were even ones you could lie down on, so that any and all demi-humans could use them.

The entrance to the changing room didn't have a door but instead a partition screen that you couldn't see through. The other cyclopes weren't here right now, but I bet this would make it easier for them to move about freely.

The cabinet with the *yuamigi*, the wearable towels, was moved to the lobby as well. I noticed an extra shelf within the cabinet. One shelf held the *yuamigi* while the other now had *yukata*.

"Are these robes?"

"No, they're called *yukata*. They're like pajamas... Well, not really? Since you can also wear them to festivals."

"It's a common type of clothing from our world," Haruno chimed in as I was getting confused over my own explanation. "They're a popular part of mainstream fashion now, so you can wear them outside. You can even wear underwear with them now!"

And then she frantically added to her own explanation with a blushing face. Well, I hear that people didn't wear underwear under a *yukata* in the old days.

The *yukata* came in six different colors. After calming down, Haruno pointed out that they likely represented light, fire, wind, water, earth, and darkness. We could have everyone pick out their favorites later.

The changing room itself was spacious, with a ceiling fan slowly spinning above us. We walked into the bath house, and to my absolute lack of surprise, there were even more baths now. The cedar wood tub was there still, but in addition, there were now a hot tub, a sauna, and an indoor open-air bath.

The concept of an “indoor open-air bath” felt kind of self-contradictory, but that’s what it was. This annex building was actually two stories tall, and the second floor had a dome ceiling that could project the view from outside. The bath itself was surrounded by rocks as if it were outside, so that made this an “indoor open-air bath.”

Of course, this feature used my MP, and it’s not like we could see the view from anywhere in the world. But one of the main disadvantages of the Unlimited Bath was that we couldn’t tell what was going on in the outside world, so now we finally had a way to handle that. Plus, I was simply happy that we could project the starry night sky from within this room. It’d be cool to try project the view from under the sea as well.

The hot tub was shallow enough to kick back and relax in, and it used ultrasonic waves for the jet streams. The sauna was an infrared sauna.

“How is that different from a normal sauna?”

“Just as the name implies, it uses infrared lighting for the heat. The temperature is a little lower than steam baths.” According to Haruno, there were benefits to both health and beauty. I felt pretty indifferent upon hearing that, but she seemed happy about it.

There was also a pool outside the building. Though, in this case, it was probably less a pool and more a cold water bath. I did notice something when I went to check out the pool.

“...Does this look familiar to you?”

“You’re right...” Clena knew what I meant. The pool was circular and shaped somewhat like a mortar. This reminded us of the reservoir back at the Torano’o tribe, although our pool was bigger.

Rakti was fidgeting impatiently, ready to hop into the pool at any moment, but I made her hold back for now. *Don’t look at me with those upturned eyes...* She was so cute that I was close to giving in, but I needed to stay strong too. In reality, we should only have fun after sorting all of our luggage... But that was a little too cruel, so the ban was only until we finished checking everything out. Maybe I was being too nice.

Anyway, I was happiest about this new pool. Our party had many members, mainly Rulitora, who couldn't stand baths. I could turn down the temperature, but I couldn't do anything about the humidity. We finally had a solution to that. They could take cold water baths freely now. There were demi-humans of all sizes, but the slight slope of this mortar-shaped pool should accommodate everyone.

"This bath sure has gotten huge, huh." Haruno said in amazement.

"Maybe it's the eldest goddess sister's pride at work?" I intended that as a joke, but maybe I was actually pretty close to the mark.

We were now done assessing the gifts, which all changed remarkably. I bet it was because I had finally gotten all of the blessings. I had no particular reason to believe that, but I frankly couldn't think of any better reason. It wouldn't do me any good to keep thinking about it anyway, so we headed back to the main building and regrouped with Roni's team. I asked Haruno to stay with them and explain how the new gifts worked. Clena, Rakti, the Demon Dog, and I headed up to the second floor.

"Hmm, only normal rooms up here."

"The central room has tatami flooring and is surrounded by a hallway on three sides, which leads to 17 smaller rooms."

"The five rooms farther inside have tatami flooring, while the others all have wooden flooring."

Each hallway opened up to five rooms. The front side of the central room with the staircase also had a room on each side, bigger than the other rooms along the hallways. Each of the smaller rooms opened up to a terrace outside. The terrace wasn't segregated by room, it continued straight around the building. The four corners of this floor also had doors that led to the terrace without having to go through a room.

"Ahh, how nostalgic." The Demon Dog looked reminiscent. Indeed, besides the high ceiling, this was built like one of those Japanese castles of old. There didn't seem to be anything resembling a gift here, though, so we climbed up to the third floor.

“I see, so this was shifted up.”

The giant bedroom had been moved to the third floor. It was already big before, but now it was even roomier. This floor also had a terrace around the perimeter. If you looked down from here, you could see the entirety of the Unlimited Bath space. The garden outside wasn't big enough to be considered scenic, but from here I could tell how much the outside area had expanded. Thanks in part to the annex building, the space was even larger than I was anticipating.

“Oh, Touya!” Yukina, who had been checking on each of the altars, flew toward me.

“Ugh, I'm tired~” said Daisy, who also flew by and landed on my head. Yukina felt some rivalry from this and flew down next to me, grabbing my arm. “That was rough! Everything's so much bigger than I thought it would be.”

“...Yeah, seems like it.”

The altars each looked pretty far from here. It was kind of inconvenient for the fishing pond to be so distant. I patted Yukina's head to thank her for her hard work, then I noticed something unfamiliar out of the corner of my eye.

It was surprisingly close to us. There was a ramp connecting the terrace to the ground. Yukina and I tried following it down. It connected to the second floor's terrace too, then kept going down to the ground.

“Is this for Rulitora and the other demi-humans?”

“Yeah, I think it is.”

The stairs we used were fine for us humans and the ketolts, but they were a little too small for Rulitora, much less the cyclopes. That was why they had never come up to the second floor before. But now they could use this ramp.

“It's so inconvenient not being able to fly~”

“I know, right?”

...But this had nothing to do with Yukina, Daisy, or the glaupis.

I asked Rulitora later if he wanted his own room on the second floor, but he answered that he felt uncomfortable staying somewhere above the ground.

Well, I couldn't argue with that. He said he'd rather use one of the cabins surrounding the building if he had to pick, so I could give one of those to him.

"I want to stay with everyone~" In contrast, Prae said that she wanted a room on the second floor. Looks like we already had an occupant for one of those two big rooms next to the staircase.

We finished the tour and returned to the first floor, where Haruno had already finished giving an explanation of the new gifts. The others were having some trouble understanding the household appliances, but they would just have to learn through hands-on experience. I was worried that they might injure themselves, though, so I would help cook for the time being.

"The second floor has a bunch of rooms now. There are enough for everyone to have their own room."

"...But what about the bedroom...?"

After I described the second floor's layout, Haruno looked as if she had jumped into an ice cold bath without remembering to heat it up.

"Oh, the bedroom has been moved to the third floor."

"Thank goodness..."

This time, her face melted as if she were soaking in a warm and relaxing bath. Her smile was so soft that it even made me feel warm inside. Did she like that bedroom that much?

Rulitora's team had also come back, so I asked them to report their findings. The garden had expanded in size, but not much else had changed besides the addition of the earth altar. They hadn't found anything that could be considered a gift.

"We have enough room to house everyone with the new buildings, so do you think we should get Crissa and the others?"

"Nah, let's hold off for now. There's still the fact that I can't close the door if anyone is inside." And if I couldn't close the door, then I couldn't move about. It'd still be best to have everyone stay at inns until we could find them a place to stay during the day.

With this, we finally completed our inspection of the upgraded Unlimited Bath. Intense stares had been drilling into my back for a few minutes now. I glanced behind me to find Yukina, Rium, Rakti, and Daisy, their eyes sparkling. I knew what they were after, so I might as well give permission.

“...You can go to the pool now,” I said, and they promptly cheered and ran off with swimsuits in their hands.

The pool seemed pretty deep near the center, so I wanted to appoint a lifeguard for them. Thankfully, I had no trouble finding candidates; the cyclops children also wanted to go for a swim, so their mothers offered to keep watch. I allowed all of them to go.

For the rest of us, it was cleaning time. First up was moving the heaviest items in the building, like the bookshelves.

“Do we want them against the wall?”

“No, let’s move them to the second floor. It’d be nice to have some more space here.” There was another large room next to the one Prae had chosen on the second floor. I wanted to move everything book-related there and make it a study room. “Rulitora, can you carry this with the books still in it?”

“Of course.”

“I shall take thine other shelf.” Despite being even shorter than I was, the Demon Dog picked up another bookshelf, unwilling to let Rulitora show him up.

“You’re willing to help us out?”

“’Tis with service that I must repay thy kindness.”

I suppose he was talking about how we were letting him stay here tonight. He certainly wasn’t our prisoner anymore, that was for sure.

We moved the chest of coins, which had been moved out of the tatami room in order to lock up the Demon Dog there, over to the Goddess of Earth’s vault.

By the time we finished cleaning everything up, it was just about time to start making dinner. Yukina and the other girls had come back from the pool plenty worn out.

“Would thou kindly allow me to partake in the bath for a while?”

“Hmm... You can use the cedar tub, but not the others. We haven’t inspected those in detail yet.”

“Why, ’tis exactly the one I wish to use.”

The Demon Dog had used the bath many times since we left the water capital, though of course supervised by me or the glaupis warriors since he was our prisoner. But, judging from his behavior recently, I didn’t think we needed to be as vigilant anymore. I let him use the bath alone for today. There was probably nothing to worry about since he was looking forward to dinner so much while we were cleaning. I saw the Demon Dog off and headed to the kitchen.

“Touya!” Right as I was about to enter, I bumped into Haruno. She was about to go out to the town to buy ingredients since we didn’t have enough.

“What are we missing?”

“We don’t have enough vegetables.”

Vegetables, huh. Our stock of produce had run out a while ago. This was a good opportunity to eat something fresh again now that we were back on land.

“I wish I could help you carry the bags, but...”

“You can’t leave the Unlimited Bath while people are inside, right? Don’t worry, Prae is coming with me. We’ll bring back lots.”

I at least walked her to the door to see her off. But once we arrived at the gate, we were greeted by several people.

“Sir Hero! Thank you for everything today. Are you heading out?”

It was the temple elder and cleric. They had completed their ritual while we were cleaning. I didn’t have anything to hide, so I answered them honestly.

“We’re going out to town to buy some ingredients.”

“In that case, please allow us to make a donation.”

“...Huh?” Shouldn’t the donations go the other way around? Apparently this was their way of paying a usage fee as thanks for letting them use the altar. I accepted their offer, and they came back with a bigger haul of ingredients than I ever would have expected. Did they have enough left for the rest of the

temple? I guess this was just how much the altar meant to them. At any rate, it felt wrong to reject their offer at this point.

Haruno leaned over and whispered, “Why don’t we invite some more people from the temple over for dinner?”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.”

I wanted to share the taste of Japan with everyone.

“I’d like to invite your temple to have dinner with us this evening...”

“Oh no, please don’t mind us...”

“Not at all, I insist. It’s thanks to the Goddess of Earth’s blessing that this place grew so much, after all.”

The temple elder kept declining at first, but he finally accepted after some more pushing. He looked pretty happy about it, so it seemed like he was just trying to be considerate rather than actually refuse us. We also decided to invite eight clerics and knights who were leading figures of the temple.

Now then, it was time to cook. We had lots of hands in the kitchen to help prepare for our big guest list. Sandra, however, was with Rulitora entertaining the temple clergy. That may have been because she was the least gifted at cooking out of her sisters, but I’d never say that to her face. On that note, the most talented was Rin. She was the type to thoroughly master whatever she set her mind to. The cyclops mothers also joined in. The kitchen was too small for them, but they could use the barbecue outside. I sent Lumis to help out their group.

“Daisy, bring the Demon Dog over here when he comes out of the bath.”

“Got it~”

I didn’t want to offend the palates of our guests, so the Demon Dog would be our taste tester as he was most familiar with the cuisine of Ares.

“Of course, I shall gladly be of assistance!” the Demon Dog answered readily.

Daisy plopped herself back on my head when she came back, and I proceeded with the cooking. According to the Demon Dog, Ares had been influenced by Hades and the demon lord army’s culture since the old days, so they would

most likely enjoy Japanese food.

“By the demon lord army’s culture, you mean...?”

“Why, we did enjoy delectable food.”

So they had attempted to recreate the food of Japan. Come to think of it, one of the notes we found in the demon lord’s castle described something similar. Apparently that experiment hadn’t gone so well.

“Oh, miso... I did miss grilled miso so much...♥” The Demon Dog was dancing around merrily. I reminded myself that this one was one of the Five Great Demon Generals. In either case, it was plain as day how much he was looking forward to the miso. What was grilled miso, though?

“What’s grilled miso? How is that made?”

“Art thou unaware?!”

That’s right, but you don’t have to wag your tail about it so much.

The Demon Dog’s spontaneous lecture taught me that grilled miso was miso mixed with various other condiments then fried until all the water content evaporated.

“Then thou puts it atop a bowl of hot rice with minced sardines and pours hot water atop to melt it all together, and then, mmm...!”

It was apparently already tasty when dry, but even better with the hot water. He said that the demon lord enjoyed the dish back when he was alive, too.

“Isn’t that just miso ochazuke...?”

“Shh, don’t say it.” Haruno clamped Yukina’s mouth shut and quietly chided her. I heard her, but the Demon Dog seemingly hadn’t over all his gushing.

“Sardines? I think we fished up something similar from the fishing pond before.”

“Then please, allow me!”

“Hey, what about your taste testing?!”

The Demon Dog ran off, and I had no choice but to send Yukina and Rium after him. Well, it wouldn’t take him too long to catch a few small fish. I used

the time to continue cooking.

We had plenty of new appliances like the microwave, so I taught everyone how to use them whenever it came up. Sera and Rin would come to me looking worried every time they needed to use something. It would take some time for them to stop fearing the unknown. The only way to get used to them was simply to keep using them. The girls in my party had picked it right up after the first explanation. For the time being, I would help out with the cooking until everyone became more familiar with the appliances.

The clergy had left for a while and returned shortly before we finished cooking. They had come back in formal wear. Their yellow robes were just as gaudy as the white ones from the temple of light. I hadn't intended for this to be such a formal event, but that must have been how much the earth altar meant to them. That, or it could have been the Demon Dog's presence.

We used one of the big cabins outside the building as a banquet hall. Rulitora guided everyone inside. Tonight's menu was rice, miso soup, tamagoyaki, and a vegetable stew. But those alone would be a little too plain, so we also prepared miso grilled meat, teriyaki poultry, and marinated fried fish. At the Demon Dog's request, we also cooked up grilled miso and small salted fish.

However, when we distributed the dishes to the temple members, their attention went not to the main dishes but to something else.

"Is there... dirt in the soup?!"

I apologize. That is miso soup.

But it was possible for them to assume so from the color. If you had no idea what it was, it might not look so appetizing. The clerics and knights started whispering among themselves. I hurriedly took a sip to show them it was fine to drink, but they still looked dubious. The temple elder picked up the bowl with trembling hands, whispering, "My Goddess..."

I really do apologize, but that's just miso soup. I was not intending to test your faith with this dish.

Did we mess up? Haruno, Clena, and I glanced at each other nervously. When we were just about at wit's end, we were saved by an unexpected helper.

“Ahh, how nostalgic this is!” Completely oblivious to the mood around him, the Demon Dog poured the miso soup over his rice and scarfed the bowl down. Then he got a second helping of rice, put grilled miso and salted fish on top, and started chowing down again.

“Exquisite! This is what I have been searching for since 500 years past!!” He went for a third bowl without slowing down. He started crying, having been so moved by the nostalgic flavor.

After watching him, the temple members also poured the miso soup over their rice and hesitantly started eating. Their hands paused for a moment, eyes widening, and in the next moment they started consuming the food much more vigorously. They each asked for a second helping of rice, and this time they added the grilled miso and salted fish on top to mimic the Demon Dog. I could tell that they were genuinely enjoying the food.

The Demon Dog saved us with that one. Was this how much a member of the demon lord’s army was trusted in Ares? The relationship that had been built up over 500 years was almost tangible. In any case, I wish they would try some of the other dishes as well, but it might be best to let them calm down first.

“We’re really pleased with how these other dishes came out too...”

I ate my own share of the grilled miso, also savoring the nostalgic taste, and waited for them to come back to their senses.

After a while, the clergy had their fill of the miso and finally turned their attention to the other dishes. I was nervous not only for their reaction, but also for the Demon Dog’s. However, they devoured these dishes too while asking for more helpings of rice all the while.

“You guys aren’t surprised by this, Clena?”

“Surprised by what?”

“The food from our world.”

Clena looked down at the teriyaki on her plate, then up at the ceiling, and finally nodded as if she had come to a conclusion.

“I guess I’m... used to it by now?”

“Used to it’?”

“The food you made has always been a little different.”

“...Has it?”

“I don’t mean it tastes bad.”

Roni, Rium, and even Rakti nodded in agreement.

Clena explained that my cooking had always been a little strange to them. I had always seasoned my cooking to my own preferences, but I guess it was pretty far from the norm in this world.

“Actually, we’ve been worried that you don’t like our cooking...”

“That’s not true at all,” I refuted Roni’s comment without skipping a beat. It was a little light on seasoning, but that made it plenty delicious in its own right.

“That happened with my party, too. When I cooked for them for the first time, they were all surprised...” Haruno added, mentioning that her party enjoyed her food as well. Apparently, back when they were staying at the royal castle, they always thought she made too much.

“That didn’t happen with me~” said Yukina, who had never learned to cook by herself, but now knew her way around the kitchen after helping me. She had gotten used to bland foods after being in the hospital so often, and I bet she had never had a luxurious meal while living with the other demons on that island.

“Considering how long ago the Demon Dog lived, a bunch of these dishes are new to him, too.”

“Is that why you were nervous?”

“I think he likes it, judging by his appearance right now.”

I was worried when they were only going for the ochazuke, but now they were all chatting and eating happily.

“Actually, I thought this was clay at first too.”

“I thought it was mud.”

They all thought it came from the ground. Well, I suppose in that sense, miso

was a fitting gift from the Goddess of Earth. In any case, Clena and the rest thought the grilled miso was delicious too. I'd say that this dinner party was a great success. Afterward, the clergy thanked us and bowed before us several times over before finally leaving. It had been a long day, but I wanted to test the new additions to the bath before the day ended. It was time to have everyone pick out their yukata.

The yukata had different colors and designs based on what the goddesses reigned over. I let everyone pick out whatever they liked without much of a fuss, since they didn't have to wear the same one every day anyway. Rakti picked out a pink one, which almost made me tease her with a "Are you sure about that, Goddess of Darkness?" but she looked so cute in it that I couldn't object.

I showed everyone how to use the sauna, but this world apparently had steam rooms too. That plus Haruno's explanation on the health and beauty effects made everyone quickly want to try it out. I'm sure it wasn't just my imagination that the girls had a different charm than usual, with beads of sweat glistening on their bodies. But anyway, I reminded them to rehydrate afterward. Safety first.

I had assumed Rin would be the most interested in the sauna, but surprisingly, it was Sera and Sandra who were more keen on it. The beauty effects were apparently exactly what they wanted. Rin was instead more fascinated by the hot tub. It was an unusual sight and piqued her curiosity. There were five sections in the hot tub, and all of them lined up to make a single spacious spa. Prae could even fit inside if she used up the whole thing.

Prae lay down in the hot tub next to Rin. "It tickles~!" she laughed.

Yukina and Rakti jumped down on top of her and they all played around in the bubbles.



“Are you going to join them, Rium?” I asked.

“Mm...” She wordlessly pointed at the ceiling. *The indoor open-air bath on the second floor, huh.* We did still need to check that out. Everyone else was having fun on this floor, and I didn’t want to interrupt them. The rock bath on the second floor was smaller than the cedar bath on this floor, so we didn’t have to go with everyone anyway.

I wanted to join Yukina and jump into Prae’s chest, but I resisted the urge and took Rium’s hand to go upstairs to the second floor. Haruno, Clena, Roni, and Daisy joined us. Daisy had just escaped the sauna and plopped herself down on my head. It seemed like she’d taken quite a liking to that spot.

The rock bath was in the center of the second floor, but there were no showers surrounding it. This was so that we could have an unobstructed view of the dome screen, which made up the walls and ceiling of this entire floor. I guess you would probably want to wash your hair on the first floor then come upstairs to have a relaxing bath with a view.

First, I checked how to use the dome screen. The instructions were already mostly in my head. Let’s see, it would be a little boring to show the temple, so I raised the elevation a bit and projected the view from above ground. This function consumed MP, but all I had to do was chant a spell in my mind to use it. I was the only one who could recite the spell and control it.

The dome glowed faintly, then lit up with the view from outside. The sun had already set; it was a desert landscape with stars as far as the eye could see.

“What, we’re outside?!”

“Kyah?!”

Clena and Roni jumped in the bath, anxiously covering their bodies underwater.

“Um, we’re okay. This screen is just projecting the view from outside. We didn’t actually get teleported, and I doubt anyone can see us from out there either.”

“Oh, really...?”

Apparently they had both gotten confused by the realistic scenery on the screen and thought we had suddenly been teleported outside. Rium hadn't jumped into the bath with them, but she had instead quickly hidden herself behind me. Daisy was still calm atop my head, but I think she just wasn't bothered by the idea of anyone seeing her in a yuamigi. Haruno wasn't bothered either, likely because she also realized that it was simply a projection.

"Is it really okay?"

"Don't worry. This is just an image of the scenery outside."

This used more of my MP than I was expecting, though. I think it consumed the most out of any gift so far. There should be a limit on how far away we could see.

"Are you okay, Touya?"

"Hmm, yeah, this shouldn't be a problem." I was already used to draining my MP all day every day, so I still had plenty left in me. *That aside, let's all hurry up and get in the bath.*

"Here you go, Daisy."

"Oh, thanks!"

I noticed that Daisy was hesitant to get in the bath, so I opened my hand just under the water and gave her a spot to sit. She flapped her wings to get down and landed on the palm of my hand, where she lay back and soaked in the water.

Haruno and Rium sat themselves not far away from us, but Clena and Roni were still a little wary of the screen and clung to my left and right sides.

"If you're that scared, you can go back downstairs."

"It's fine, I can understand it logically."

So they just needed to get used to it. In that case, I should try changing the view a bit. I chanted within my mind again, and the view started moving at a fairly high speed. The scenery rushed along as if we were looking out the window of a train. It was a bit of an alarming sight for Clena and Roni, but also pretty fantastical for people from this world, so the idea that they were actually

outside faded and they calmed down a bit.

“Touya, it’s okay now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it was such a lovely night sky, so let’s enjoy it.”

I stopped the screen then took a big breath. This was actually pretty tiring.

“More...” On the other hand, Rium had actually gotten excited about the screen movement. Her eyes sparkled as her curiosity was stoked. I told her to spare me for now and we’d do it again another day.

The view was desert as far as the eye could see. The starlight illuminated pillars of smoke rising in the distance. Maybe they were ventilation outlets. They continued in a row into the distant night. It was a curious sight, but I wanted to pay more attention to the stars. I copied Prae by stretching out my legs, using the edge of the bath as a headrest, and lying down in the water. I didn’t forget Daisy of course, so I kept my outstretched hand floating above the water. However, she flew over to the area below my neck and lay down there instead.

“Are you okay, Touya?” she asked in a worried tone.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I was indeed tired, but that wasn’t the reason why I suddenly wanted to lie down. “It’s easier to see the stars like this, isn’t it?”

“Ohh...”

On cue, everyone else looked toward the sky, too. We were far from shore right now, but this starry sky was as spectacular as the view from the open-air bath at the Maiden of the Roaring Waves. Haruno lay down like I did, and we spent the next several moments in peaceful silence. This projection constantly consumed my MP, but it was worth it. Though maybe I was the only one who was qualified to say that.

The sound of chatter and giggles coming from below finally broke our silence. Everyone who had been enjoying the sauna and hot tub came upstairs.

“Woah, what’s this?!”

“Amazing!”

Everyone was surprised by the outside view. We sat ourselves back up, with Daisy propping herself on my shoulder, so that we could greet the new arrivals.

This rock bath was big, but still smaller than the cedar bath downstairs. Having everyone in here would make the space cramped, but it was still much better than the days where Clena, Roni, and I huddled ourselves together in a single tiny tub. All three of us glanced at each other. They were probably thinking the same thing I was. Then Haruno snuggled herself against me before I knew it. She might have been reading my mind.

Yukina and the others were coming into the bath one by one, but for some reason Prae had stopped in her tracks. At first I thought she was worried about someone her size getting in the bath, but that wasn't the case. She was staring at something on the wall projection.

"What are you looking at, Prae?"

"Um, there's a big light coming toward us from over there."

"A big light...?"

She was looking beyond the pillars of smoke toward the sea. There was indeed a bright light swaying in the distance, which made everyone tense up. Curious about what was approaching the port, I zoomed in on the area where the light was coming from. The landscape flew by even faster than before. Before long, we were flying over the sea. Now we could clearly see the light, and I realized that it wasn't one light source but many that seemed like a single one from afar. I zoomed in even closer to get a view of exactly what the lights were.

It was a galleon. Perhaps to make it easier to spot from port, there were several lanterns hanging from all over it. I wondered why they'd do such a thing, but after looking at one particular spot on the ship, all my confusion vanished.

"...What's that guy doing?" I could see the bow of the ship, where the self-proclaimed Cosmos was striking a pose. We couldn't hear his voice from here, but he was arching his back and bellowing a mighty laugh.

"Oh."

In the next moment, he fell into the water because he had arched his back too far. Ricott jumped in after him in a panic, while Foley threw a rope down their way. As I watched him get rescued somehow, I once again murmured, "...What is he doing?"

"...Okay, let's ignore Cosmos for now." Once I confirmed that Cosmos was safe and sound, I decided that we didn't have to pay their party any mind and turned off the screen. He wasn't a bad guy, but he was exhausting to be around. I didn't mind seeing him again, but I wouldn't be the first one to greet him either. That was my ambivalent relationship with the self-proclaimed Hero Cosmos, AKA Akio Nishizawa.

"Um... That was Nishizawa just now, wasn't it...?" Haruno asked timidly. She had a faint recollection of him. I guess she hadn't seen him since Jupiter. I just realized that I'd been calling him "Cosmos" without thinking. Well, I guess I didn't mind.

"We'll see him at the capital either way, and it would take time for us to go back to the port just to greet him."

"Yeah, we can't take detours while the people from the wind temple are in our care."

They'd been constantly on the run, even now. I wanted to give them a place to rest soon. If we only wanted rest, staying at this temple and using my Unlimited Bath was a good-enough solution, but then I wouldn't be able to move from here. And without the Unlimited Bath, they needed a large place to stay. Especially the cyclopes with their large bodies.

We might have to have Clena, Haruno, and the others search around while I guard the Unlimited Bath, but even in that case, I didn't want them to stray too far from us. So the best place I could think of to go right now was the city center, where the royal palace was. We needed to head there as soon as possible; we didn't have time to go back to the port. So we'd start traveling again tomorrow, just as planned.

"Well, let's not change our plans at this point."

"Yeah, we'll start heading to the royal capital again tomorrow morning."

And so I turned the screen on again, and we enjoyed the rest of the bath looking up at the starry sky.

“It’s so pretty~”

“It really is~”

“What a wonderful night sky~”

I was lying on top of Prae, and Rakti was in turn lying on top of me. I was sandwiched between the two of them, but I couldn’t help it since this bath was small. I also had to lean my head farther down Prae’s chest to stare up at the night sky, but I couldn’t help that either. Probably. Daisy was lying in Rakti’s hands right now, so we were actually four layers deep. Anyway, Prae really was big. In a lot of senses. I bet I looked like a kid from a distance compared to her.

On another note, Rakti, Yukina, and Rium had apparently discussed among themselves and came to an agreement taking turns lying on top of me.

“When Rium’s turn is over... Do you want to try, Lumis?”

“Why would I?! That’s embarrassing!!”

That prompted a little teasing scuffle between Lumis and Rin, though one of them was quite serious. Haruno tried to use the opportunity to take the spot on top of me, but Clena knocked some sense back into her.

“P-Please don’t mind me...”

And then, I was a little confused on how exactly this developed, but Roni ended up being the fourth to lay on top of me. She was, well... her tail wagging from underneath her yuamigi was extremely ticklish.

After the bath, I took on my daily task of deciphering our collection of ancient texts. Once that was done, we all went to sleep on the third floor with Prae joining our usual party... But for some reason, I was in the bath in my dream, too.

In front of me was the Goddess of Earth, smiling widely. She was wearing a yuamigi, but her northern hemispheres were very much uncovered, probably too big to fit within. Her lightly tanned twin islands stuck out right before my eyes.

“Sorry, what’s going on?”

“You’ve grown.”

I didn’t get it. So was this a reward for my growth? I felt like my eyes might get glued to those twin islands forever, so I restlessly looked around.

The steam obstructed most of my vision, to the point that I could only see slightly in front of me. If this was the Unlimited Bath, then the ventilation should work a bit more effectively. The water was a cloudy milky-white color, also not something from the Unlimited Bath. But this place looked somehow familiar, including those twin islands...

Where? Where had I seen this before? I mean, I saw those twin islands every time I dreamt, but...

...That’s right! That’s it!

“Have you remembered?”

“Woah?!” I turned around at the sudden voice to see the Goddess of Light standing behind me, also in a yuamigi. She walked through the water until she stood before me, then reached out her hand to touch me.

That moment, my memory cleared as if the cloudy water had suddenly become transparent.

“That’s right... Before I even met Rakti, right after I came to this world, I met all of you...!” About a week after I was summoned to this world, I’d had a dream where I was surrounded by all of the goddesses.

“Oh, you remembered! Good boy!” The Goddess of Fire appeared to my left and patted my head vigorously.

“Hey, have you ever thought about why we goddesses are sisters?” The Goddess of Wind flew down to me next, coiling herself around my arm.

Hm, the Goddess of Wind had a point. I started thinking back to the basics. Why were they the six goddess sisters? Did someone decide that they were sisters? If so, who had the power to make that decision?

“It’s not so different from your relationship with Yukina...” After I couldn’t voice an answer, the Goddess of Water appeared behind me and gave me a

hint.

My relationship with Yukina... I see. Thanks to the Goddess of Water, I thought of one more key point.

“Everyone has the same parent...?” Siblings were born from the same parents. That was obvious. But it was true that I had never thought about it that way until now. That the goddess sisters, who reigned over all things in nature, might have parents just like humans did. In that case, what did the parents reign over?

...Hm? The parent of the goddess sisters, who ruled over all things in nature...?

“Could it be...”

“Yes, you are correct.” The Goddess of Earth was grinning from ear to ear as she got up and stood beside the Goddess of Wind.

“Yes, Touya. Our mother is... the goddess who created this world, and the one who rules over the world itself.” The Goddess of Darkness, Rakti, finally revealed herself from behind the Goddess of Light and spoke up to me. She shifted to the Goddess of Light’s right side so that I was finally surrounded by all six goddess sisters.

“Great job thinking that through, what a clever child!” If it wasn’t for the Goddess of Wind’s amicable attitude, I’d be feeling incredibly overwhelmed right now.

“By the way, Brother. Have you realized that this is not our usual place?”

“...Huh?” By “usual place,” she meant Rakti’s sanctuary, where we appeared in my dream every night.

A sanctuary was a goddess’ power. The Goddess of Wind had used her own sanctuary to transport Haruno’s party to the temple of water. This bath wasn’t the Goddess of Darkness’ sanctuary. In that case, where was this?

“...Wait. Considering the topic at hand, could it be—”

“Correct! This is Mama’s sanctuary, though just a tiny part of it.”

I see. This was also where I’d had my dream soon after I was summoned to

this world. But why? Why was I able to come here? I knew why I could visit Rakti's sanctuary. It was because we were always traveling together. But I didn't know the Mother Goddess. I didn't have her blessing, either. So why?

The Goddess of Light and Goddess of Fire answered my question.

"You're misunderstanding something, Brother. Everyone in this world has forgotten our mother's name, but she has always been watching over us all."

"Every living being in this world has been blessed by our mother. It's just that none of them have noticed it, not even you."

"Everyone in this world...? But I was summoned here."

"You were granted the blessing when you were summoned to this world. Otherwise, you would not be alive right now."

But that's the Goddess of Light's... I was about to say, but then realized. Her blessing allowed me to understand the language of this world and communicate with its residents. But there were other blessings that the ruler of the world could grant me that would allow me to survive in this world, too.

"No one in the world has noticed our mother's blessing... Yet, you were able to come here. That is why you are our younger brother," the Goddess of Water added.

I see, that was the reason why the goddesses had always called me their brother. I glanced at Rakti, who noticed me looking and said "I'm the older sister!" while puffing out her chest. So even Rakti thought of me as her younger brother.

The Goddess of Earth patted Rakti's head, then turned her gaze straight at me. I also tried my best to look straight back at her without flinching.

"Please remember this. Our mother is... the 'Goddess of Chaos'—the goddess who gave birth to this world."

"The Goddess... of Chaos..."

The mother of the six goddess sisters. She may have been named Chaos, but she was also the creator goddess of this world.

"Is she somewhere in this bath...?"

As soon as I said that, the Goddess of Wind, who had kept herself wrapped around my arm this whole time, let go of me and stood up. Then the goddesses split themselves into groups of three to my left and right, forming a path in front of me. All of them seemed a little bit tense.

Beyond the steamy air, I could hear a soft *splish, splash*. The source of the sound made her way slowly and deliberately toward me. She stopped when she was within arm's reach, slowly stretched out her hand... and then, my consciousness suddenly cut off.

I sat up with a gasp, then found myself in the center of the giant bed on the third floor of the castle. Everyone else was still asleep. Looking at the clock on the wall, I saw that it was still dawn.

"Touya..." Rakti sluggishly sat up.

I took her out of the room quietly, so that we wouldn't wake anyone else up. My head was still in a fog. I wanted to take a bath to clear the haze away. I needed to explain the Goddess of Chaos to everyone, but before that, I wanted to make sure my head was clear.

Keeping Rakti under my arm, we headed downstairs to the bathhouse in the annex. The walkway outside was dead silent. I stopped where the walkway formed a cross in the center.

"Hey, Rakti. I... did meet her before, right?"

"...Yes, you may not remember, but you did meet her—our mother, the Goddess of Chaos."

"Uh-huh... That's right." I didn't doubt her. It was just a strange feeling. I didn't remember what she looked like, but an affectionate smile was tugging at my memory. I also didn't remember what I had said to her, but what she had said to me had been imprinted inside my head. I still didn't get the feeling that I had really met her, so what was this memory that seemed so sure for me?

I looked at the garden from the walkway. This building had gotten bigger, but so had the garden. Putting everything together, this really was the size of a castle. Honestly speaking, there was one other doubt I had—my gift didn't really have much to do with baths anymore. But I figured as much when the

Goddess of Fire's kitchen appeared. I hadn't really questioned it after that.

But now I knew. The Goddess of Chaos had told me this.

"So this space itself is...!"

The "Unlimited Bath" was, at most, just the bathhouse. This space itself was the Goddess of Chaos' gift—the dimension that brought all of the other goddess' gifts together. In other words, this was another world. While trying to wrap my head around that fact, I soaked in the morning bath while talking with Rakti more about the dream last night.

"...So the Goddess of Chaos' blessing isn't that special in itself?"

"Yes, everyone in the world has our mother's blessing, including us sisters." Rakti explained everything I asked her with delight, probably because she got exclusive use of my lap this morning. The Goddess of Chaos' blessing was granted to everyone in this world, including the goddess sisters, but nearly no one realized this fact.

"So why did I realize?"

"In your case, I think it's because you received all of our blessings."

This had been explained to me back in Ceres, but to receive the blessing of two or more goddesses, you needed to have an appropriate amount of MP to match. The amount of MP required to receive all six blessings must be phenomenal. San Pilaca, one of the party members of the first sacred king, had received five blessings. I was probably the first person in history to receive all six.

The Goddess of Light's blessing allowed me to level up faster, and the Unlimited Bath made me consume MP on a daily basis. Come to think of it, my MP usage multiplied every time I was granted a new gift, but I never felt like I was running out of MP because of it. I was growing as much as my MP costs were. I wasn't really conscious of it, but that's just how quickly I had been growing.

On the other hand, if I hadn't leveled up enough, one of the blessing ceremonies might have failed. I was relieved that they had all gone well, though I bet none of the clerics had been worried since I was a Hero of the Goddess.

“Then has anyone else ever realized this? Besides you and your sisters, of course.”

“The dragons have.”

I was apparently dragon-class now? Thinking back, “dragons” weren’t a race of beings in this world but instead a term for powerful monsters that had the ability to affect their surroundings. I guess I was affecting my surroundings via the Unlimited Bath.

Well, “Unlimited Bath” was no longer an accurate name for this small world that the Goddess of Chaos’ blessing had brought about... but I didn’t know the correct name for it, so Unlimited Bath it would stay.

“...I don’t feel like I’ve become as strong as a dragon, though.”

“No dragons have their own world, you know?”

I guess it wasn’t just a matter of strength. The spore dragon was one thing, but the flower dragon hadn’t been all that tough.

“Can I talk about this with everyone else?”

“I don’t mind. We’re not hiding it or anything.”

The reason Rakti and her sisters hadn’t mentioned it until now was because the Goddess of Chaos had forbidden them. She wanted me to remember it myself first. So she had been testing me—testing whether I could get this far on my own. In that case, did yesterday’s dream mean that she acknowledged me?

“Oh, and one more thing, Touya. You’re the newest member of our family now, so...”

“So?”

“I’m your older sister now!” Rakti stood up with her hands on her hips and stuck out her chest. Her proud-looking stance was so cute that I patted her on the head. She grinned happily, but then tensed up as she remembered what she’d just said, and once again proclaimed “I’m your older sister!”

She really was cute, so I gave her a big hug. What an adorable older sister I had.

Everyone had woken up by the time we returned from our morning bath. They had begun cooking breakfast, so Rakti and I also put on aprons and started helping out. This was a good opportunity to talk since the Demon Dog wasn't around. I called Rulitora over and talked about the Goddess of Chaos with everyone.

"...This is hard to believe right off the bat. I don't think you're lying or anything, of course."

As to be expected, they didn't take in my story so easily.

"What you're saying makes sense to me, though," said Haruno, who could follow along just fine. We were on the same wavelength. But the people from this world were different. Clena explained that the people here believed that the six goddess sisters created this world. No one had ever considered the idea that there existed another goddess who created this world, and that she was the mother of the goddess sisters.

"Does this world have any other creation myths that are passed down outside of human settlements?"

"No, there are none of those."

Apparently the temples were the only organizations who passed down these teachings. Rulitora's tribe didn't have any creation myths in the first place. That was no surprise, since I bet missionary workers wouldn't travel as far out as the void anyway. It was also not the temples' fault that the Goddess of Chaos had been forgotten, either. She had apparently been forgotten long before the temples even came into existence.

"...Are you okay, Sera?"

"I-I'm okay. This does not stand in contrast to the Goddess of Light's existence, after all."

The most shocked out of all of us was, unsurprisingly, the cleric Sera. Followers of the Goddess of Light believed her to be the eldest sister and also the leader of all the goddess sisters. It must have been shocking to hear that there was an existence above her, and that it was her mother. Sera wasn't the type to care too much about hierarchy, yet this news was already so

overwhelming for her. Other people might have even more extreme reactions.

“Woow! The Goddess of Wind has a mom, too!” Prae was not affected at all, but she was probably the exception here. Yeah, we probably shouldn’t spread this information yet. We all agreed to keep this a secret, including from the Demon Dog.

After breakfast, it was time for us to get ready to depart. The temple elder had prepared enough gembolic wagons for all of us. One of them could seat two adult cyclopes, so we finally had a means of traveling with them, too. If we used these, then we could reach the city center by this afternoon.

The ones that the temple elder had prepared for us were rapid gembolics. They didn’t have to pull a large carriage, so we could reach the city center fairly quickly like this. They suggested sending a letter to the demon lord’s army to alert them of our arrival. Yeah, I didn’t want to accidentally start a war. I read over the letter that the Demon Dog wrote, then we sent it off.

We’d probably eat lunch while riding on the gembolics, so we should prepare portable lunches for the journey.

“I wish for onigiri! Please, grant me an onigiri lunch!!”

At the behest of the Demon Dog and his wagging tail, we made onigiri for lunch. It was a good pick for a light and portable meal. We made some tea for the ride, too. Then we split up into the gembolic wagons and began our journey to the city center.

I took up the front wagon. With me were the Demon Dog, Clena, Haruno, Rulitora, and Daisy. Rulitora took up two seats, while Daisy was perched on my shoulder. We had a long journey ahead of us, so I started to think about topics of conversation, but the Demon Dog started talking first.

“Sir Rulitora, were thou born in Ares?”

“No, I was born in the void. Though I’ve heard that my ancestors used to live around here.”

“Why, the void...!” The Demon Dog reacted deeply to that name. That area was once his homeland. He added that many sand lizardmen lived in Ares, mainly above ground.

All right, I might as well use this opportunity to pick the Demon Dog's brains. Once we reached the city center, it would finally be time for us to confront the survivors of the demon army. I wanted to gather as much information as I could before then.

"Just to make sure, what exactly is the relationship between the demon lord's army and the Ares royal family?" This was what I was most concerned about. Were they still cooperating to this day?

"What exactly do you mean?"

"Like, are you guys secretly controlling the royal family from the shadows, or..."

"How exactly dost thou view the demon army, Sir Touya...?"

"I'm thinking of the Goldfish's old party. And is the Flame Devil still around?"

"I cannot refute those points!"

Neither of them were the greatest people, after all. Anyway, Clena and the others were looking our way with interest, so I kept interrogating him.

"So really, how's your relationship with them right now?"

"We do maintain good relations. The royal family is fully aware that our base is in Ares."

"Are they sheltering you?"

"'Tis not so one-sided as that. Ares is a rather poor kingdom, so we give the royal family our assistance."

I see. So in the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord 500 years ago, this might have been the reason why Ares had remained Hades' ally until the end. The view from the indoor open-air bath last night was a vast desert land which couldn't be considered fertile by any stretch of the word. It wasn't so difficult to imagine how important trade with Hades must have been to this country. Ares must have taken in the refugees from Hades so readily for similar reasons. If the demon army and Ares were cooperating to this day, it must be for mutual benefit. The royal family really could be giving the army shelter right now.

“So what exactly is this alliance?”

“’Tis a combination of a few things. And one more thing that I must tell thee at this point... We are no longer called the ‘demon lord’s army’!”

“...Huh? What do you mean by that...?” I asked in confusion, and then the Demon Dog replied with a rather haughty tone.

“Indeed! Now, we are... the Demon Lord Corporation! We are the greatest merchants in Ares and one of the pillars that support the standard of living within this country!”

Um, was it really okay for the demon lord’s army to switch jobs like that? Although, I could finally come to terms with them coming to the water capital to negotiate trade now.

According to the Demon Dog, this company originally started as a cover for the army to stay hidden within Ares. But as they mimicked the teachings of the demon lord, their commerce business began taking in steady profits, and they figured that this was a fine track to stay on until the demon lord’s revival.

Was this why the army was split between two factions now—the ones wishing for the demon lord’s revival, and the ones who wanted to appoint a new demon lord?

I had several questions, but there was one obvious one that I wanted to point out first. “You guys didn’t actually call yourselves the Demon Lord Corporation, do you?”

The Demon Dog promptly looked away.

“You really did?! You were supposed to be in hiding, and yet you named yourselves the ‘Demon Lord Corporation’?!”

“’Twas a long time ago! We changed our name after we were almost discovered!” He explained that the merchants who escaped Hades had called themselves that at first. It was also a way to guide the survivors of the demon lord’s army back together after they had been scattered apart.

After Hades collapsed, Ares had no trading partner other than Neptune, who at the time had many followers of the Goddess of Water. They’d determined

that the eyes of the sacred family wouldn't reach them there for the time being. However, around 300 years back, the temple of the Goddess of Light greatly expanded in power, and they zeroed in on the Demon Lord Corporation. They changed their name at that point to escape detection.

"So what are you called now?"

"Aye, currently, we call ourselves... the 'White Orchid Corporation.'"

They'd done a one-eighty and given themselves a completely normal name. Formerly the Demon Lord Corporation, now the White Orchid Corporation. He said that the White-Faced Ogre currently led the company. Maybe that had something to do with the new name?

They were apparently in support of the demon lord's revival. What stance should we take when we meet with them? With the Demon Dog here, I didn't think we needed to be hostile. But would that still be the case with the demon lord factored in?

I should talk about this with the others. As we swayed in the gembolic-drawn wagon headed straight for the city center, I turned to Clena and Haruno.

Second Bath – Barbecue in the Underground Kingdom The gembolic wagons galloped along the tunnel road, the echoes of their hooves serving as our background music, along with the rattling wagon wheels. I had a late lunch on my shaky seat, stuffing my mouth with onigiri. Soon, the road ahead of us grew brighter. We were almost at the city center.

We exited the tunnel to find... yet another cave. The tunnel opened into a much more spacious area. The ceiling was only slightly higher than the temple city's, but the road was much wider. I'd compare it to a six-lane road with sidewalks. The biggest contrast to the temple city was how bright it was here. A row of lights on the ceiling lit up this underground area, and the walls were so polished that they reflected that light like mirrors.

"Is the light coming from above ground?"

"Nay, those are rainbow opals. They are coated with a paint made from a certain species of moss, which makes them give off that glow. Though the paint must be reapplied every so often."

"That's pretty convenient~" Daisy said from my shoulder.

"Well, 'twould be folly to create an underground city if thou had no way to see," the Demon Dog quickly countered. He had a point.

The ceiling, floor, and walls were perfectly flat. The material was originally soil, but it had been polished to an almost mirror-like degree. Everything we had seen until now had also been refined with magic, but it was nowhere near this level. I was confident that I had enough MP to create walls harder than these, but I couldn't make anything this smooth and reflective. They probably used specialized techniques, tricks of the trade.

“W-Wow...” Clena was speechless at the sight.

I could see why. The areas before now still felt like we were in a cave, but this city was completely man-made. It was different from any other place we had visited so far, fit to be called the city center of Ares.

“...” I was also at a loss for words, but for a different reason from Clena’s. I looked over at Haruno, who also seemed to arrive at the same conclusion.

“This is... an underground mall, huh,” Yukina said bluntly.

Indeed; to those of us from modern Japan, this looked just like an underground shopping mall you could find around train stations.

“I’m less surprised at the sight itself and more at the fact that this even exists here in this world...”

“...Same here.”

Since this was a familiar sight to us, we weren’t as surprised or impressed as everyone else was. That felt a tad disappointing, but maybe it was just me.

“Is it okay that nothing here is ‘blessed land,’ even though it’s the city center?”

By “blessed land,” I meant natural cave rock. Natural rock was considered more prestigious than man-made materials in Ares, after all.

“The royal palace in the center was constructed with natural rock.”

“Oh, so the city grew so big that the natural caverns weren’t enough anymore.”

I see, Haruno’s conclusion made sense. They needed to expand, but also wanted to make a city that wouldn’t shame the royal palace. As a result, the city center was built so neatly that it resembled a modern underground shopping mall.

The main difference from the malls I knew was that the shops on the sides of the street didn’t have display windows. Instead, the walls were plastered with big sign boards and posters that showcased the products being sold. I would guess that the posters and sign boards had a major effect on how well each business did.

The gembolic wagons wouldn't take us any further, so now we could take a closer look at the streets on foot. The Demon Dog said that the White Orchid Corporation was down the main street on the way to the royal palace.

The main street was as busy and crowded as its name suggested. But there were very few humans—almost none. The most populous were the dark elves, just like back in the temple. Lycaons were plentiful too, but there weren't many gillmen or marsh lizardmen. Maybe we were too far from the port.

I could feel many eyes on us as we walked down the street. The Demon Dog was with us, and cyclopes were likely a rare sight around here... I could think of several reasons why we'd attract attention.

But in fact, Roni attracted most of the stares. She was also a lycaon, but a "light" lycaon, while the ones around here were all "dark" lycaons. Clena noticed that she seemed a bit uncomfortable and positioned herself to shield Roni from view. I did the same.

"It sure is crowded, though..." Rulitora noted from the back of our group. Everywhere I looked, I saw families with children, young couples, and salespeople advertising their products. The children pleaded with their parents to buy things, and the shop employees appealed to them with boisterous calls.

We didn't have to push through the crowd, but it was still difficult to walk. This must have been especially troublesome for Rulitora and our other larger party members. Daisy clung to my face from my shoulder. Maybe she was bad with crowds. That reminded me to pay attention to the children. I looked behind me and called out to make sure that the cyclops children wouldn't get separated from us. They were taller than human adults but still children on the inside, so we needed to watch out for them.

That aside, I could smell the sweet scent of southern fruits, freshly baked bread, and juicy meat. A lot of these shops were over-the-counter businesses. There was no way to escape these tempting scents in this underground area. I had just eaten some onigiri but was feeling hungry again already.

"Is there a festival today?" Rium asked.

"Nay, 'tis always like this," the Demon Dog answered nonchalantly. So today wasn't a special day—the city center was always this lively.

Soon after I could see the royal palace in the distance, the Demon Dog stopped. To our right was a shop with a big sign board that said “White Orchid Corporation.” The sign was a milky white ceramic, and reliefs of flowers adorned the letters.

“We do not actually sell flowers, mind~”

There were several posters plastered out front like the other shops we had seen so far, but unlike them, none of these posters had any consistency. They felt very disordered.

Rakti and I peered at the posters decorating the outer wall. While they didn’t sell flowers here, they did sell all sorts of other goods, from weapons to food.

“’Twas the demon lord’s way. Find anything that seems to be in demand and claim it,” the Demon Dog said.

“...We’re talking about the demon lord, the King of Hades, right?” Clena retorted with an exasperated tone.

If that was the demon lord’s philosophy, then I could see why the survivors of the demon army switched their focus to commerce after they fled here.

“They received our letter, right?”

“Priority mail should have been delivered by now.”

All right, there was no point in loitering around. I prompted the Demon Dog to lead the way into the store. The door was just barely large enough to fit Rulitora. The cyclopes would have to wait outside, but I didn’t want to risk leaving them alone, so I asked Sandra, Rin, and Lumis to wait with them. The inside of the store was illuminated with rainbow opals, making it brighter than I was expecting. The floor space inside was raised above the ground and lined with product-filled shelves.

“It’s like we’re in a historical movie,” whispered Yukina. This *did* feel like a traditional kimono store. The raised platform was just tall enough to sit down on, but it would take some effort to climb up. Some customers were, in fact, sitting on the edge and chattering with shop employees. They were all dark elves.

An employee who had just come out from the back of the shop noticed the Demon Dog, then quickly did an about-face and rushed back inside. The other customers and workers started noticing us too, and soon enough the shop was abuzz with whispers.

Suddenly, everything fell quiet. A person walked out from the back of the shop who could only be described as “pure white.” Her skin was whiter and more translucent than Haruno’s, her eyes clearer than Clena’s, and her hair, bright as freshly fallen snow, was gathered up in a short ponytail. Two locks draped down from her temples to her cheeks.

The moment I saw her, my instincts told me that this was one of the Five Great Demon Generals—the White-Faced Ogre. The “face” part didn’t refer to a mask in this case, like it did with Goldfish. She wore an elegant robe tied with a thick sash, which almost looked like a kimono. The likeness may have been on purpose. The socks she wore were *tabi*, likely made by Ficus Brand. I noticed that all the other employees were wearing the same tabi socks. I guess the store didn’t allow shoes inside.

“That’s a woman, isn’t it...?” Haruno whispered in my ear.

I didn’t know if she had always looked like that, or if she changed after the Hero of Darkness summoning, but the White-Faced Ogre before us was clearly a woman.

All the customers and staff stepped to the side so that there was nothing between us and her. She walked right up to us. Her facial features were refined, but she didn’t come off as cold or stern. She stopped at the edge of the platform, kneeled down, and bowed.

“We humbly welcome you all, Heroes of the Goddess and your parties. We have been informed of your arrival.” A smooth, somewhat high-pitched voice—she really was female. She slowly raised her head, straightened her back, then glanced at Clena. “And you must be...”

Clena looked at me, so I gave her a nod. She took a step forward and handed over the Dark Prince’s sword, which had been affixed to her waist.

The White-Faced Orge pulled the sword slightly from its sheath, just enough to see the Crest of the Five Quinces on the base of the blade. She quickly

resheathed the blade then handed it back to Clena in a respectful manner.

“Pardon me. Please come this way.” She stood up and gestured to follow her inside the store.

Two shop employees brought over a bench, which was about half the height of the shop floor platform. They placed it before the platform, making steps just the right height for us to walk up. I see, so this was how you were supposed to go inside the store.

“Oh, just a second. We still have a few of our party members waiting outside—the cyclopes.”

“They indeed would not be able to enter through this door... Let us go out back. I will have one of our workers show them the way.”

“Rulitora, can you go with them?”

“As you wish.”

Rulitora went outside while the rest of us took off our shoes and went up the steps. Seeing this, the White-Faced Ogre murmured, “They are indeed familiar with this...” She then led us to the back of the store. The hallway was much dimmer, but not so much that we couldn’t see where we were going.

After a short walk, we reached an open area. The White-Faced Ogre said that this was a delivery entrance. Gembolic carriages carrying goods apparently made this place a crowded mess in the early mornings. I noticed that there were several more doors on the opposite side. The Demon Dog said that those led to the warehouse. There were no more deliveries today, so the cyclopes could stay here for the time being.

“Demon Dog...”

“Pardon?”

“You should’ve taken us here from the beginning.”

“...Ohh!” The Demon Dog clapped his hands together in realization. So he really didn’t think of that himself.

Hearing our exchange, the White-Faced Ogre stopped walking and turned to face us. She remarked, slightly taken aback, “I heard that Sir Demon Dog had

been taken prisoner... But you all seem to be getting along quite well.”

“He was pretty cooperative during our journey to Ares.”

“I see... In that case, may I ask you to release him? We are prepared to offer as much ransom as you want.”

“A ransom...”

It felt a little late for that. I mean, we had intended to release him last night since we’d arrived in Ares, but he was the one who asked to stay in the Unlimited Bath. I looked over at him, and he looked back with the eyes of an abandoned puppy. Don’t try to make me feel guilty like that. Did you like the Unlimited Bath that much? Or the rice and miso, rather? Well, I guess I could lend a hand.

“Please speak with him yourself,” I declared, turning back to look the White-Faced Ogre in the eyes. Unsurprisingly, she seemed a bit bewildered, looking between the Demon Dog and me with a mystified expression.

“...Sir Demon Dog?” A quiet yet intimidating voice. It immediately made the Demon Dog stand up straight, but his ears drew back and his tail tucked in. He wouldn’t look the White-Faced Ogre in the eyes. I couldn’t tell from here, but I bet his eyes were darting back and forth right now.

The White-Faced Ogre sighed, probably inferring a lot of information just from the Demon Dog’s reaction. “You do not wish to come back?”

“N-Nay, that is not...”

“With whom does your loyalty lie?”

We’d heard that the head of the White Orchid Corporation was the White-Faced Ogre, but judging from this conversation, the Demon Dog was her superior. I learned later that while the White-Faced Ogre was indeed the head of this company, that was just for cover and the Demon Dog held a higher rank in the demon army itself.

The other generals were working on reviving the demon lord, so the lowest ranked general, the White-Faced Ogre, was put in charge just as a pretense. The Demon Dog had both the personality and skills fit for business, but his position

didn't allow for it. After the Dark Prince proclaimed that he would become the new demon lord, the Demon Dog had no choice but to become the head of this opposing faction.

All that aside, though, he seemed scared of incurring the wrath of the White-Faced Ogre. He had apparently become weak to a woman's anger ever since turning into a lycan. The White-Faced Ogre's aura gradually grew more intense, her gaze sharpening. Maybe he wasn't scared of women in general, but just this one and her angry side. But then the Demon Dog, who had been cowering like a frog being targeted by a hungry snake, suddenly perked up his ears and tail and spoke up haughtily.

"Bow down, bow down! Bow down, I say! Dost thou know not in whose presence we stand?! The daughter of the Dark Prince, granddaughter of the demon lord! It is Her Majesty, Clena! Your head is yet too high, bow down!!"

"...Huh?" The White-Faced Ogre was taken aback. The letter had mentioned Clena, but she must not have expected him to suddenly bring her up like this. She glanced at us with an incredibly confused expression, but we couldn't offer any help either. We were just as confused.

"...Ohh, I think the Demon Dog is saying that he backs Clena," Haruno said, the first one to make sense out of the situation.

I see, that explained what the Demon Dog was trying to get at. If Clena was their master's granddaughter, then she was the highest in the chain of command right now. So being on her side meant that he still had his loyalty. Even if he had mostly been lured by rice and miso.

"Okay, that's enough."

"Eek~"

Now that I was caught up, I pressed down on the Demon Dog's head and stepped between the two of them.

"We came here to find out if Clena is really the Dark Prince's daughter and the demon lord's granddaughter. Can we start from there?"

Our relationship might change once we figure that out, so I wanted to get that over with first. And that change would come from both sides. Their side didn't

need explaining, but whether we released the Demon Dog or not would also depend on the results. Specifically, if Clena really was the demon lord's granddaughter, then we'd release him without ransom. If she wasn't, then we'd prioritize our safety. I couldn't tell if the White-Faced Ogre knew what I was thinking, but she agreed with my suggestion.

"However, I cannot bring all of you. Besides Lady Clena, I can only allow the demon and imp to come."

Yukina the demon and Daisy the imp, huh.

"So basically, only people from a demon race?"

"Indeed."

"If Touya's not going, then I'm not either. Not interested."

"If you do not wish to come, I will not insist."

I was glad that Daisy said that, but the White-Faced Ogre was justified. The demon lord was likely defenseless while he was sealed, and she didn't want to bring just anyone near him. I would argue that allowing anyone in as long as they were a demon wasn't exactly the safest way of doing things either, but that was their reasoning.

I couldn't let Clena and Yukina go on their own, though. If a situation arose where the Demon Dog had to choose between the demon lord and Clena, I'm sure he would pick the demon lord. Clena might think I was being overprotective since she could fight for herself, but I needed to remember that these were demon generals we were facing. Now then, what to do?

"We also have the Goddess of Darkness with us, can she go too?"

"Wha..."

I gestured for Rakti to walk up to my side, and the White-Faced Ogre's expression changed.

She must have heard that the Goddess of Water had gotten angry over them abandoning Rakti 500 years ago, so I could understand if she didn't want Rakti to meet the demon lord right now. The Demon Dog had also acted quite fearful when he apologized to Rakti. She was our trump card against the demon lord's

army—though Rakti herself wasn't especially angry at anyone.

And if she looked at me with teary eyes, I'd have no choice but to give up everything for her, so she was also a trump card against me, but I kept that part a secret.

Anyway, I had one more ace up my sleeve.

"Also, I received the blessing of darkness from the Masked Cleric..."

"That goldfish...!"

Oh, so the White-Faced Ogre also thought he looked like a goldfish. Haruno said that goldfish were rare back in the day, but considering their social positions, it wouldn't have been surprising for them to know what goldfish were.

Anyway, this should work. If the requirement for going with them was to be part of the demon race, then I was half-qualified. As one last push, I offered another suggestion.

"Oh, but I can ask Rakti to help out with some other errands."

"...You may come with us, Sir Touya." She agreed quickly.

I reassessed our situation. Our attitude with the Demon Dog might make it seem otherwise, but we didn't trust them enough to leave Clena alone with them yet. Clena looked relieved now that I was given permission to come with them. It was a little forceful on my end, but I think they could tell what I was thinking and still agreed. If I tried to push any more right now, they'd probably pull back too much, so this was a good middle ground.

"To change the subject, is there a Ficus Brand around here?"

"Y-Yes, there is. It is one street over, so it would be faster to leave through the back door."

"Sorry to be a bother, but can one of your staff lead us there? We have several people who escaped the temple of wind with only the clothes on their backs."

"That is terrible. In that case, our company can arrange a donation to the Goddess of Darkness."

The White-Faced Ogre regained her composure with the change of subject and quickly switched to a gentle smile when she brought up the topic of donations. She was eagerly on board with the idea of sending Rakti out shopping.

Rakti was looking at me anxiously, but I gave her a nod and she accepted the offer.

“Okay then. Haruno, can you take Rakti and the others to Ficus Brand?”

“...I will. Please take care.” Haruno looked worried but still assented. She also knew that we shouldn’t push too hard in this situation. And it was a fact that her party needed to stock up on clothing. This was a good opportunity to do so.

Now then, while the White-Faced Ogre and her staff were preparing their donation, I went inside the Unlimited Bath to retrieve some of our own money. We might not need it with the donation, but just in case.

“What should I do, Touya?” Yukina asked. I needed to make sure of something before answering her.

“...White-Faced Ogre, I have a question.”

“What might that be?”

“My sister was summoned as a Hero of Darkness by Phoenix. How would your demon army treat her in that case?”

“Curse that Phoenix... Always doing something unnecessary...!” Her face warped into something vicious. Those Hannya masks must have been inspired by faces like this... But I didn’t point that out. After noticing our stares, she cleared her throat and returned to normal, responding, “There should be no trouble. What is Phoenix doing right now?”

“We fought him when we rescued my sister, but then he ran away, so I’m not sure. One of the Heroes of the Sacred King, someone who calls himself Cosmos, has been chasing after him though.”

“...Has he made an enemy of the heroes?”

“No, Cosmos is just trying to woo one of Phoenix’s underlings, a demon named Balsamina.”

“...Would you please not use this time to jest?”

“I really wish I were joking.”

The White-Faced Ogre changed once again from looking calm to looking confused. She glanced at the Demon Dog inquisitively, but he didn't know who Cosmos was.

“That hero named Cosmos actually arrived in Ares last night. If you want to learn more about Phoenix, why don't you try meeting him?”

“Hm? Yes, I will consider that...”

She seemed incredibly unwilling to do that, so I didn't prod her any further.

“Anyway, I think we'll be fine. Yukina, do you want to come with us?”

“Of course!”

By the time the staff came back with their donation, we had also finished preparing, and Prae and the other cyclopes had just arrived.

The donation was given to us in a chest reinforced with metal and filled to the brim with gold coins. It was like a historical treasure chest, dense and heavy. Wood was apparently a valuable material in Ares, so the chest itself was made of ceramic. This was a large sum of money, including the chest itself. They really splurged for us. It must have been partially an apology for abandoning Hades and running away back in the day.

Since this was a good opportunity, I asked the group to stock up on not only clothing but also daily necessities. We didn't have tableware that the cyclopes could use right now. I doubted they sold tableware for imps here, but they might find things that could be used as a substitute.

With that, I asked Daisy to join the shopping group. Clena, Yukina, and I would go underground to see the sealed demon lord. Only the White-Faced Ogre and Demon Dog came with us. They didn't bring any guards, though I doubt they needed it. Maybe they thought the two of them would be enough if we ended up fighting. Or perhaps only a select few were allowed to see the demon lord. I didn't know which, but either way, we shouldn't let our guard down.

After I saw Haruno's group off, I turned to face the White-Faced Ogre. “Where

are we headed?" I asked.

"Directly underground."

Right under the shop, huh. This was already an underground city, and we were going even further underground.

Clena gripped my hand. She was shivering nervously. I couldn't blame her. She was about to possibly meet her grandfather for the first time, and he was the demon lord on top of that.

I was summoned here in the first place to do something about the demon lord's revival. A lot had happened since then, and I didn't exactly know what I should be doing now. But finding out more about the demon lord would help lead me to that answer.

"Now then, please follow me." The White-Faced Ogre set off. The three of us looked at each other, nodded, then followed behind her.

She led us to a room behind the shop. The door outside was plain, but the room inside, while small, had barely a speck of dust and felt rather solemn. On the other side of the room was a pair of extravagantly decorated double doors that didn't match the rest of the room. They opened to a spiral staircase that led underground.

The White-Faced Ogre continued walking at the front of the line with the Demon Dog at the back. The three of us were between them. The spiral staircase was wide and gently sloped. As we walked down, I asked the White-Faced Ogre a few questions that had been on my mind.

"Just to make sure... Does the Dark Prince's faction also have their base here?"

"...No, they have been avoiding this area ever since they declared that they would appoint a new demon lord."

"The Dark Giant, too?"

"Yes, he said he would join forces with the young lord... That damned brother."

So she called the son of the demon lord the "young lord." I pretended I didn't

hear that last mumble.

So the Dark Giant and White-Faced Ogre were siblings? It didn't sound like they had a good relationship at the moment. I could only see the back of her head right now, but I didn't think I wanted to know what expression she was making.

There was one more thing I was curious about.

"So why did a fight break out at the water capital?"

Why did the two factions, who weren't working together at all, appear at the water capital at the same time?

"They may have obtained knowledge regarding Sir Demon Dog's visit to the water capital."

"So someone might be leaking information from within the White Orchid Corporation?"

"...I do not deny the possibility."

So they weren't in absolute harmony, either. I didn't know whether there was a traitor in the White Orchid Corporation, or whether the other faction had snuck in a spy. But the fact that the Dark Prince was able to send out the Dark Giant in time after getting the information meant that they might be unexpectedly close. They might also be seeing the information in real-time by using a spell like the Inept Scout that had been cast on Yukina. In either case, we should remain vigilant.

That was the end of our conversation. We continued down the stairs in silence until we reached the bottom. That was a lot further down than I expected, but that showed just how carefully they were protecting him.

The room had smooth walls and a domed ceiling. There were five statues of knights placed at regular intervals along the wall, each casting a pale glow that lightly illuminated the room. The air in the room wasn't stale; maybe it was regularly cleaned. But it felt less like a tidy room and more like a hospital.

I noticed that the five knight statues were positioned to form a pentagram. There was an altar at the center of the pentagram and someone lying inside

wrapped in a dark blue cloth. A mummy? The wrapped figure was clearly not human. His face looked like a lizardman's, but the two horns sticking out of his head made him look much more formidable. His arms were crossed over his chest, but there weren't just two arms. He had three on each side, a total of six arms. Everything below his waist was one solid mass, and I couldn't tell what it was supposed to be from outside the cloth. He was named Amann Naga, so perhaps his lower half was coiling around itself like a serpent.

"...Just to make sure. When we visited the ruins of Hadesopolis, we saw a statue that looked like it was supposed to be the demon lord."

"So that is still there... That is his normal form, when he took the appearance of a human," the White-Faced Ogre replied. She took a folding fan from within her sleeve and covered her mouth with it.

Did the demon lord reveal his form after he took damage?

"At first, the lord could not transform into anything other than a balding old man. We had our troubles back in those days..." the Demon Dog reminisced.

"...Ahem. Anyway, what you see here is our demon lord in his true form."

We never had any particular difficulties with our hair, but I guess the demon lord did. It felt like we just got to hear something confidential, but I'm not sure if that was cause for celebration... Anyway, the White-Faced Ogre explained that the demon lord had fought the first sacred king in this form, but sustained deep injuries and went to sleep. He had stayed asleep to this day.

"So is he going to wake up when he fully heals?" Yukina, clinging onto me from behind, peeked over my shoulder and asked.

That made me curious too. We were summoned because the demon lord's revival had been prophesied to the sacred family. He could wake up any day now. However, the White-Faced Ogre shook her head, looking down. "He should have recovered long ago, yet he continues to sleep..."

"Is that cloth for helping him recover?"

"Ah, please do not touch it," she said, closing her folding fan and walking up to the altar. As soon as her fan got near the cloth, I saw crackling sparks and a bright light.

She withdrew the fan, which was now scorched black at the tip. Yeah, that was hardly for recovery. It was the opposite. We wouldn't be able to get out unscathed if we touched that.

"You did well, bringing him here like that..."

"We used spirit magic to carry him without coming into contact with him."

It was probably the same spirit magic that Clena used. I wanted to know more about what that cloth was, but the White-Faced Ogre wouldn't say any more. She put the fan to her mouth again and closed her eyes. She didn't want to reveal any more information to us, since we were still neither enemies nor allies. Anyway, the important thing was Clena. I looked over at her; she was staring at the demon lord's mummy with a blank expression.

"Clena?" I called out to her, but she didn't respond. "Whoa?! Wait, Clena!"

Ignoring me, she approached the altar with unsteady steps. I hurried over and put my arms around her. That was close—we were only a few steps away from the altar now.

"Huh?! Wh-What was I...?" She had been unconscious but suddenly came back to her senses, confused.

I was afraid that she might try the same thing again, so I didn't release her from my embrace. While I hugged Clena, Yukina was also hugging me from behind. I slowly shuffled our way back, distancing ourselves from the altar. Clena was still dazed and unable to walk by herself.

"Did you feel something?" The White-Faced Ogre drew near us. The burnt scent from her folding fan prickled my nose, but Clena didn't seem bothered by it. With her eyes still affixed to the demon lord wrapped in cloth, she slowly strung a sentence together.

"I... know this person... even though we've... never met..."

The White-Faced Ogre nodded in satisfaction. The Demon Dog also nodded, saying, "Though she knows not his face, she can feel their connection. Just like..."

"Sir Dark Giant and Lady White-Faced Ogre."

“The demon lord and the young lord.”

They didn't sync up. The White-Faced Ogre glared at the Demon Dog. I see, so the White-Faced Ogre could also tell they were siblings after they had been transported to this world. Judging by their reactions, it seemed clear that Clena really was the demon lord's granddaughter. We finally had our answer. We knew now that he wasn't purely an evil guy, but it was still pretty shocking.

Clena was trembling softly in my arms. She felt the most shocked, of course. I hugged her even more tightly. She noticed my intentions and leaned her weight against me. Yeah, Clena was Clena, serpent grandfather or not. I had to protect her. And now it was time for me to drive the conversation.

“Lady White-Faced Ogre, going back to our discussion about Sir Demon Dog.”

“Oh? Oh, yes. What is it?” She seemed a bit warmer now. Maybe it was just my imagination, but maybe it was also because I called them with titles.

“I'll let him go without any ransom.”

“Is that all right?”

“If he is a subordinate of Clena's grandfather, then I see no point in keeping him prisoner.”

The Demon Dog snapped his face in my direction, but I pretended not to notice. It would be a bigger problem to keep him prisoner after this. And I had no intention of handing Clena over to them just because she was the demon lord's granddaughter. She wasn't thinking of doing that herself, either. I needed to talk about this with them as well, but that could wait until we returned to the floor above.

Maybe we could ask them to help us buy some ingredients to use in the Unlimited Bath. I'm sure the Demon Dog would be more than eager to do so. Oh, but we couldn't go back upstairs like this. I was just about to loosen my grip on Clena, but then there was a sudden tremor that shook the room violently.

Since my mind had been somewhere else, I lost my balance, and the three of us fell toward the altar. Oh no, all of us would touch the cloth at this rate...! I acted quickly. To at least prevent the two of them from touching the cloth, I hugged Clena with my left arm and stuck my right arm in front of us.

“...Huh?”

But I didn't feel any pain. The sparks didn't appear, either. I couldn't stop myself from falling at this rate, though. I tried to balance myself with my right arm but failed, and the three of us tumbled onto the floor.

“Are you okay, Touya?!”

“Yeah... What about you, Clena...?”

“I'm fine.”

“T-Touya...”

I had fallen on top of Clena, so I tried to get up, but then heard Yukina's trembling voice from on top of me. I raised my head to see that the cloth wrapping had vanished, and what lay there was no longer a mummy but the demon lord himself.

“H-Hey, what happened to the cloth?”

“It... vanished as soon as you touched it, Touya...”

“...What?”

I looked at my right hand. I had touched the mummy wrapping when I fell. I looked at the demon lord lying on the altar again, then a thought suddenly flashed through my mind.

“Oh! Does this work the same way as Rakti's seal?!”

Rakti's seal was a combination of her own powers and the powers of the grave marker. Only I, who possessed both the blessings of light and darkness, could break the seal. The cloth wrapping must have been a mixture of the powers of the first sacred king and the demon lord. That was why nothing had happened when I touched it.

“...Wait a second!”

If that cloth was the seal, then it vanishing was not a good thing. I frantically got to my feet again, but the demon lord had already woken up. His golden eyes, slitted vertically like that of a snake's, were staring straight at us. I tried to escape the stare by looking around and saw the Demon Dog and White-Faced

Ogre kneeling on the ground.

I see, I see. So the demon lord was revived. Or rather, I revived him. I was a hero summoned to defeat the demon lord, or at least prevent his revival. How ironic that I was actually the one to cause it.

“So you are the one who broke my seal...”

His voice was peculiar and cold. It made me feel like I was being pierced by icicles. Yukina cowered behind me, her grip on my arm growing tighter.

“I wish to ask why you broke my seal. But before that, it seems I have something else to take care of.”

The demon lord got out of his bed, not giving us another look, and headed toward the door to the room. I kept my eyes on the demon lord. I positioned myself so that I could open the door to the Unlimited Bath at any moment for us to escape inside.

The sudden sound of tumbling rock echoed in my ears, and something crashed down in front of the door along with a bunch of rubble. Was that rubble the spiral staircase? They just destroyed all of it. Whoever just came down with the rubble must have done it. They must have caused the rumbling earlier, too.

The room was now filled with so much dust that we couldn't see anything. This was bad. I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath and yelled Clena's name.

“O, wind spirits!” Clena quickly drew her sword and summoned a gust of wind. Since we had a wind altar inside the Unlimited Bath, she could use the wind spirits whenever she needed. The wind coming out from my door blew the dust away.

“So it was you, damned brother...!” said the White-Faced Ogre, sounding disgusted.

Standing before us were the Dark Giant, gripping a lance with “Human Husk” inscribed on it, and one other person. It was a knight dressed in a full suit of jet-black armor closely resembling my Magic Eater.

“Hmph... So you have come, too,” the demon lord said to the knight, which

was a huge hint. The knight didn't respond, instead standing still while looking straight at us. I could guess what he was thinking. The knight was looking at Clena, or more specifically, the sword she was holding. He must have realized that that sword was once his own.

Yes, the knight in the black armor was the Dark Prince—Clena's father and the demon lord's son. The sensation that Clena had felt with the demon lord was most likely occurring within the Dark Knight, too.

"Yukina."

"Leave it to me."

Clena might experience something similar again, so I asked Yukina to hold her back. I couldn't leave myself to do that in this situation.

I had figured that a potential spy in the White Orchid Corporation might be close enough to relay information immediately, but they moved even more quickly than I was expecting. I wondered if the Dark Prince rushed here after hearing that the potential granddaughter of the demon lord had arrived. But what must have come as an even bigger surprise to him was the demon lord's revival, and now three generations of family were standing here.

Even the Dark Giant, who had made a mess of the water capital, couldn't initiate an attack right now. He kept glancing at the Dark Prince. This situation was in the demon lord's and Dark Prince's hands. We were surrounded by rock, so earth cleric spells would be most effective here. I kept a hand on the ground, waiting for their next move.

A father, the demon lord Amann Naga, and son, the Dark Prince, were facing off in this dimly lit underground room. The demon lord wordlessly folded a pair of his arms and glared at the Dark Prince. I could feel his intimidating aura from here. So this was the demon lord's power...

On that note, he was only crossing his middle arms; the other four were still free. His upper and lower pairs were ready to strike at any moment. Meanwhile, the Dark Prince was still distracted by us. It was hard to tell through his helmet, but I could feel his gaze on us.

He was full of openings, but the Dark Giant next to him wouldn't let any of

those openings go unguarded. In fact, he looked ready to attack the demon lord at a moment's notice. However, the White-Faced Ogre and the Demon Dog standing at his left and right wouldn't let such an attack happen.

This father-and-son tension felt like a ticking time bomb. The granddaughter was standing off to the side, and we siblings were the ones protecting her. The father was protected by a younger sister, and the son by her older brother.

"...Hey, Demon Dog, you're the only outlier here."

"Such hurtful words! My time with the demon lord has been the longest out of any of us!" the Demon Dog protested, his eyes remaining focused on the Dark Prince in the meantime. All I said was that he was an outlier, so he must have been thinking the rest too. "In that case, thou art all outliers too, Sir Touya!"

"Are you saying Clena and I have nothing to do with you?"

He let out a dog-like whimper at that. If we were truly unrelated, then we would have treated the Demon Dog much more like a prisoner during our trip here.

Clena was hunched down on the ground now. I couldn't spare a glance, but I would guess that her face was bright red. Yukina was pinching my side, though it didn't hurt.

"Hmm..." The demon lord's slitted golden eyes flicked toward us inquisitively. But I didn't falter. If I could have, I would have fled long ago. If it came down to it, I could summon earth spirits to buy us some time and escape into the Unlimited Bath.

"What...?" The Dark Prince took the bait, turning to face us with his killing intent laid bare. "What did you do to my daughter?!" He stomped toward us, each step heavy enough to crack the floor beneath him. I prepared myself to perform earth spirit summoning, but then— "Apologize to Mom first before you start acting like my father!!"

—Clena stood up, livid, and used all the force she could muster to lob her sword at him.



Still sheathed, the sword smacked his helmet, and a shrill metallic sound rang through the room. The Dark Prince stumbled backwards. I guess it was a bullseye, or rather her words had caught him off guard. Not only the Demon Dog and the White-Faced Ogre, but even the Dark Giant was taken aback.

“Heheheh... Wahahahaha! How foolish!”

The demon lord let out a thunderous roar. He slapped his lower pair of hands against his hips, then arched his back and bellowed with laughter, but his upper pair of arms were still at the ready. *That’s a little unfair.*

“Tch... Retreat!” Maybe because this wasn’t the right mood for a fight anymore, or because he couldn’t stand being in his daughter’s presence, the Dark Prince picked up Clena’s sword and turned back.

“Y-Yes...” A second later, the Dark Giant followed suit.

“I won’t let you go, you fool of a brother!”

“That’s what you think!”

The White-Faced Ogre launched an attack as soon as he faced away from her, but he deflected the attack as if he was waving away a fly, not even raising his lance.

The demon lord didn’t seem like he was planning to do anything more, and the Demon Dog was still standing guard beside him. I wasn’t about to carelessly run after them, either. The Dark Prince and Dark Giant leapt out of the room.

My party and the demon lord’s group were the only ones remaining.

Crap, this turned from a three-way fight into a standoff between the grandfather and granddaughter. Clena was still trembling, and she couldn’t use magic now that her sword had been taken away. I wanted to avoid a fight. I should observe their movement for the time being.

All six of the demon lord’s arms had adopted a fighting stance. He said in a low growl that reached my core, “It seems that you are deep in thought... But there are times when you must act decisively.”

“...?!”

His tone seemed almost playful, but his voice sent a chill down my spine. I immediately used an earth spirit spell to summon a circular wall around us.

The jet-black wall, hardened through my MP, blocked us from sight, and I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath.

“Heheheh... Buying some time?”

I could hear the demon lord’s aloof voice from the other side, then the sound of a punch against the wall. I didn’t think he could break it immediately, but it wouldn’t hold out for long.

Without saying a word, I pointed to the other two to get inside. We all entered the Unlimited Bath and I closed the door behind us.

“Phew...” I felt the tension drain from me as I sat with my back to the door. We were at least safe for now.

I was able to make my move thanks to his warning. Was that his way of showing me his lack of concern against us? I couldn’t tell, but either way, we couldn’t just relax. We may be safe in here, but Haruno and the others were still out in the city.

I looked beside me. Yukina still had some energy left in her, but Clena had sunk down to the ground.

“Clena, can you move?”

“...I can. I’m just a bit drained right now,” she said and smiled at me, but I could tell it was forced. She was acting.

But still, we had to move.

“Hold out for just a bit longer, Clena.”

“I know... What are we going to do?”

We were going to prepare for battle. I needed to get my Gravesword from its storage spot at the front entrance, as well as the Magic Eater.

“...Maybe you shouldn’t have thrown your sword.”

“I-I couldn’t help it! I couldn’t even stand holding it back there...”

What a shame, Dark Prince. But I couldn’t blame her too much.

“Can you still use magic without that sword?”

“There was a magic dagger among the weapons we found in Hades that I can use...”

“All right, let’s bring that and the Magic Eater to the annex.”

“Huh? Are you going to take a bath, Touya?”

The annex was the building with the bath house.

“No no, I’m going to equip myself while taking a look outside.”

“Ohh, I see...”

Of course we needed to equip ourselves, but we also needed more information before making our next move.

First, we found the magic dagger, then we carried the Magic Eater armor to the indoor open-air bath. I immediately turned the screen on and projected the view from outside the bath. Since it was immediately outside, it didn’t use too much of my MP.

The projection showed the demon lord gripping the Demon Dog by his collar with one hand.

“Touya, boots first. Lift up your foot.”

“S-Sure...”

The girls helped me get dressed while I continued to observe our opponents.

The demon lord was pointing in one direction while saying something to the Demon Dog. I couldn’t hear them, but it looked like he was yelling.

He was pointing at the black wall, which was now in shambles. It really didn’t hold out for long. But he must have been caught off guard when he broke down the wall only to find that we had disappeared.

The Demon Dog was waving his arms around, explaining the situation. He was probably telling him about the Unlimited Bath.

The most important piece of information was that, after I closed the door, it could only reopen in the same spot. I hadn’t told this to the Demon Dog before, but maybe he had already figured that out by himself. He was probably also

blabbing about the indoor open-air bath. The Demon Dog hadn't been here himself before, but he'd heard us talking about it.

I finished putting on the Magic Eater and continued observing the demon lord. He gave out some sort of order, and the White-Faced Ogre jumped out of the room alone. After seeing her off, the demon lord turned back to the dirt wall.

"Hey, did he smile just now?"

"Huh? Can snakes smile? Can you tell because you're related?"

Clena had sensed something, but that made Yukina confused.

"...I thought he did, too." But Clena wasn't the only one. I wasn't an expert at serpent facial expressions, but after spending time with Rulitora's tribe, I also got the feeling that he grinned just now.

"...How can you tell?"

"Probably because I stayed with the Torano'o tribe for a while."

"Rulitora's usually pretty stoic, so he doesn't make too many expressions. You probably can't learn from watching him alone."

"That's not fair!"

I didn't think that was important right now... But I could take Yukina to visit the tribe again one day when we had the chance.

Anyway, what was that smile just now? The demon lord learned what the Unlimited Bath was from the Demon Dog, and then he gave an order to the White-Faced Ogre. Where did he send her to? The only possibility I could think of was to Haruno's group.

And then the demon lord smiled. Following that train of thought, I arrived at one conclusion.

"Let's go!"

I turned off the screen and ran to the entrance. The demon lord likely knew that we were watching him right now. That smile was a message directed at us. And if he sent the White-Faced Ogre to Haruno's group, then I could see what

he was scheming.

Basically, *“if you don’t come out, we’re attacking Haruno. I won’t allow you to stay cooped up in there.”*

That smile was a provocation. I didn’t think my guess was too far off the mark.

We arrived at the door while my thoughts raced. I grabbed the Gravesword and asked Yukina to open the door so that I could rush out as fast as I could. As expected, the demon lord was waiting for me with his middle arms folded and his other four in a battle-ready stance. Had he taken a liking to that pose?

“So you’ve finally come out... I assume you’ve deciphered my plans, from that distressed look on your face.”

So he really was provoking us. We had moved almost exactly according to his will. Paying no heed to our distress, the demon lord continued talking.

“That is the black grave marker... To turn it into a sword, have you no fear of divine retribution?”

The demon lord had his eyes on the Gravesword. Despite what he had just said, he seemed to be a little amused. Facing him right now, I felt as if he would tear me to shreds if I moved so much as a finger. But I had the Gravesword on my side. If I could find an opening to strike, this wouldn’t be a hopeless battle. It was too early to give up yet.

I hid the girls behind me and looked for a chance to charge, but then the demon lord suddenly turned his back to me.

“Now then, follow me. Let me hear your story.”

“...Huh?” Couldn’t I stab him in the back right now...? No, I had no chance. The Demon Dog was still looking our way, and the demon lord hadn’t let his guard down yet.

“Worry not. I merely sent the White-Faced Ogre to take care of things above.”

I see, the Demon Prince’s arrival meant that they had invaded through the shop above. They couldn’t leave the place unmanned without a general for long.

“Though had you continued thinking and not made a move then, I would have

torn you limb from limb.”

That must have been what he meant by “act decisively” earlier. He had been testing us. His threatening aura dissipated, and I couldn’t feel the chill either. I guess we passed for now. I still couldn’t let my guard down, but the best decision was to follow him for the time being.

The staircase had been destroyed, but the Demon Dog agilely climbed back up by kicking against the walls. The other demon generals must have gone back up in a similar manner. Yukina could fly back up, but not Clena and I. As long as we didn’t know what the situation was like above, I couldn’t send her back out alone. The demon lord also couldn’t exactly jump up with his lower body. He looked up with a “Hmm...” and gripped the rocks with his claws, attempting to climb up.

“Wait a moment. I can assist with my magic.”

“Hmm?”

I summoned earth spirits from below my feet and formed a platform from the ground. I checked that everyone, including the demon lord, was on the platform, then fired up another spell. The platform started to float upward.

“Ho!” the demon lord exclaimed in wonder. This must have been a new sight for someone from 500 years ago.

This may have looked like an elevator at first, but it functioned more like an escalator as we gradually went up the stairs. I continuously modified the shape of the walls as we moved up and fitted the platform across.

When we finally arrived at the top, I didn’t see any sign of the Demon Dog. The demon lord was looking around inquisitively. Oh yeah, he was carried here after being sealed, so he didn’t know where we were right now.

I walked forward, and the demon lord silently followed. We arrived at the delivery area, where the doors to the warehouse were, and felt an odd tension in the air. Haruno and the rest had already come back. They had probably heard about the Dark Prince’s surprise attack. The White-Faced Ogre and Demon Dog were here too, but they were facing Haruno’s group, looking as if they might start a fight at any moment.

“Touya, that person over there...”

“Who?”

I looked where Yukina was pointing to see an extra person in Haruno’s group who had not been with them when they’d left.

“Kopan?!”

“What?! Where?!” Clena raised her voice and looked around, but he was on the short side and hard to spot.

But it really was him there—Kopan, the traveling merchant who had done us many favors. Had he run into their group while they were out shopping? It would have been Haruno’s first time meeting him, but Roni and some others would have recognized him. We had last seen him in Neptune and had no idea he was coming to Ares. Had he arrived here while we were in the water capital?

“...Do you know him?” the demon lord asked from behind us.

“Um, I guess...” I turned back and answered him, but saw the demon lord looking at Kopan with a somewhat stunned expression.

“It seems as if you do not.”

“...Huh?” I was getting confused. Kopan approached us with that familiar smile on his face.

“My oh my, it has been a long time, Sir Touya. And you as well... demon lord.”

Huh? What? The demon lord and Kopan knew each other?

“Rushing here to witness my revival? That is a virtuous act, quite unlike you.”

“Oh no, it was simply a coincidence. I am absolutely astonished by your revival, my lord. That is the truth indeed. But I am very curious as to how your seal was broken and would very much like to hear the story...”

He had the same way of talking as ever. But maybe you should claim you were being virtuous even if it was a lie, Kopan. Though I guess the demon lord would see right through it. Anyway, how did these two know each other? Hades used to trade with every other nation, but that was 500 years ago. Was Kopan a demon who had been alive since then or something? He had white hair right

now, but maybe it was silver once upon a time.

He seemed very close with the demon lord, though. Maybe he was a merchant who interacted with the demon lord often? But even then, he was being too casual. So he must have had a high position within Hades. And that would be a demon general. But there were hardly any living demon generals left. The one possibility would be...

“...Wait a second, no way.”

“It seems you have finally noticed.”

“You really are a clever lad.”

“Now then, let me introduce myself once again.”

The demon lord and Kopan looked at me. The two of them seemed like they were sneering, and I’m sure it wasn’t just my imagination. Paying no heed to my confusion, Kopan stood before me and bowed deeply, almost mockingly.

“My name is Kopan... But I once went by a different name. I’m sure you have heard of it, Sir Touya. One of the Five Great Demon Generals... Indeed, I am the Flame Devil.”

The second he said that, I brandished the Gravesword without saying a word.

“Calm down,” the demon lord chided me.

Meanwhile, the Flame Devil was completely unfazed by my threat and continued to approach us, his smile unchanged.

“I watched your ceremony at Hephaestus, though from the shadows.”

“What?”

“...Did you enjoy yourselves?”

The second he said that, I again brandished the Gravesword without saying a word.

“I repeat, calm down,” the demon lord chided again. Though, I could see a hint of exasperation in the demon lord’s face as well. I guess he was trying to tell me that the Flame Devil’s personality had always been like this.

Well, he did help us a lot back in Neptune. And we were the ones who went

barging into his hideout unannounced back in Hephaestus. We didn't need to be hostile right now, I reasoned, calming myself down.

"Don't tease him too much."

"I shall act with prudence."

The two sounded amicable, yet they seemed rather vigilant of each other. In the meantime, the White-Faced Ogre and Demon Dog were trying to gather up all of their employees.

I found a good time to run over to Haruno's party. The cyclopes were looking at us worriedly. Rulitora and other party members with weapons were forming a protective circle around them. They were on alert, wary of the possibility that we had made enemies of the White Orchid Corporation. Haruno also had her sword unsheathed.

I took off my helmet so that they could see my face and put them at ease. Daisy flew to my shoulder and then clung to my hair. Her hands were shaking; she must have been incredibly scared. I stroked her back, with her scrunched up wings, while walking closer to everyone else, and then Rakti jumped onto me. Roni rushed up to Clena who was standing next to me and asked her a barrage of questions like "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"...What's going on?" Rium asked, silver spears in her hands. She was in combat mode.

I explained to everyone that the demon lord had been revived, but we had avoided a fight for the time being, and that the source of this commotion was not the demon lord but the Dark Prince. That wasn't quite enough to calm everyone down, but it was better than believing we might fight the White Orchid Corporation. The way things looked right now, we'd have an easier time talking things through with the demon lord than with the Dark Prince.

"Um... It sounds like you went through a lot," Haruno sighed and resheathed her sword.

I noticed that Sera looked very fatigued.

"Are you all okay?" I asked.

“Y-Yes... We had just finished shopping when I felt a shock run through me, but I was the only one who felt it... And then Rakti said that the demon lord had awoken, so we ran back here,” Haruno answered in Sera’s place. She further explained that Sera had fainted after hearing Rakti’s words, and that was why she was so pale right now. But Sera was the type to fully recharge if you gave her time to calm down, so I decided to leave her be for now.

Anyway, I was concerned about how only Haruno felt that shock. She told me that it felt like a shiver coursed through her from the base of her feet to the top of her head. The demon lord had been sleeping deep underground, so the direction matched. Did she feel it because she was one of the heroes? That would explain it. We were summoned as heroes of light, while they were summoned as heroes of darkness. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say we could detect things like this.

The exact second the demon lord revived must have been when that cloth vanished. Since Clena, Yukina, and I fell on the floor, we hadn’t been able to see it with our own eyes. But if what Haruno said was true, we had one problem.

“Do you think Cosmos felt that shock too...?”

“...That’s a possibility.”

Not good. Cosmos would without a doubt race here to check things out himself. He wasn’t a bad guy, but I couldn’t predict what he might do to the demon lord. I had to somehow explain the situation to him, but we couldn’t have him barging in before I could do even that. With that in mind, I suggested continuing our conversation with the demon lord in the Unlimited Bath. If we stayed out here, the cyclopes would have to wait around somewhere else, so this would be a good chance to let them rest inside the Unlimited Bath as well.

“The dimension that the Demon Dog mentioned... Very well.”

The demon lord quickly agreed, ordering the Demon Dog and White-Faced Ogre to make some preparations.

“Would you mind if I intrude as well?”

“It would be better than leaving you outside.”

The Flame Devil tried intimidating us with a grin, but I didn’t fall for it. I’d

rather keep him within our sights than let him roam around freely, anyway. He said that his bodyguards were still waiting outside, so we sent an employee over to bring them back here.

The doors to this delivery entrance were broken, but the walls survived without a scratch, so I decided to summon the door here. The cyclopes would have no problem getting in from here either. The central room on the second floor of the main building would be a good place for our meeting with the demon lord. I asked Haruno and her group to go in first and tidy up a bit. Daisy said she wanted to rest and flew up to her bed on the third floor.

I asked Rulitora to stand guard outside the door. As soon as I entered, I took off the Magic Eater. Prae helped me. She was doing a great job, but because of our height difference, I felt like I had gone back to being a little kid who couldn't undress himself. I changed into my "young master of a merchant family" outfit and equipped a tuna knife to my hip. I asked Prae how their shopping had gone, and she described their trip using big, expressive gestures. I enjoyed watching her as we waited, and before long, the Demon Dog, White-Faced Ogre, Flame Devil, and demon lord came in.

The demon lord was still in his Naga form. He was wearing a lustrous red *maekake*, the bottom half of an apron, along with several ornate accessories. Was he planning to stay in that form? The statue that we saw in Hades showed him in his human form. Maybe it took too much energy to maintain that form, so I decided to not ask about it.

I asked the Flame Devil if he was currently transformed into another form, and he replied that he "wasn't as fired up as he used to be." Well, that didn't answer my question at all.

The Demon Dog carried two bundles. I didn't want him bringing anything dangerous inside, so I asked him what they were, and the demon lord replied "something nice." The Demon Dog only added that they were "nothing bad." I doubted we could get any more out of them right now, so I decided to let them pass.

"Hoh... That bastard had some peculiar powers, but yours are just as bizarre," the demon lord commented as he came through the door and looked around.

The “bastard” likely referred to the first sacred king, while the “peculiar powers” was probably his gift.

I had a feeling he would wander off somewhere if I left him be, so I quickly guided him to the second floor. The demon lord probably couldn’t climb up the stairs in his current form, so I directed him to the ramp outside. The Demon Dog and White-Faced Ogre followed. The demon lord looked around the garden with great interest. He started asking me about anything that caught his eye.

“What is that windmill?”

“That’s the wind altar. It constantly generates wind, so we use that area to dry our clothes.”

“...Hmm. And that red pillar?”

“That’s the fire altar. Our ketolt party members use that as their blacksmith forge.”

“I see. You do not respect the significance of those things one damned bit.”

Yeah, as I described them just now, I thought the same thing.

“What is that large pond?”

“That’s a pool... Er, a coldwater bath.” I wondered if he could make sense of modern vocabulary.

“You need not correct yourself, I can discern the meaning just fine.”

So he did understand modern vocabulary? Or maybe the Goddess of Light’s blessing translated my words into something the demon lord could understand. That or, conversely, the demon lord’s blessing of darkness did something similar to my blessing.

Anyway, at the rate this conversation was going, it looked like we would have to give a tour of the Unlimited Bath after our meeting. It sounded like the Demon Dog had already talked to him about the miso too, so we might as well host the demon lord’s group tonight.

We reached the second floor after we had walked halfway around the main building. The seat at the back of the room was supposed to be the seat of honor, but neither of us bothered with those formalities, each sitting down on

the left and right sides of the room.

I sat in the center of the right side of the room. To my left were Clena and Roni, and to my right were Haruno and Rakti. The demon lord sat in the center of the left side. To his right was the Demon Dog, and to his left was the White-Faced Ogre. The demon lord's bottom half was coiled on the ground.

"Now then, where shall I sit?"

"Wherever you want."

"In that case..."

The Flame Devil sat himself at the front of the room. He was neither on the demon lord's side nor on our side. Maybe he was telling us he was neutral. I doubted he would give me a straight answer if I asked, so I let him be.

The demon lord was looking my way intimidatingly. I was trying not to shrink back in the face of his stare when suddenly his oppressive aura vanished and he grinned at me.

"Touya... I thank you for your efforts on this occasion!"

"Oh... Um, yeah, sure," I reflexively gave a half-witted response since he had caught me off guard, and only after I finished talking did I realize that he was referring to me breaking his seal.

"White-Faced Ogre!"

"Yes."

The White-Faced Ogre pulled an ornate tube from her bosom and handed it to me. There was a letter inside. The letter described how I had revived the demon lord and then sang me many praises. They had probably written this while waiting outside the Unlimited Bath earlier.

"This looks like a letter of commendation...?" Haruno observed. I see; I had seen these in movies sometimes. The ceremony at Hephaestus didn't have one, so I was confused for a moment.

"Demon Dog!"

"Yes! Please, Sir Touya."

The Demon Dog got up and presented the two bundles he had been carrying. Roni accepted them and brought them over to me. Inside the bags were a long sword, a short sword, and a wooden box. The two swords were both single-edged blades forged similarly to Clena's sword. Everything from the design of the hilt to the decorations on the sheath was extravagant. The long sword was interspersed with gold and silver.

"That is the Kitano Toshiro Yoshimitsu. It is inscribed with Yoshimitsu's name. And that is... the Hoshi-kiri."

"Wait, that's...!" Haruno was the only one who reacted to the names. Apparently they were both famous katana. I asked why these famous katana were here in this world, and the Flame Devil interjected.

"That's right, I remember how popular it was 500 years ago to name your favorite weapons after the katana you once owned. My, how nostalgic! In fact, I have this one called Honebami..." And then he started rambling about how great his own sword was.

I see, so they used the names of their favorite katana again for their weapons in this world.

"Did your sword have a name too, Clena?"

"Who knows? If it did, I've never heard of it."

"That scoundrel's sword? It was called Matsu. What an effeminate name."

The demon lord looked displeased. I figured it would be best to not touch on this further and changed the topic.

"Then the lance called 'Human Husk' that the Dark Giant has is also...?"

"Oh, I did hear him call it that. That's the name of a famous lance, too."

"Yes, yes, you are very well-informed. That was indeed the name of his favorite lance back in the day!"

Kopan started blabbering again with no signs of stopping, so I decided to go ahead and open the wooden box. Inside it were very fine-looking tea accessories.

"In the past, teaware was often given out as a reward."

“I see...”

“Yes! I am presenting those to you as your reward!” The demon lord proclaimed in a loud voice. I’m sure it wasn’t only me who thought he was also trying to interrupt Kopan’s rambling.

“I had also considered offering my granddaughter as your wife, but she might throw something at me, so you’ll have to figure out that part on your own.”

“Wha—?!” Clena raised her voice, but the demon lord laughed it off and continued.

“Both of these katana have conductors for using spirit magic. Clena may have whichever one she desires.”

I see, they were giving these to us as a replacement for the sword that the Dark Prince ran off with. I was thankful for that.

“...Clena.”

“What is it? I’m fine with the shorter sword, the Yoshimitsu.”

“No, it’s not that... Should I really be accepting a reward for reviving the demon lord?”

“...Isn’t it a little late for that? It doesn’t change the fact that you broke his seal, either way.”

“Is that how it works...?”

“It is.”

Okay, in that case, I bowed and accepted the gifts.

Now then, I had received a reward from the demon lord, but this wasn’t the end of our discussion. There was one thing that I had to confirm—whether or not the demon lord was planning to bare his fangs at the Olympus Alliance once again.

During our journey, we had learned that the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord was not purely a battle of good versus evil. He may not have caused it deliberately, but the truth was that the first half of the war 500 years ago was an economic war started by Hades. The second half was

retaliation against Hades by an alliance formed with Jupiter at its center. Additionally, while this may not have been intentional on the demon lord's part either, at that time, the temple of darkness felt disrespected and betrayed the demon lord. Their archcleric, the Masked Cleric, helped the first sacred king infiltrate Hades, where he was able to seal the demon lord and end the war with Hades' defeat. I wonder if the demon lord was just easily misunderstood...

In the course of ending the war, the Goddess of Darkness, Rakti, was accidentally sealed by the first sacred king. The nation of Hades became the wasteland known as the "void," and the battle 500 years ago ended to no one's benefit. Well, I was sure that the actual people involved were the most aware of how pointless of a war it was, so I didn't say anything out loud.

Now then, how should I bring this topic up? I played through everything the demon lord had done until now in my head. I didn't have much to ponder, though. What had left the biggest impression was when he said, "there are times when you must act decisively." He probably meant that I shouldn't think too hard. Maybe he doesn't like people who are wishy-washy. All right, in that case, I should just ask him straight.

"I'd like to confirm one thing... Are you planning to fight against Jupiter again?"

"Of course."

That was a blunt answer. Even more so than my question. Should I seal him again with the Gravesword? Was that even possible? What should I do in this situation? Numerous options spun around in my head. No—it was the demon lord's advice, but I should still act decisively. I was about to summon spirits of light when the demon lord spoke his next words.

"I'll need to be smarter about it this time."

...'Smarter'? What did he mean?

"Um, what do you mean by that?" Haruno asked in my place, since my brain was still trying to catch up.

The demon lord sneered at us before he answered. Had he been waiting for me to make a move before he interrupted with that remark?

“If there was one mistake I made 500 years ago, it was allowing the neighboring nations to rebel.”

Was that it? He didn’t “make them rebel,” but “allowed them to rebel.” And this time, he wanted to corner them to a point that they couldn’t rebel even if they wanted to.

“I caught up on the current state of affairs before coming here... My subordinates have been holding up well,” the demon lord said, patting the White-Faced Ogre’s head. His movements were rough, so her head was being shaken back and forth. Even so, she looked a little happy. “The White Orchid Corporation, I see... You have developed it quite extensively. Huhuhu,” the demon lord laughed. So this was what he was thinking...?

“So rather than returning to your position as a lord, you want to focus on business?”

“Do you wish to hear how much the Ares royal family is indebted to the White Orchid Corporation...?”

“No, I’m good.”

He really was. In other words...

“Rather than leading from the forefront with your own power, you want to have control over even greater power from the shadows—Is that what you’re saying?”

“Haruno?!” She sure knew how to talk straight, too.

“You understand me well, young lass,” the demon lord laughed. He seemed to be entertained.

So he was changing his plan of attack. The demon lord didn’t seem all too concerned about his position as a lord.

“So the ones who instigated the attack against Hades 500 years ago were... merchants?”

“You understand too, knave.”

So that was it. The demon lord had driven the neighboring nations into an economic corner 500 years ago, but at the time, the relationship between

Hades and the other nations were seller and buyer. The other nations should have been getting the goods that they wanted.

The ones who would have noticed that they were in a bad spot were merchants, who could see the money being drained from their country first-hand. If the merchants had noticed a little later, then they would have been driven to the point where they could no longer rebel even if they wanted to. They tried to warn their royal families and instigate a strike back against Hades, and what resulted was the war 500 years ago. The demon lord confirmed all of this.

The demon lord's objective this time was to be in a position like those merchants. He wanted to hold economic power, enough so that he could move an entire country to his will when the time came. In our world, a company that did business across country borders was known as a multinational corporation. If he could achieve that, then he would indeed hold more power than the king of a single nation.

And right now, the White Orchid Corporation had the demon lord and two demon generals. They could even develop their military power along with their economic power. He could become an existence even greater than a demon lord.

I looked to either side, but only Haruno's face had become pale. Even Clena hadn't been able to keep up this far. Rakti and Roni were frozen in place, as they'd been trying to follow along but failed. How was the demon lord able to think up all of this?

"You really are a clever youth," the demon lord laughed, perhaps reading the shocked look on my face. "You sure know how to choose a man! That's one thing I won't have to worry about!"

"Shut up!"

He even teased Clena.

Anyway, the revived demon lord wasn't intending to start another war, but he was intending to become a greater existence than just a demon lord. What should a hero do in this case? I may be in no position to talk as the one who revived him, but could someone who claimed that he wanted to "take over the

economy” really be called a demon lord? Though if we left him be, I wouldn’t be surprised if he had the world’s economy under his thumb before long.

“What do you think, Touya?” Haruno asked me dubiously. “Is defeating a big businessman really the job of a hero?”

Apparently she was wondering the same thing.

“I feel like a thug in a movie who’s been tasked with assassinating some VIP.”

“...I can sort of understand that analogy.”

Whether we’d be the good guys or bad guys depended on that VIP’s background, but either way, we wouldn’t be “heroes.”

We weren’t getting too far thinking about it as two people from another world. Would Clena understand if we explained this to her? I had my doubts, but we would deal with that later. We knew the demon lord’s intentions now, so our meeting reached a stopping point.

The demon lord seemed interested in the miso, baths, and various other things, so we would be accommodating them tonight.

“In that case, I’ll use the bath first!”

“I will join you!”

“I shall lead the way!”

So you two want to join the fun too, White-Faced Ogre and Demon Dog? Well, someone needed to explain how the baths worked, and I could let the Demon Dog handle that.

“I shall also take this opportunity to join you all.” The Flame Devil cheerfully followed them.

Yeah, I’ll leave them alone for now. I doubted they would go so far as to destroy the baths. Probably. On that note, Rulitora had always hated the baths, so would the demon lord be okay? Just in case, I told the Demon Dog that they could use the outdoor pool if the baths didn’t suit the demon lord’s fancy.

In the meantime, the rest of us headed to the Goddess of Fire’s kitchen to prepare dinner. Most of the group wasn’t used to handling miso yet, so Haruno

and I would be the main ones cooking today. Rulitora was standing by at the inner door, while Prae was waiting at the back door leading to the garden. Daisy was lured by the smell of food and came flying down, then sprawled herself out on top of my head. Needless to say, our topic of conversation was our meeting with the demon lord. However, only Haruno and I could fully understand what the demon lord's new objective was.

"T-The demon lord, a merchant...?" Sera tilted her head as she stirred her pot.

Clena at least understood that he was trying something more shrewd this time, but she also wasn't sure whether his plans were appropriate for a demon lord or not. She seemed flustered, but she had gone through a lot today, so I didn't want to push her too much.

"I'm wondering about one other thing."

"What is it?"

"What exactly was prophesied about the demon lord's revival?"

"That's..."

The sacred family and temple of light had summoned us heroes because they were given that prophecy. I'd heard that the elves had also received a prophecy and went to alert the sacred family, but judging by their timing, their source was something else. Maybe other parties had received their own prophecies as well. In that case, what exactly was in the prophecy?

"Do you know anything, Sera?"

"The ones who received the prophecy were the temple elder and the sacred king. But I am unsure of the details..."

She didn't know either, huh. Maybe Princess Franchellis and the elf Foley from Cosmos' party might know something. I actually wanted to go meet Cosmos now.

"Umm... Why don't you try asking directly?" Rakti asked matter-of-factly.

Everyone looked at each other in confusion, but I knew what she meant. Yeah, I guess I did have that option. I could ask the Goddess of Light directly, the one who sent down that prophecy.

“D-Do you mean in the dreams that you’ve mentioned...?” Sera asked, her eyes twitching. I could understand how she felt as a cleric of light, but please don’t make that face at me. I didn’t want to get too hung up on this topic though, so I changed the subject.

“Anyway, regarding what we’ll be doing next... Setting aside whether we’re going to be enemies or allies for now, we’re at least not going to follow him.” Even if we weren’t going to be enemies, that didn’t mean we would become his underlings. Everyone had different reactions, but they at least seemed relieved, especially Sera and Sandra. “We’ll host them for today. We can assist them if it doesn’t cause trouble for others. And we’ll sell them miso if they want it. Is that a good stance to take?”

“Becoming one of the White Orchid Corporation’s business partners? I think that’s fine,” Haruno remarked, being the first to agree with me.

“I’m in favor too. We’ll need to keep an eye on what the demon lord is up to for a while, but I think we can maintain the status quo for now.” Clena also agreed. Everyone else in the room, including Rulitora standing guard by the door, nodded. Sera also didn’t think this plan would be a problem.

“By the way, Clena.”

“What is it?”

“Are you okay with calling him the ‘demon lord’? He is your grandfather and all.”

“...Let me think some more on that.”

She was apparently conflicted about it too. I wasn’t in a position to order her around, but I at least wanted to make one thing clear.

“Clena, if I was put off by you being the demon lord’s granddaughter, then I would have been when you told me about the Dark Prince back in Hades a long time ago. I accept everything about you, don’t forget that, okay?”

Clena was taken aback for a moment, then adopted a solemn expression, then turned away from me with a “Hmph.”

“...Thanks.” And finally, she softly sighed. She was red all the way to her ears.

As we continued cooking, Haruno brought up a question. “Should we really have accepted the Hoshi-kiri?”

“Huh? Is it a special katana or something?”

Haruno explained that the Hoshi-kiri was a katana passed down from the demon lord to the Dark Prince when he inherited their family’s estate.

“...Wait a minute, so is that the mark of his successor?” Clena interjected when she heard the explanation.

“It might have that implication.”

“So instead of his son, the Dark Prince, he named his granddaughter Clena as his successor?”

“No, the one who accepted the reward was Touya...”

“Don’t tell me he named me as the successor...?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but I think it’s safe to say that he accepts you as one of his family.”

“I wonder about that...”

“I mean, who would he choose—his son, who neglected his sealed father and went off claiming he would become the new demon lord, or his granddaughter, who brought the one person who could break his seal...?”

“Well, you have a point, but...”

There wasn’t much to argue about. On that note, if the Dark Prince wanted to be the new demon lord that much, he could have at least taken the Hoshi-kiri. Maybe it was his way of saying that he’d forge his own path, separate from his father.

“Oh, and there’s one other thing I want to check... What do you want to do about the Dark Prince, Clena?”

“What do I want to do...?”

“Do you want to reconcile? Or just leave him alone?”

“I won’t consider it unless he makes up with my mother...”

So it depended on whether or not her mother would forgive the Dark Prince. It was a problem between those two in the first place, so that was reasonable. But we didn't have an answer for the present.

"Then do you want the demon lord and Dark Prince to reconcile?"

"...I'm not sure."

That's why she didn't know what attitude to take against the demon lord yet. His character surprised all of us, so I couldn't fault her for it. If only he had said something like "Now then, time to take over the world!", I would have somehow found a way to slam my Gravesword into him and not have to think about all of this. But in reality, this demon lord wanted to take control of the economy. And we were hosting him as a guest tonight.

I wasn't intending to burden her with all the responsibility, but I couldn't ignore Clena's opinion in this situation either. She said she wasn't sure yet, so for now, the most we could do was to be as hospitable as possible so that we didn't worsen our relationship with them.

"This isn't the time for us to act decisively yet... right?" But the demon lord's words lingered in my mind. Was this something that could wait until later? It wouldn't hurt, would it? Was I just thinking too much again?

As I mulled over it, Haruno tapped my shoulder. "I'm not saying that the demon lord's words are wrong, but I don't think you're thinking too hard right now. Everyone's different, and I think there are pros and cons to either approach."

"Really?"

"Depending on the situation, acting decisively can mean the same as 'haste makes waste.'"

"I-I see..."

"I think you'll be fine just keeping his words in mind."

So basically, adapt yourself to the situation and act decisively when you need to. That was harder than it sounded, but I'd try to keep that in mind.

After the demon lord's group was done with their bath, Rulitora guided them

to the large cabin on the outskirts of the main building—the banquet hall. A sliding door separated the inside room from the garden, and opening it made the room feel much more spacious.

We asked the demon lord if he needed a taste tester for his food, and he unexpectedly answered that “there would be no point.” It was a convincing answer from him, though. At Haruno’s suggestion, we decided to have a barbecue in the garden so that we could cook the food in front of everyone.

I asked the Demon Dog if the demon lord would be offended by our plans, but he said that the demon lord enjoyed off-kilter ideas like this. He suggested flavoring the food strongly, to which Haruno earnestly nodded. Apparently the demon lord had been known for enjoying strong-tasting foods in his past life. Being historically significant must be a pain if even stories this minor were memorialized.

As I carried trays of food into the banquet hall, I saw the demon lord staring intently at the grill in the garden with all three sets of his arms folded. His arms didn’t fit through his yukata sleeves, so he tied it at his waist and wore a *hanten* on top, with his chest left bare.

“What is that, young lass?”

“Who, me? That’s a ‘barbecue grill’.”

“Hmm... What do you grill on that rack?”

“Um, a lot of things?”

He was asking Yukina, who had brought over tea, a barrage of questions. She answered his questions readily, perhaps because she had decided the demon lord wasn’t dangerous. I didn’t want her to say something out of line and anger him, so I hurried to finish setting the table.

The seat of honor this time was given to the demon lord, while the Demon Dog and White-Faced Ogre sat to his left and right. The Flame Devil sat next to the White-Faced Ogre. They wanted to keep an eye on him, and the White-Faced Ogre’s eyes were sharp.

The cyclops mothers were still a little frightened of the demon lord and stayed out in the garden, but the children didn’t seem to mind and were just

excited for the barbecue. The others sitting down at the banquet table were Rium, Prae, and Rin. Though in Rin's case, she might just not be in the mood to cook.

"You have a curious assortment of party members," the demon lord remarked, glancing at Prae and the other cyclopes.

"We also have ketolts and glaupis waiting for us back at the port."

"Hoh, the ketolts of Hephaestus...?" The demon lord perked up at the mention of the ketolts. Hades and Hephaestus had traded back in the day, so he may have met ketolts before.

Moving on, the Demon Dog and White-Faced Ogre were bewildered at the menu for tonight. That was understandable. After all, the only dishes before them were large helpings of white rice and miso soup. The Flame Devil was wearing his usual smile, but he seemed like he was scrutinizing our every move. The demon lord was more interested in the barbecue, not even looking at the dishes in front of him.

Now for the main course. Rulitora carefully rolled the grill toward them so that it didn't damage the tatami mat flooring.

"We'll be grilling plenty from here."

"I see, you will be preparing the food right before us, so that we can eat it freshly made." The demon lord's eyes sparkled. He was more keen about unknown cuisines than nostalgic ones. All right, let's get grilling. I was the head chef tonight.

As for beverages, the White Orchid Corporation brought over their own stock of alcohol since we had run out. Everyone underage got juice. The only ones in our party who drank were Rulitora, Pardoe, and Shakova, so we never carried much alcohol in the first place. In particular, once Pardoe and Shakova started working, they would often forget even to eat, much less drink. But then we picked up the Demon Dog, who very much enjoyed his liquor. Rulitora also started drinking more as a result, and thus we had run out by the time we reached Ares. That was actually half the reason why the Demon Dog had adjusted so well to our party.

Rulitora sat himself next to the Demon Dog after bringing over the grill. They immediately started drinking. On the other side, the demon lord was more interested in the juice than the alcohol. He had glasses of orange juice, apple juice, tomato juice, and a cup of tea on his tray. He seemed especially fond of the apple juice, admiring the sparkling amber color inside the glass as he held it up.

I recalled that Japan started cultivating apples during the Meiji era. Of course, that was after the demon lord's time. Did this world have any similar fruits, though...? I asked Rium, who was helping me cook.

"Rium, is there anything similar to apple juice in this world?"

"There is, but it's more cloudy looking."

I see, so this drink was more clear.

The demon lord then silently picked up the dishes in front of him. He took a sip of the miso soup, flicked his tongue, and then his golden eyes opened wide.

"...Who made this?"

Oh no, was it not to his liking?

"Um, I did." Clena was grilling in the garden, but stopped to name herself.

"I was the one who taught her how to season it." I raised my hand as well, showing him that it wasn't only her responsibility.

"...I see." But the demon lord said no more and continued eating.

What was that? The Demon Dog... was off in his own world right now, so I beckoned for the White-Faced Ogre and asked her.

"Not to worry. Had it not been to the demon lord's liking, he would have flipped his tray over by now."

So he liked it and asked who made it? This was bad for my heart. I really think the demon lord was just easily misunderstood. The Flame Devil was turned away from us, his shoulders quivering. Was he trying not to laugh? I guess he also knew what the demon lord's reaction meant.

Anyway, he seemed to like the miso, so I kept on grilling. I was making miso-

grilled fish, freshly caught from our fishing pond. I finished cooking up four plates worth of fish and Rakti, who was dressed in a maid outfit, carried them over to the demon lord and the generals.

They all knew that she was the Goddess of Darkness already. The Demon Dog and White-Faced Ogre seemed a little tense, but the demon lord and Flame Devil were surprisingly composed. I wasn't trying to harass them, Roni was just busy in the garden right now.

"Hoh...!" The demon lord's expression changed again. He chomped down on his food without a word. He seemed to be enjoying it. All right, time to cook for everyone else, too.

The children liked the soy sauce-marinated barbecue more than the miso marinade, so they were grilling that up in the garden. The aroma of the broiling soy sauce tickled my nose. The group here was allured by the scent as well and asked me if I could cook it for them.

I started grilling the soy sauce-marinated meats, and before I knew it, the demon lord had gotten up from his seat and was standing behind me. He was staring inquisitively at the barbecue from above my head.

"Lad, what are those bright red stones under the rack?"

"They're fire stones. They're from the fire altar and use my MP to heat up. I just need to tune my MP and we can use them in place of charcoal."

"Is 'barbecue' a type of food from your world?"

"Yes, though rather than food, I would say it's a cooking method."

Now I was grilling up miso-marinated poultry. I was saving the miso-grilled onigiri for last.

"Where did you get this fresh fish?"

"They're from the water altar over there, though we just call it the fishing pond."

He was asking me so many questions. Was his sense of curiosity that strong?

"...What is this gift of yours? It is supposed to be the power of a hero, is it not?"

“Well, that’s what they were aiming for when they summoned us heroes. But this has been a great help for me since it makes my life a lot easier.”

“Hmm...”

He asked me several more questions after that, mainly about the Unlimited Bath. He had taken a liking to the cedar wood bath and said he would try the pool next. Next, he asked me about cooking and what other things we could cook here.

Then he asked about Clena. He really did have his granddaughter on his mind. He also asked about Clena’s mother, but I couldn’t answer since I didn’t know much either. I suggested that he ask Clena directly, but he went to the garden and started asking Haruno questions instead. Avoiding Clena, huh?

He had picked up some vegetables and spices, so from the looks of it, he was asking Haruno about cooking. I kept watching them as I grilled. Then, Clena came into the banquet hall.

“What were you talking about with the demon lord?” she asked timidly. *You too?* Like grandfather, like granddaughter, as they say.

Finally, we finished our dinner party without a hitch—on my side, at least. After that, Clena had tried talking with the demon lord directly, but there was still some tension between them. She said that their conversation hadn’t been particularly interesting, and he just wanted to ask about Clena’s family.

Her father had gone missing before getting married, and as a result she had been treated as an outcast in her family, which made the demon lord angry. Then, when he heard that she had started traveling to look for her missing father, that anger became focused on the Dark Prince. I see, so that was why they had looked so tense.

Haruno, Clena, and I were supposed to eat dinner after serving everyone, but Clena was exhausted from being on edge all day. The demon lord had already left, saying that he had work to do with the White Orchid Corporation. The door to the Unlimited Bath was now shut, so she could finally rest for tonight.

I was a bit suspicious about how the Flame Devil had been so quiet during dinner, but he was also outside with the demon lord right now, so I decided to

think about that later.

“Oh, he was mumbling something about ‘heresy’ while drinking several cups of tea.”

Uh, what? Well, our tea was from a faucet and didn’t even need tea leaves, so maybe that was why. Haruno explained that his idea of green tea was likely *matcha*, where the leaves were ground and mixed into hot water. However, the green tea from our faucet was *sencha*, where the leaves were steeped in the water but not mixed in. The color of tea in the past was brown, and it was only after the Edo period that they had learned to cultivate green-colored tea. I see, was that what the Flame Devil had meant by “heresy”?

“The demon lord seemed to like it, though.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, he said it reminded him of jade.”

The color was a big factor for him as well, huh. He liked the apple juice too, so I wondered if he had a preference for transparent things.

We finished our meals and it was time to take a bath, but our timing was later than everyone else’s today. It would be just the three of us in the bath tonight. I’ve said before that it was embarrassing to take baths with a large number of girls, but allow me to amend that. Even with a small number of girls, if they were the type to act bold, then it was embarrassing all the same.

I washed their hair like I always did, and then Clena washed my hair while Haruno washed my back. Clena was in front of me massaging my head and Haruno was behind me scrubbing my back. I was sandwiched between them. And they were super close. Way too close. There was no reason why they had to be this close. Four plump melons were way up in my personal space.



“What are you acting embarrassed about after all this time?”

“Touya, please take responsibility if anything happens ♥”

I now knew how a rabbit being toyed with by a lion felt. I survived that ordeal and went into the bath, but now they were pinching me on both sides, so my trial continued.

I could guess why they were acting so differently today without asking them directly. Clena had become more conscious of me after the demon lord gave me the Hoshi-kiri, which was meant to be given to his successor, and then treated me like Clena’s partner on top of that. Haruno was just being influenced by Clena’s behavior.

But I couldn’t lose to them, and for a good reason.

“...The demon lord is trying to recruit me, isn’t he?”

“Huh? Yeah... I guess so,” Haruno said, glancing at Clena.

Yeah, that was the reason why I couldn’t simply enjoy these melons right now. The demon lord clearly wanted me in his faction, the former demon lord army. Part of it might be him acknowledging me, but surely he also saw value in using me.

I was happy with how the girls were treating me right now. We were in the same party and under the same roof. But I couldn’t predict how the demon lord would react to anything we might do. It was even scarier because I didn’t know if he would stop at simply getting angry. I probably didn’t need to think about it this much, but if I had to take responsibility, then I wanted to do so after things were more stable.

“I see...”

“It’s true, we’re like drifters right now.”

The girls agreed after I explained what I was thinking. But they still didn’t let go of me. They looked at me earnestly, as close as ever. They were point-blank in my face now. I didn’t have a reason to keep holding back, so I put my arms around their shoulders.

“I’ll give you points for thinking about it seriously.”

“But this isn’t something you should be thinking about alone.”

The girls both smiled at me, which made me happy. But enduring this was rough.

“What do you think we should do?”

“We could stop being drifters... Find a place to call home?”

“That goes along with our current goal anyway.”

“Yeah, we need a place for the cyclopes and glaupis to settle down.”

“Maybe we could ask the White Orchid Corporation to help us with that. They can pull strings with the Ares royal family, after all.”

“Oh yeah, they said that they were lending them a lot of money...”

The two started talking with me in between them. They were awfully amicable, or rather, it felt like they were on the same wavelength. The longer their conversation progressed, the more their melons pressed against me. Not wanting to lose, I ran my hands down the sides of their bodies and pulled their hips closer to me.

Yeah, I shouldn’t think too hard right now. Sometimes, it’s better to act decisively than to stop in your tracks. I was sure now was one of those times.

“It’d be nice if we could find a place where Prae and the other cyclopes can live easily.” I joined their conversation, hypothesizing what kind of home I would like. I’d been on pins and needles ever since we arrived at the White Orchid Corporation today, so it was relieving to finally be able to sit back and chat. The three of us continued to soak in a long, leisurely bath and peacefully passed our evening.

I went to bed early, cuddling Rakti as my body pillow to increase the time I could spend talking with the goddesses in my dream tonight. My sense of time with the goddesses was vague, though, so I wasn’t sure if this would have any effect at all.

The next thing I knew, I was surrounded by the goddesses wearing gorgeous kimonos. The Goddesses of Light and Water were wearing properly fitted, traditional kimonos, but the Goddess of Earth’s breasts were practically spilling

out of hers. The Goddess of Wind had an adorned one with short frilly sleeves and a miniskirt. For some reason, the Goddess of Fire had her chest bound and only wore one of the sleeves, leaving her other shoulder and arm bare. Rakti, who was still in my arms, was wearing an adorable furisode-style kimono for children. As a bonus, I was wearing a haori and hakama. The goddesses often showed up in various outfits, but this was the first time I also changed outfits to match. I guess this was because I was recognized as their brother.

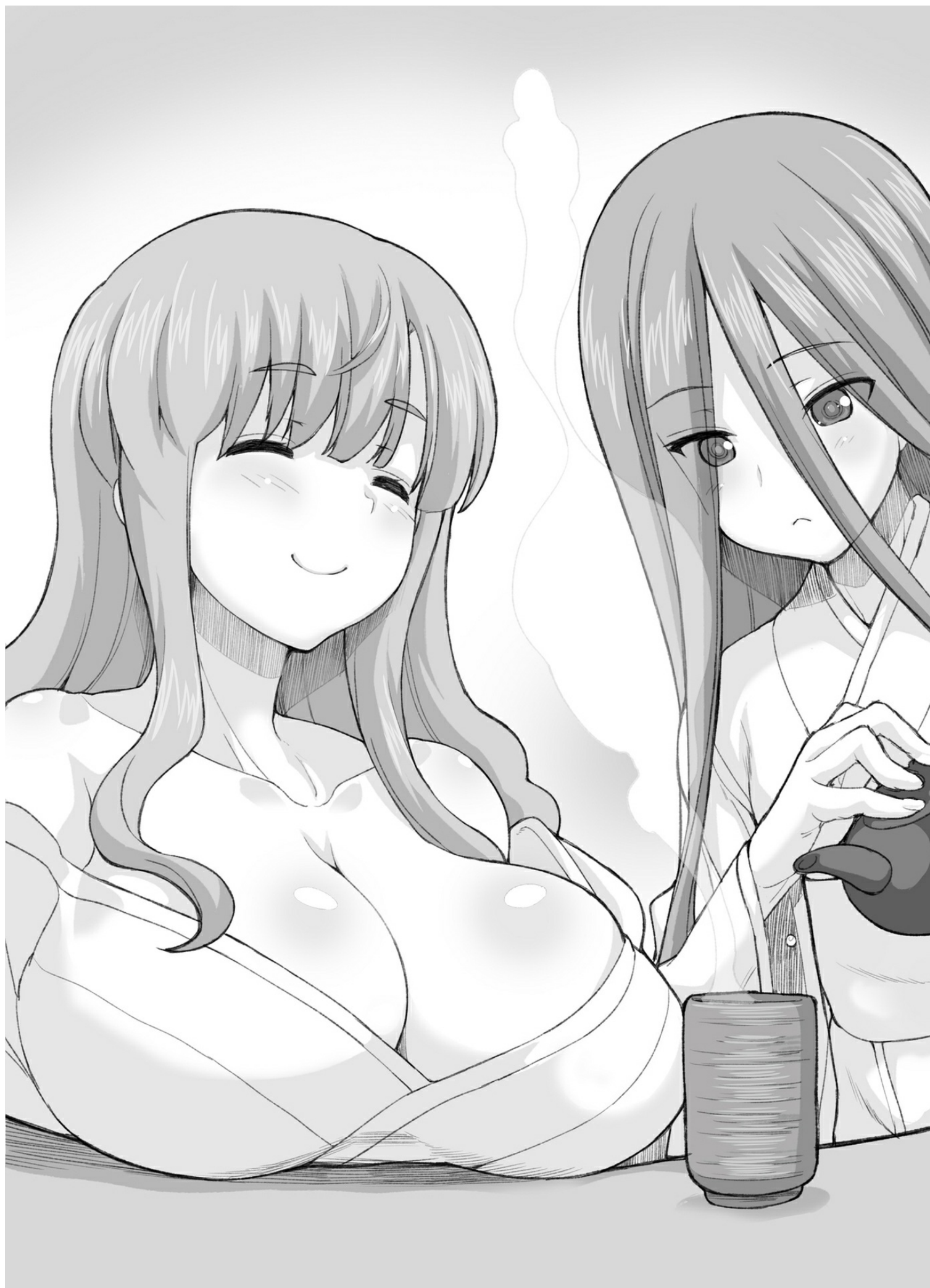
Rakti and I stood up, and the Goddess of Light positioned herself in front of us.

“It seems you have something to ask me today, so I asked Mother to stay away.”

How considerate of her. If the Goddess of Chaos appeared, I wouldn't be able to remember this dream.

Rakti guided me somewhere, and suddenly, we were inside a large Japanese room. There was a large kotatsu in the center of the room, which we all sat down around. The Goddess of Earth plopped her breasts, which still seemed like they were about to pop out of her kimono at any moment, on top of the kotatsu. Were they that heavy?

The Goddess of Water produced a teapot from somewhere and poured tea into a teacup, which the Goddess of Earth similarly pulled out from somewhere. The amount of tea she poured out seemed much greater than the volume of the teapot, but I decided to pay it no mind. I assumed it worked similarly to the Goddess of Water's faucets.



I took a sip, and it was a different flavor from the gift tea. A single sip warmed my body and somehow made me feel more calm. The Goddess of Water had the same stoic expression as ever, but maybe she could tell that I was tired and wanted to do something to help. She could read my mind anyway, so I sent her a torrent of gratitude vibes. Oh, her cheeks turned red. And then she swung her face away from me.

The Goddess of Light also drank some tea, cleared her throat, then began speaking.

“Now then, where shall we start?”

“Honestly, so much happened today, I don’t even know where to begin...”

“I see... In that case, let us start with the demon lord.”

This was it. I sat up straight. Reviving the demon lord was my mistake. I was prepared to accept any punishment they threw at me. But the Goddess of Light’s next words were beyond the furthest of my expectations.

“You did well, Brother.”

“Huh? But I, uh, revived the demon lord...?”

“What do you mean? Thanks to your hard work, you prevented the birth of the demon lord.”

“W-Wait a second! What do you mean ‘birth’? Not ‘revival’?”

The Goddess of Light adopted a mysterious expression and continued.
“Thanks to you, that girl was able to reach the place of destiny.”

‘That girl’? ‘Place of destiny’? Did she mean how Clena happened to be present when the demon lord revived?

“When that girl threw her sword, fate was altered.”

“Huh? What do you mean...”

“It is true. That man claimed that he would become the new demon lord, did he not?”

The Dark Prince? And Clena altered fate by throwing her sword at him? I had been wondering whether or not “demon lord” was a fitting title since he had

proclaimed that he wouldn't start a war with Jupiter, but to think that the prophecy had been about the Dark Prince...

"That is not correct either."

"Huh?"

"I... did not make any prophecy related to the demon lord."

".....What?"

The Goddess of Light had bluntly refuted my unspoken hypothesis. Her revelation was so unexpected that I needed quite some time to find my voice again.

Third Bath – A Mosaic-Tiled Prophecy

Cosmos and his party arrived the morning of the next day. I'd left the door to the Unlimited Bath open all morning, so one of the staff of the White Orchid Corporation dropped by to alert us. I had been staring off into space ever since my dream last night, so everyone was worried about me, but thankfully Cosmos' party came early.

The self-titled Cosmos, Princess Franchellis, and the elf Foley were the only ones who had come. I went to greet them at the door. They said that they had run into Pardoe's group at the port city last night, where they learned that I had already gone ahead with the Demon Dog, so they left Ricott in charge of the imperial guards and got on a rapid gembolic carriage to find us as quickly as possible.

Thank god Princess Franchellis was here, though. If they'd left her with the bodyguards, I wouldn't have anyone to hold a proper conversation with. Foley wasn't a bad girl, but she and Cosmos shared similar dispositions and she tended to follow in Cosmos' footsteps.

The princess looked exhausted. They must have rushed here without a break. I guess she also didn't trust the other two to carry out a proper discussion since she went to such lengths to come here. I appreciated her efforts.

"Yo, glad you're safe! I was so worried when I heard that the Demon Dog kidnapped you all! Did you get hurt? Oh, here's a souvenir."

I was about to ask them about the prophecy right off the bat, but Cosmos cut in first. He gave me a carefree smile and handed over something wrapped in an extravagantly embroidered cloth, which I accepted by reflex.

"...It's moving."

"Yeah, he's pretty sprightly."

Whatever it was, it was alive. I didn't want it to suffocate, so I hurriedly unwrapped the cloth—an action that I immediately regretted.

"Give me back my body—!!"

I had revealed a shrieking skull with jaws rattling. It was Phoenix, the former demon general who had gotten fired from his position after fighting and losing 100 battles. As expected of an immortal, he still had energy to spare even after having been reduced to just a skull. I silently wrapped the bundle back together; even though he was still squirming in my hands, I couldn't hear him anymore.

If I remembered correctly, he was a type of monster called a necroarc. Where did the rest of him go? He was a monster who could revive himself even after being burnt to a crisp—I mean, he was essentially already revived right in front of me.

“S-Sir Cosmos, you should explain things first! Um, that’s a curse-repelling mantle...” Flustered, Foley told us that this mantle could repel curses and other evil spells when worn. It was a relic of the elves and was passed down to Foley when she departed on her journey. Since Phoenix could always return no matter how many pieces you shattered him into, they had wrapped his skull in this mantle so that it couldn't rejoin the rest of his body.

If Phoenix could control the rest of his body with magic, then this was similar to how I had nullified Goldfish's ability to control metal by putting him inside the Unlimited Bath. Since the cloth muted his voice, I supposed his voice was also carried by something like magical sound waves. Skeletons didn't have vocal cords, after all. Apparently the rest of his skeleton was tied up in various parts and under Ricott's care.

“Do you think he's pieced the rest of himself together by now?”

“It's fine, they're keeping his pieces very far apart.”

Okay then, but why did Cosmos give me his skull as a souvenir? ...I bet there was no actual reason behind it. Just something he felt like doing.

“How did things go with Balsamina?”

Cosmos responded with a thumbs up and a pearly white smile. Sounds like he had pulled it off. She had initially resisted Cosmos' cajoling but finally gave up and joined their party after they successfully got Phoenix under control.

“That's great, I'm happy for you!” He had congratulated me after we rescued Yukina, paying no mind to the fact that she was a demon. Now it was my turn to

return the favor. Balsamina was apparently trying to avoid meeting any other demon generals right now, so she was staying with Ricott's group.

"I remember that Balsamina had said something about their prince trying to revive the demon lord..."

"Oh, she talked about that with us, too."

"Did she? I don't remember~"

Yeah, I couldn't expect anything from Cosmos.

"But the Demon Dog told us that the Dark Prince was trying to make himself the new demon lord."

"The new demon lord?!"

"Oh, don't worry. We prevented that from happening."

"I-I see... That's good to hear..." Foley breathed a sigh of relief.

The princess, who had finally caught her breath, joined our conversation and asked, "Um, how did you accomplish that?"

"I can explain that later..." I needed to tell them that while we did prevent the birth of a new demon lord, we'd also revived the old demon lord at the same time.

"So why does your story clash with what Balsamina told us?"

"Maybe Phoenix had been apart from the demon lord's army for so long that the situation had changed without him knowing."

It had been about 15 years since the Dark Prince declared he would become the new demon lord, so maybe Phoenix hadn't been kept up to date. Maybe Balsamina was trying to avoid the other demon generals because she hadn't seen them in so long.

"We've learned a few other things, and this is something that I'd like to ask Your Highness and Foley about... It's about the reason why you summoned the heroes—about the prophecy of the demon lord's revival."

The princess' eyes opened wide.

We led Cosmos' party to one of the cabins in the Unlimited Bath. This room

had a wooden floor, a table, and chairs, so it was more comfortable for the princess than a tatami-floored room.

Haruno, Clena, and the light cleric Sera joined us. I hadn't told them about my dream last night yet, either. Honestly, I didn't know how to tell them. That was why I wanted to hear the princess' side of the story first.

After we all sat down around the long table, Roni came up to us dressed in a maid outfit and asked what we'd like to drink. I let everyone have their choice. Cosmos asked for tomato juice, commenting how nostalgic it was. Foley asked for apple juice, since it was a rare sight for her, and the princess chose carbonated water. Haruno and I chose green tea, while Clena and Sera asked for orange juice.

"To cut straight to the point, I'd like to ask you two—what exactly was the prophecy regarding the demon lord's revival that caused us heroes to be summoned?"

The princess and Foley looked at each other. They seemed like they wanted to know why I would ask such a question, but I just continued staring at them. The princess sighed and started talking.

"The prophecy from the Goddess of Light was bestowed to us in fragments. We had not received a prophecy since the time of San Pilaca, several hundred years ago. The words that were bestowed to the sacred family and to the temple of light differed, so deciphering the meaning was a challenge."

She said that the prophecy had been delivered to the sacred king and an elderly female cleric of the temple of light.

"Is that why Foley went to Jupiter as well?"

"That's right, Miss Haruno. Our elder received the prophecy and ordered me to relay it to the sacred family."

"But by then, as you all know, we had already interpreted the prophecy as a warning of the demon lord's revival and performed the hero summoning ritual."

"...Can you tell me exactly what the prophecy said?"

The princess' face tensed up at my question. Sera half stood up from her

chair, looking discomposed. Maybe it was taboo to ask something like this in this world, but there was no way around it. I had to know.

The princess turned to glare at me intensely, and for a while sparks flew between us. How should I get the information out of her? I was willing to share our intel in turn, but maybe I should spill a few things first as a tradeoff. Cosmos interjected before I finished my train of thought.

“Wh-What’s wrong? Come on, smile, everybody!”

The princess glanced at Cosmos, who was attempting to mediate, then smiled ever so slightly. She faced me again and slowly strung a few words together.

“Awaken... Darkness... Light... Darkness... Come together... Demon lord... Break... Seal... Those were the eight fragments from the prophecy.”

“Is ‘darkness’ supposed to be in there twice?”

“My father said that he had heard it twice.”

Apparently the sacred family, the temple of light, and the elves received five fragments each.

“The five fragments that the sacred family heard were ‘awaken,’ ‘darkness,’ ‘darkness,’ ‘come together,’ and ‘break.’”

“Our elder was bestowed ‘awaken,’ ‘light,’ ‘come together,’ ‘demon lord,’ and ‘seal.’”

“The temple’s five parts were ‘light,’ ‘darkness,’ ‘demon lord,’ ‘break,’ and ‘seal.’”

I see, that’s how it was. If those were the only words that they’d heard, then it would indeed sound like an ominous omen of the demon lord’s revival. Now I understood why they’d made such a big *misunderstanding*.

“...Your Highness.”

“What is it?”

“I have the ability to hear words directly from the Goddess of Light. When I told you that we had prevented the birth of a new demon lord, those were words from the goddess herself.”

“.....What?”

“I also learned about the prophecy from her. This is hard for me to say, but... Your interpretation was wrong. The goddess did not make any prophecy related to the revival of the demon lord.”

Everyone in the room looked at me at once. Besides Cosmos, who was still glancing back and forth at the two girls beside him. Haruno and Clena looked obviously surprised, but all the color had drained from Sera’s face. I felt bad for her right now, but I couldn’t hide the truth from her.

“What... What do you mean...?”

“‘Awaken’ the Goddess of ‘Darkness’. Let the forces of ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ ‘come together’, go to the castle of the ‘demon lord’ to ‘break’ the goddess’ ‘seal’. That is what the Goddess of Light told me.”

“B-But that...!” The princess jumped up from her seat, her chair falling behind her. Her face had gone pale, her voice shaking. She turned to look at Sera imploringly, who meekly nodded to affirm what I had said. She already knew that I could meet the goddesses in my dreams.

They had assumed that the prophecy had come to them in fragments, but that in itself was wrong. They had only been able to make out parts of a full sentence. To hear a prophecy in full, you needed blessings from several goddesses and an enormous amount of MP. Even San Pilaca had not been able to clearly make out messages from the goddess back in the day.

The goddesses had told me that having the blessing of darkness made a big difference in regards to this. By going to the place in my dreams, the amount of MP needed to receive a prophecy greatly decreased. That was likely because it was a place much closer to the goddesses than this world. I asked if no one had been granted the blessing of darkness all this time, but they said, “Without light you cannot see, and without wind you cannot hear.” So only having the blessing of darkness wouldn’t do you any good, either.

“Also, the Goddess had been sending out this oracle constantly over the past 500 years. But hardly anybody has been able to hear it since the time of San Pilaca.”

The Goddess of Light, who loved her sisters, wanted to free Rakti, who had been sealed by a “stray bullet” during the war. You could only break the seal by combining the powers of light and darkness, and that was what she had been trying to tell us this entire time. Indeed—that wasn’t the first prophecy in several hundred years like they had thought. There just wasn’t anybody who could listen.

And yet she never gave up for 500 years. Finally, people who could hear a fragmented version of her message appeared, but they misinterpreted it and performed the hero summoning ritual. That was the truth behind us being summoned to this world.

“Just from those eight words, it does sound like the demon lord’s seal is about to be broken...”

“And if you only look at the words from the sacred family and the temple, it sounds especially dangerous.”

Clena and Haruno could both sympathize with why they had conducted the hero summoning rituals.

“And don’t the elves’ words sound like a method to deal with the demon lord?”

I see, something like “‘Awaken’ the ‘light’, ‘come together’ and place the ‘demon lord’ under a ‘seal’.” The “come together” could refer to the sacred family, temple of light, and the light elves.

“It can’t be...!”

The princess tumbled to the floor, losing all the strength in her legs. Foley rushed over to help her back up, but Cosmos remained still, probably because his brain was still trying to catch up with everything we had just said.

“Umm, so what are we talking about, in simple terms?”

“It’s like they couldn’t hear the goddess’ voice well because they only had one bar of signal. So they misunderstood what she was saying, and we were summoned as a result.”

“Ohh...” Cosmos looked up, finally understanding what we were talking about

with the comparison to cell phones.

The princess was spent, so we decided to continue our conversation in a room where we could relax. We guided Cosmos' party to the Japanese-style tatami room, the gift of darkness. There was no better place to recover than here. The princess and Foley were taken aback by the tatami floor, but Cosmos sat down on it as a matter of course, so Foley followed and nervously sat down next to him.

The shock had been too much for the princess, so she was using Cosmos's lap as a pillow and was lying down languidly. A fatigued Sera was also using my lap as a pillow right now, so Cosmos and I were facing each other right now with girls on our laps. What a strange sight.

After all this, I still had yet to bring up the main point of our discussion. I needed to tell them that I had accidentally revived the demon lord. This was exactly why I wanted to talk about the prophecy first. Now we knew that the goddesses were not concerned about the demon lord's revival and didn't deem it a threat. The princess had taken the news worse than I had expected, but we were able to come to this room with its placating effects as a result, so it was a blessing in disguise.

"So you can meet him after this, but uh... I accidentally revived the demon lord from 500 years ago," I said frankly.

"What do you mean?!" Foley raised her voice and stood up. The princess was faced away from me right now, but her body tensed up.

"It's okay, stay calm. The demon lord said that he's not intending to start another war with Jupiter."

"...Is that true?"

"He awoke yesterday. There hasn't been any commotion since then, right? You can confirm with him directly."

"That's a scary idea in itself..."

Even if he wasn't planning on attacking Jupiter, he was still quite frightening, so I could understand her apprehension. But I had to convince them that he really wasn't planning to start another war. That was my role, as the one who

had revived him, otherwise Jupiter and the alliance might attack the demon lord again.

“This is from the demon lord’s point of view, but... The war 500 years ago was actually started by Jupiter.”

“...Huh?”

“Jupiter and the surrounding nations got themselves deep in the red after trading with Hades, so they tried to get back their money... That’s the truth behind the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord.”

“Um, uh, huh...? Wuh? Huuuh?!” Foley’s face changed expressions at a comically rapid pace, but I couldn’t blame her. The princess was trembling with her back still facing us.

“Were they conducting some fishy business?” Cosmos asked, surprisingly calm. He grabbed Foley’s hand, and she obediently sat back down.

“I can’t say either way, but from what I can tell, the demon lord’s strategies were just too advanced for the other countries to understand.”

“Uh-huh...”

“It’s like how in the latter half of the 18th century, textile manufacturing in the British Empire turned India from a textile exporting country into an importing country,” Haruno offered.

“I understood nothing you just said.”

“...Oh, I remember learning that in class, Haruno.” I remember that it happened during the Industrial Revolution. I didn’t know whether the demon lord had tried to spur on an Industrial Revolution himself or not, but it was safe to say that he had used economic strategies that hadn’t existed in this world.

“I heard that the demon lord was big on fashion, too.”

“Huh, really?”

“Yeah, there are some accounts of it. He was also a fan of the new and unusual, so if you bring a person like that into this world...”

“It was like the perfect playground for him?”

Haruno nodded in response.

This world had gems that ours didn't, like rainbow opals. Things like that must have gotten him worked up. Ficus Brand didn't exist at the time yet, either. I bet he could have made a killing conducting business related to fashion alone. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the demon lord had a direct influence on the creation of Ficus Brand.

Before I knew it, the princess had turned around to face me. The others were also listening to our conversation attentively.

"Hero Touya... Do you believe that the sacred family was at fault for the war?" the princess sat herself back up and asked. She looked solemn. Maybe she had known something about the truth of 500 years ago, too.

Everyone was looking at me now as I pondered. She had asked me this in earnest, so I had to respond in kind. I sorted my thoughts, then opined, "I think they were both at fault, but if I had to say who was more in the wrong, it was the sacred family."

"...May I ask for your reasons?"

"The demon lord... well, Hades as a whole, took advantage of the other countries' ignorance to conduct their business. I think they were taking it too far."

"I suppose that is the case..." She seemed not so pleased by the word "ignorance", but it was the truth, so I hoped she wouldn't hold it against me.

"But I also think the other countries brought it on themselves when they used up all of their own money."

"...I do not deny that."

Even accounting for their ignorance, they should have known better and not spent so much on those luxuries. I of course had no details on what exactly transpired, but I bet they had been pretty generous with their spending.

"Also, starting a war just because they were running out of money is pretty questionable..."

"Ahh... Yeah, I can't say I understand the logic behind that~" Cosmos agreed,

though still sounding ambivalent.

“Ugh...” the princess groaned.

Maybe they couldn’t think of any other course of action at the time, but that was still no excuse to start a war.

“Did you already know something about the reason behind the war 500 years ago, Your Highness?”

“...This is from Jupiter’s point of view, but...”

That made my ears perk up.

“...The demon lord used a cursed power to devour the riches of all the neighboring nations, and the first sacred king committed himself to eradicating that cursed power.”

I looked at Sera on my lap, and she nodded. “The temple of light has passed down the same story.”

“A cursed power? Hahahah, like a god of poverty?” Cosmos joked.

“No, it was more like banks,” I replied.

“...‘Banks’? Excuse me, but what is that?” asked the princess.

“I can explain that. Banks are an institution that exist in our world...” Then Haruno started a little lesson on the world of finance. After she was done talking, the princess fell prostrate on the floor.

“Franchellis?!”

“A-Are you okay?!”

Cosmos and Foley rushed to the princess’ side, then Clena scooted over and whispered in my ear, “What happened to her?”

“She probably figured out the truth.”

“The truth?”

“The sacred family back then didn’t understand the financial structure of Hades, so they assumed it was a curse.”

“So from the sacred family’s point of view, they were cursed, which meant

Hades attacked first.”

“But in fact, it wasn’t a curse at all...”

“Which means the first to attack was the sacred family. From Hades’ perspective, they were essentially being falsely accused.”

“The stuff about how the ‘first sacred king committed himself to eradicating the cursed power’ sounds fishy, too.”

Yeah, the first sacred king was a summoned hero, too. It made more sense to say that they made eradicating the cursed power their goal, and therefore they performed the hero summoning ritual. Though it was still possible that the first sacred king got fired up after hearing their situation.

I looked over to see that the princess was still prostrate on the ground. She seemed like she was actively resisting Cosmos’ and Foley’s help. She was still trembling, too. She was one of the people who summoned us to this world, but she was absolutely not a bad person. In fact, I knew that she was someone I could have a genuine conversation with.

She had a personal doctrine, which caused her to join Cosmos on their journey. But after hearing my story, her core values had been shaken. It was obvious how distressed she was right now. She needed time to sort out all this new information and her thoughts on them, so it might be best to leave her be for now.

“Cosmos, let’s leave the princess here to rest, and we can go outside.”

“...No, I’ll stay. I need to be by her side at times like this!”

“O-Okay...” I looked at the princess to see if she had reacted, but she was still prostrate on the ground and I couldn’t tell. I looked at Foley instead, who timidly nodded. I decided to trust her judgment right now.

“Are you all right, Sera?”

“Y-Yes, mostly...” she said, but couldn’t muster enough strength in her legs to stand.

“Up you go.”

“Kyah...!”

I picked her up like a princess. She was more than light enough. She seemed embarrassed, but didn't resist. She even wrapped her arms around my neck to keep herself from falling. Clena and Haruno looked at me like they had complaints, but I had to help Sera right now. And so the rest of us, including Foley, left the room.



“U-Um...” Foley spoke up after we slid the door closed behind us. “Uh, um... Can you let me meet the demon lord?” Her shoulders were trembling, but she didn’t back down. She wanted to confirm the demon lord’s plans herself. I didn’t mind, but I’d be responsible if anything happened to Foley.

“...Why don’t we make something for him?”

“Huh?”

“Clena will bring some food to the demon lord, and Foley can tag along. Then you can speak with him.”

“I wonder if that would work... Would the demon lord get angry?”

I think he’d be happy, actually. It would be homemade food from his granddaughter, after all.

“I heard that he has a sweet tooth, so maybe we can make some sweets.”

“...Why do you know that?”

“He was a famous historical figure in our world.”

“Eh? So even his food preferences got passed down for 500 years? Do the humans in your world have long life spans?”

Japanese people did have a reputation for having long life spans, but I doubted we could beat elves. Foley still looked like she had misgivings, but I couldn’t provide any more reassurance. We had a quern-stone that could produce sugar now, so I agreed with Haruno’s idea to make some sweets for the demon lord. We’d elevate his mood so that Foley could talk with him. Haruno, Foley, Clena, and Roni made their way into the kitchen. I was going to bring Sera to the bedroom on the third floor, but before that, I asked Haruno what they would be making.

“Hmm, maybe a western dessert, since that would be new for him?”

“There are a lot of similar things in this world, so I’m not so sure about that.” This world did have cakes, though they didn’t have anything like a sponge cake with whipped cream and strawberries on top. “One of the books from Hades said that the demon lord had tried to recreate miso in this world, so we cooked a lot of miso-related dishes for him yesterday... We can’t use it for dessert,

though.”

“Actually, there are a lot of sweets with miso in them.”

“Huh, seriously? But it’s miso.”

“You can make dango, manjuu, cakes, and cookies.”

You could even put miso in cakes? I wondered what it would taste like. Sweet and salty?

“With the ingredients in Ares, I think we can make miso dango and miso cookies.”

Planning out something like this during their shopping trip yesterday was exactly something Haruno would do. I could leave this to her.

We parted ways and I went to the third floor, where I laid Sera down.

“Get some rest, I’ll check on you later...”

“...Hold on, may I ask you something?” She looked up at me earnestly, still lying on the ground. I straightened my back and gave her my attention. “Was it wrong of me to become a cleric of light...?”

That was a difficult question. I wasn’t a cleric, so I wasn’t in any place to lecture her. But I wanted to give her a sincere answer. I stared back at her while carefully choosing my words.

“I don’t think I can deny that the temple of light was in the wrong 500 and 300 years ago.”

“When they attacked Hades, and when they banished the demi-humans?”

“For the former, I’d say it was more that they concealed the truth after destroying Hades.” If you asked me if they could have taken any other approach besides attacking Hades at the time, I wouldn’t be able to answer. But I couldn’t excuse how they had handled it afterward, especially with how they’d treated Rakti. “But I don’t think the followers of the Goddess of Light are in the wrong.”

“But it was us followers who made the wrong decisions...”

“The Goddess of Light never ordered you to attack Hades or to banish the demi-humans, did she? The temple of light isn’t entirely made up of good

people.”

Sera’s eyes opened a little wider. She might have recalled her time back in Athena.

“...You’re right. Some of the people involved were in the wrong. If I don’t acknowledge that, then I can’t take the steps to correct it,” she said, and suddenly sat up vigorously. Light had returned to her eyes.

Did she mean that she wanted to take steps to correct the temple’s actions by herself? I didn’t think she needed to take on that much responsibility, but I bet she thought otherwise. I noted to myself to tell Sandra and the others about this conversation later. As temple knights, they were better suited to handle this than I was. Especially Rin, who could think these situations through with a level head. I could trust her to stop Sera if she tried anything rash, or at least alert me if she did.

“Hey, you couldn’t even stand by yourself earlier. Why don’t you get some rest?”

“Oh? Ahh, you’re right. I’ll do that.” Her cheeks flushed red, probably recalling how she had been carried here in the first place, then she lay down again.

Staying here would continue making her feel antsy, so I decided to leave her alone for now. I went to the entrance of the Unlimited Bath to find Sandra, and sure enough, she and Rulitora were standing guard by the door. I gave them a rough outline of what we had talked about with Cosmos, suggesting that she ask Sera for the details later.

Sandra was taken aback at first too, but she understood my message and told me that she would make sure to bring Rin and Lumis to talk with Sera later. I told them that they could come to me anytime, and she said they’d tell me when the four of them finished talking among themselves later. Looks like I had no choice but to wait for now.

“Rulitora, did anything happen while we were talking with Cosmos?”

“Kopan’s... the Flame Devil’s bodyguards came by, but that was all.”

Thinking about it now, the Flame Devil shouldn’t need any bodyguards. I guess it was to hide his true identity. That aside, if things continued to proceed

smoothly between the demon lord and Clena, it was sounding like a good idea to call Pardoe and the others here soon. Apparently nothing else had happened in the meantime, so I was about to go back inside to clean, but speak of the devil... The Flame Devil was here.

“Happen to have some time right now?”

“...What for?”

He seemed fishy, and there was that incident in Hephaestus, but he had never actually done us any harm. On the contrary, he had done great work for us in Neptune. I didn't know if he could tell what I was thinking, but he grinned at me and continued talking.

“Oh no, it is nothing important. I am just here to relay a message.”

“A message?”

“Yes, yes. Someone has come to visit you two, actually.”

“Who does ‘you two’ refer to?”

“That is, of course, you and Sir Cosmos. A Hero of the Sacred King, Sir Natsuki, has come to visit you.”

“...What?”

One of the five summoned heroes and a Hero of the Sacred King, Natsuki Kannami. The battle-hungry hero had finally appeared. I hadn't heard a peep about him since he'd defeated one of the 16 demon generals, the Beast King.

“...Just to confirm, did he fight his way in?”

“No, he simply dropped by.”

So he didn't come here looking for a fight after hearing about the demon lord...? I didn't want to let him inside the Unlimited Bath before knowing his motives. We had the cyclopes inside, who weren't fit for battle. However, I couldn't stray far from the Bath as long as the door was open.

“Where's Kannami right now?”

“I let him stay in that room. See, the room right over there.”

The Flame Devil pointed to a room by the delivery entrance. I think I could go

that far without having to close the door to the Bath. All right, I could meet him there.

“How many people did Kannami come with? Just one?”

He had gone undefeated while battling his potential party members and had started his journey with the one person who bested him, an elderly general. They should still be a party of two, unless they had found more people.

“Oh no no, he came as a party of three.”

“Three? So there’s Kannami, the old general, and then who?”

“As luck has it, he brought the Beast King along with him.”

“...What?” I was getting more and more confused by Kannami’s intentions.
“...Rulitora.”

“I will accompany you.”

“Leave the guarding to me. I’ll ask Lumis to back me up.”

Both Rulitora and Sandra were quick to respond. I guess Rin would look after Sera in that case.

Our visitor was a fighting addict whose first idea after being summoned was to choose his comrades through battle. If he had brought two party members with him, then I wanted to have two of my own who were strong enough to put up a fight in case it came to that. But Haruno and the others were cooking right now. If the glaupis were with us, I could pick one of the stronger ones, but that was impossible right now. I looked around, wondering who I should ask, then stopped on a certain someone.

“Flame Devil, you’re not busy right now, right? Come with me.”

“Oh?”

If they had a demon general with them, then I’d bring one of the Five Great Demon Generals.

“I’m not sure if you’re our ally yet, but if someone on their side knows your true identity, then they’d want to avoid a fight, right?”

“That is a harsh way of putting it, but you are not wrong.”

“And I don’t know why they have a demon general with them. Maybe they just want to ally with someone who knows more details about the demon lord’s army.”

“I would have preferred if you’d said that part first.”

He rambled a little more to me after that, but eventually agreed to come with me. It seemed like he was doing this for his own amusement, but he still seemed curious, so he wouldn’t try to wreck things of his own accord. Probably.

“Hey, Daisy~!”

“Coming! What’s up?”

“Come with us. If a fight breaks out, can you fly back and alert everyone?”

“Well that’s terrifying!”

I also enlisted Daisy as our messenger, just in case. Now we should be all set.

“What a worrywart,” the Flame Devil scoffed at me, but I ignored him. It was only natural to make preparations in case things went south.

We arrived at the door to the room. I knocked, heard a “Come in,” then opened the door. A fragrant aroma wafted through the air. I’d heard it was customary to burn incense when you hosted visitors in Ares.

The room had a bare wooden floor. It was fairly spacious inside and furnished with an elegant wooden table and wooden chairs. Most of the buildings in Ares were made of earth or rock, so wooden furniture was considered a luxury. This was the case for floors, walls, and ceilings, too.

Kannami’s party had been sitting down but stood up to greet us when we entered the room. All three of them had muscular builds and made the room feel much more cramped.

“It’s been a while, we haven’t met since Jupiter.”

“I’ve heard rumors of your accomplishments.”

Kannami reached out to shake my hand, so I did the same. He was wearing a plain but sturdy-looking sleeveless tunic. His bare arms were sunburnt and showed off his toned muscles. He had always been taller than me, but looked

no slimmer than the last time I remembered seeing him. On the contrary, he seemed mightier than ever. The glint in his eyes made me think of a nimble predator. Daisy must have had the same thought as me, since she let out a little squeak and clung to my cheek.

“This is the first time we’ve talked. I’ve heard all about you guys. My name is Achilles.”

“I am Rulitora. I serve as Sir Touya’s raver.”

A giant old man gave a hearty laugh and slapped Rulitora on the shoulder as he introduced himself. He had a smooth bald head and a white beard. He must have been the old general. He looked like he was getting on in years, but wore heavy plate armor as if it were as light as a feather. He was just slightly shorter than Rulitora, and judging by the sheer bulk of his plate armor, it seemed like he had the body of a gorilla.

“...Why are you here?”

“I have a cordial relationship with the people here.”

A lion demi-human growled at the Flame Devil. He had a similar build to Achilles but looked taller, maybe due to his rich mane. He must have been the Beast King. I was curious why he was here, though.

“I beat him and then added him to my party.” Kannami’s explanation was short and simple. I’d heard that he had defeated the Beast King, but not that he had recruited him as well...

“What a bunch of muscleheads...”

I didn’t know how exactly their party ended up together, but just as Daisy said, they all seemed pretty similar.

“They are both seasoned veterans.” Rulitora said that judging by the demeanors of those two giants, they were both highly experienced fighters.

However, this intimidating aura I felt came not from those two, but from Kannami. I could only assume that he had a battle-oriented gift that more than made up for his lower physical strength. In any case, this party was composed of muscle, muscle, and more muscle. They were a different kind of

extraordinary compared to Cosmos' or my parties.

Kannami placated the Beast King and proposed that we sit down. Everyone besides Daisy, who still clung to my shoulder, obliged, then Kannami started the conversation.

"Where's Nishizawa, by the way?"

'Nishizawa'...? Oh yeah, that was Cosmos' real name.

"The princess collapsed from shock, so he's tending to her right now."

"Shock? Did something happen?"

"This is a good opportunity, so why don't you tell them all about it?" the Flame Devil suggested. He really was here for his own amusement... or maybe he had some other plans.

They had the Beast King with them, so maybe they had already learned a few things about 500 years ago. I think it was safe to tell them about the truth of what happened. And since they would find out soon enough anyway, I let them know that Haruno was here as well.

"...I see, so that's what happened."

It took a while for me to finish explaining everything, but Kannami seemed to take it all in relatively well. I guess he really had heard some of this already from the Beast King.

"I'd heard that Jupiter was the one who attacked first, but I didn't know the reasons behind it..."

"Ohoh, so that was all you knew? But that is understandable, since why would the Beast King know anything about economics?"

"You bastard...!"

I stand corrected: they didn't know much. They knew that Jupiter had been the ones to attack first, so they must have at least surmised that there was another story behind it all. Achilles was holding back the Beast King, who was about to leap out of his seat at any moment. I also whacked the Flame Devil on the top of his head, saying, "Don't taunt him."

I then told them about how the demon lord had reawoken, but the only thing Kannami replied with was “Did he seem strong?” So he wanted to try his hand against the demon lord? If so, please do it somewhere else. If they fought here, I could imagine the entire city ending up in shambles.

“Do you believe all of this, Achilles?”

“More or less. I wouldn’t be surprised if it really was true. It doesn’t sound all that strange. The most important part is whether or not it was a war to protect our country.” As a former military general, his priorities lay with protecting his country first, and everything else second. When he heard about the demon lord’s revival, he got up out of his chair halfway, but then sat back down without a care when I said that he wasn’t planning to fight.

“Can’t we just let the demon lord take care of these guys?” Daisy’s suggestion was a little tempting, but I ignored her for now.

Anyway, Kannami’s party could understand why the princess had collapsed now.

“So now’s not the best time to bother Cosmos...”

“In that case, please pass our message on to him.”

Kannami handed me a flyer. It was plain, with only text in a single color that said *The Great Ares Arms Competition*.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a competition that will be starting soon. By chance we have three—actually, four—heroes here, so why don’t we all enter?” Kannami grinned.

I see, this was why he had come to visit us. The flyer said that we could use our own weapons and armor, so I wondered how far my Magic Eater could take me.

“The winner gets 5,000 Ares gold coins. How about it?”

His eyes were sparkling; he looked like a kid in a toy store. He really did seem excited to participate. We had barely talked back in Jupiter, so I didn’t know he was this kind of person. He seemed eager for me to tell Cosmos about it, but also for my own response. Well, I didn’t have to think about this too hard.

“I’ll have to decline your offer,” I said bluntly. Kannami looked befuddled; he probably didn’t expect me to decline. I moved on to give him my reasons. “Have you heard about how the temple of wind was attacked? We’re taking care of refugees from there right now, and our priority is finding them a place to stay.”

“Wouldn’t the prize money help you with that? It’s 5,000 gold coins.”

“No worries, we’ve got money from some other sources.”

I glanced at the Flame Devil, who grinned back. I had talked with him last night, and he told me that the tatami mats from the Goddess of Darkness’ room could make us money. Furniture made from plant sources was expensive in Ares, so he wanted me to sell him tatami mats for 200 gold coins apiece. That would be enough for us to cover the refugees’ living expenses. The tatami mats were worth more than I thought, but he said that if faith in the Goddess of Darkness were still thriving, then they might have gone for 500 apiece. In any case, I had a way to earn 5,000 gold coins on my own. I didn’t want to fight fellow heroes for just that amount of cash.

“I’ll ask Cosmos about it, though his answer might depend on the princess.”

“G-Got it, thanks.”

And that was the end of our conversation. Kannami didn’t seem to want to push it further, either. We caught each other up on everything else we knew after that, but he brought up one piece of information that I found puzzling.

“Ritsu Nakahana is in Jupiteropolis...?”

“Huh, who’s that?”

“Oh yeah, you wouldn’t know her, Daisy. You could say that she’s a troublemaker hero?”

I’d heard stories of her back in Ceres, but didn’t know that she had returned to Jupiter.

Achilles was diligent about visiting every temple of light along their journey and contacting the sacred capital, Jupiteropolis, and that was how he had found out about Nakahana. Ares had no temple of light, so they didn’t have the latest information, but the last they had heard, she had found a position close to the

prince and should still be there.

“Close to the prince? Wasn’t the prince really angry with her?”

From what I remembered, she had tried to recruit the prince into her party, but he turned her down. She then took her two existing party members and set off on her journey as an excuse to flee Jupiter.

“She apparently brought back an army, and he allowed Ritsu to return for the sake of bringing that army under him.”

“An army...?”

The last I had heard, she was living it up in the mansion of a wealthy landlord in Ceresopolis and gathering battle ravers. Had things escalated that far?

Cosmos’ party had the imperial guards, and until Athena, Haruno had taken the pilgrims of the Goddess of Light with her. Having an army with you was a safe decision, but... How did she end up in a position close to the prince? I couldn’t tell what they were after. I could assume that she had returned because the prince wanted her army, or maybe she had done something with her gift. She had tried to recruit the prince in the past as well, so maybe she had just given it a second shot. But I couldn’t think of much beyond that.

“So Nakahana didn’t do anything to stop the attack on the temple of wind?”

“I can’t say. Though she should have been in the capital around the time that it happened.”

I asked the princess about this later, but she said that she knew nothing more about it. She also contacted Jupiteropolis every time they passed by a temple of light, but they’d had no way of doing so ever since setting sail from Neptune. In that case, there was nothing else I could do right now other than shelving this information in the back of my mind.

Kannami and I made a deal to contact each other if either of us found out anything new. His party wanted to train for the arms competition, so after that, we parted ways.

“You bastard! If you want Clena, go win the arms competition!!”

“I’m not a prize!!!”

“Oof?!”

After that, the Dark Prince dropped by and thrust the same flyer in front of us, but Clena promptly shoved it back in his face. I decided to pay them no mind. The Flame Devil saw this exchange and started rolling on the floor laughing.

The White-Faced Ogre told me that the arms competition had a long history. These days, it was just a yearly tradition, but in the past, a former king of Ares was disgruntled by how his troops kept losing against the demon generals and started the competition as a way to recruit stronger soldiers. Due to this backstory, they asked the demon generals to refrain from participating even to this day.

“So that’s why the Dark Prince didn’t challenge us to a battle there or anything.”

“Yes, he actually cannot participate.”

I was thankful that he didn’t ask to fight us or anything, but I didn’t know if he was actually being nice or not.

**Fourth Bath – The Light of the Goddess,
Obscured by Steam** That evening, we decided to take a bath before dinner and catch each other up on the day's events. I was concerned about Sera, but she had gone into the sauna with Sandra, Rin, and Lumis. She was probably going to talk to them about our conversation earlier. I reminded myself to check in on them if they stayed in the sauna for too long. I listened to what Clena and the others had to report while lying on top of Prae in the cedar wood bath.

“Eheheh~” Prae was the only one of us who used the deeper end of this bath, so I suggested that we all take our bath here tonight. She seemed really happy to have us here. She was hugging me like a stuffed animal as I leaned back, sinking into her. This softness and bounciness gave the third floor bedroom a run for its money. But I felt too much like a little kid like this, so I asked Rakti to come sit in my lap. I rested my weight on top of Prae, burying my head in her knockers, and hugged Rakti's dainty little body on top of me. Ah, this was bliss.

Just like this, I chatted with the others about today's happenings. I told them how Kannami had visited us with the Beast King in tow, about the Great Ares Arms Competition, and that Nakahana was in Jupiter.

“Wow, that's a lot of new stuff...”

“Nakahana is in Jupiter...?”

Unsurprisingly, they were mostly commenting on Kannami's party. They were curious about Nakahana's party too, but we didn't have any more details right

now, so there wasn't much to discuss. No one here was interested in the arms competition, though. I thought Sandra might like the opportunity to test her skills, but she told me "Battles are not for show."

Meanwhile, Daisy was using a bucket in place of a bathtub and talking to Rium and the others about all the scary faces that Kannami's party had made. That aside, they all agreed that it should be fine to have his party around. They hadn't turned hostile even after I told them that I had revived the demon lord, and they had taken in a demon general as a party member as well, so I think we had nothing to worry about.

"We have Yukina here too, so if they told me that they saw all demons as enemies, then I might not have let them go."

"Yeah, I can see you doing that."

Our relationships with the Demon Dog and Flame Devil weren't so bad right now, and I could hold a pleasant conversation with the White-Faced Ogre. The demon lord was, well, Clena's grandfather. That of course didn't mean that we would turn against the sacred family. We were on good terms with Princess Franchellis right now, too. If the demon lord and the generals said that they didn't intend to fight Jupiter, then we could leave them alone for now. They might cause some trouble economically, but the princess had already sent a message of warning, so we had done all we could at this point. Now, the one thing left to focus on was finding a place for the cyclopes and glaupis to stay.

"We should start planning for the cyclopes," I said, which made Prae tighten her arms around me. Woah woah, I was getting buried alive by squishiness. The cyclopes and the glaupis were like family to her. Of course she was worried. If we wanted to make a plan, though, I wanted the assistance of the demon lord's army, who had been living in Ares for the past 500 years.

"How did things go on your side? Did you deliver the miso sweets?"

"Can you get your face out of there before asking us?"

Whoops. I got back up and straightened my posture a bit.

"He didn't say much, but he asked to have more three times, so I think he liked them?"

That sounded like he absolutely loved them.

“What about Foley?”

“They had tea together after he finished eating the sweets. It sounds like she believes that he’s not going to start another war with Jupiter now.” Roni further explained that while Foley had been skeptical at first, the demon lord said that there was no profit to be gained from starting another war, and that convinced her.

“Does that mean that she understood the financial aspect of it?”

“I’m not sure; it sounded like she had made some poor assumptions about him, but when he said that he wouldn’t start a fight, she believed him...”

...Well, as long as she was convinced, we could leave it at that.

On that note, Ricott and the imperial guards had arrived earlier this evening, and we let them stay in the Unlimited Bath. They were shocked to see the inside of the Bath for the first time, but then the princess talked to them about the truth of 500 years ago, and they were hit with an even bigger shock than what they were already experiencing. The princess had yet to fully recover, but now she was busy trying to deal with Ricott and all the guards. Having something to do would help take her mind off things, at least.

Cosmos, in the meantime, said that he wanted to try entering the arms competition. Now the princess had one more thing to worry about, but I could do nothing but watch over them. My condolences. I had one more thing on my mind, but it was something I had to ask the demon lord and the generals about, so I saved it for later when I could meet with them about the cyclopes. Right now, I had other things to do.

“...All right, I’m healed!”

“Are you okay, Touya?” Rakti looked up at me with worry, but her face just healed me even more.

“Will you be okay? Don’t push yourself,” Yukina also asked with concern.

“Don’t worry, I can handle it.”

There was one thing I had to put my mind to, even if it meant making

everyone else worry.

“The demon lord’s army will be coming by tonight, right?”

“Yeah. They said they want to use the bath, too.”

“And we have Cosmos’ party here tonight as well.”

“That’s a lot of people...”

Right, I was going to use all of my MP to generate as much rice and other ingredients as I could to treat all of our guests tonight.

I decided to take a break and headed to the study room on the second floor of the main building. The magic bookshelves that we had taken from Hades were lined up neatly and filled with books, but other than that, this room was barren.

We had asked the demon lord about all of the things we’d taken from his castle, including these bookshelves, but he simply said that we could keep them all. Maybe it was for his granddaughter Clena, or maybe because they had collected dust for 500 years anyway.

“...What’s up?” Rium was sitting directly on the wooden floor, holding a large book that could barely fit between her arms. She spent a lot of her time in this room immersed in our book collection. Right now, she was reading a picture book that we had bought at an auction in Neptune. It was filled with bright and colorful illustrations; it felt pleasant just to admire the pages.

We really did need to put some furniture in here other than the bookshelves. It’d be nice to have a table and chairs, though that might mean that Rium would spend even more time in here. Anyway, I couldn’t relax in this room, so I was going to bring some books to the third floor. It was the most comfortable place besides the tatami room downstairs, which was in use right now.

“I used too much MP, so I’m taking a break. I’m bringing some books to the third floor, do you want to come?” I offered. Rium stared at me silently for a minute, then nodded. I grabbed a few books that caught my interest off the bookshelf, took the heavy picture book from Rium, and we walked to the third floor hand in hand.

I lay down on the giant fluffy bed that took up the entirety of the third floor and started reading. Rium snuggled up next to me and opened her picture book again. She kept close to me without saying a word, and once in a while snuggled up closer as if to remind me that she was there. She was like a kitten. We didn't have anything to talk about since we were reading different books, but it felt nice to spend time together like this. She was the type to enjoy passing her time quietly and peacefully.

The book I was reading was much smaller and thinner compared to Rium's picture book. It was about the religion of the Goddess of Darkness during the time of Hades. Something had been on my mind since we'd arrived at the White Orchid Corporation. None of the demon generals, not even the Demon Dog, seemed to be followers of the Goddess of Darkness. They respected Rakti to an extent, but clearly weren't pious. I was sure she had noticed this by now, too.

A goddess' powers grew in proportion to the amount of faith she received. The demon generals were still alive, and there should be plenty of descendants from Hades here to this day, yet Rakti had lost all her power and was nothing more than an average young girl right now. I had picked up this book because this had been bugging me. It should tell me about what the religion of the Goddess of Darkness was like back in the day.

"Hey, Rium, do you have a moment? Do you know if any of the other goddess religions have books like this?"

"...What kind of book is it?" Rium peered at the book I was holding. She flipped through a few pages, then made a perplexed face. "I've never seen something like this before... Maybe it's unique to the Goddess of Darkness' religion...?"

So none of the other faiths had this. This... sightseeing book of sorts.

At first I thought that this might be a holy script on how to worship the Goddess of Darkness, but upon reading it, I found that it was a guidebook about places to see inside the temple and shop recommendations near it. The book said that the pond in the courtyard, where Goldfish had been hiding, was a beautiful garden that had attracted many visitors at the time.

"This makes the head temple look less like a place of worship and more like a

tourist attraction.”

“That would be crazy for the other temples...”

I could see why they would do it, though. Many shrines in Japan were treated the same way. I bet the demon lord’s army had something to do with this book. I noted to myself to ask the demon lord later about this and the Goddess of Darkness’ religion. It might be a sensitive topic, so I decided to save it for after dinner and somewhere Rakti wouldn’t be around.

Rium seemed interested in the book, so I handed it to her and picked up another. This one was another book from Hades.

“...And this one’s a tour of the castle, huh.”

Apparently the demon lord’s army had put a lot of effort into tourism back in the day.

Dinner went off without a hitch that night. I was worried that there might be another incident like our dinner with the temple of earth’s elder, but surprisingly, Cosmos was a fan of miso soup. He quickly gulped a bowl down and asked for another serving. The princess and the rest of their party looked a little uncertain at first, but they also drank it without complaints.

“This sure takes me back. I like seaweed, but I prefer miso soup with bulkier ingredients in it, like tomatoes.”

“...What is that?”

“Oh, you don’t know?”

Cosmos and the demon lord started talking about their favorite miso soup ingredients. They were actually hitting it off well, probably because the demon lord was interested in learning about all the different foods that he’d never heard of before. The princess and the others were looking at them like they were aliens.

Well, they were getting along, so I think we had nothing to worry about. The princess might have to deal with more headaches, but this lowered the probability that they’d break out into a fight against the demon lord.

On another note, the main ingredient tonight was a seaweed-like plant that

was commonly found around Ares. We selected it because it was readily available to buy and paired well with the miso soup. After being enlightened to the wonders of tomatoes in miso soup, the demon lord demanded that we include them for tomorrow. I think this world did have a vegetable similar to tomatoes... But that aside, did that mean the demon lord was planning to come here every day? For now, I just warned him that I couldn't guarantee that we could find tomato-like vegetables.

After dinner, I asked the Demon Dog to arrange for the demon lord and me to talk. I wanted to know more about what had happened while the demon lord had been sealed, so I asked the White-Faced Ogre and Flame Devil to come, too. The Demon Dog didn't join, saying that he had some work to take care of.

I asked Clena and Haruno to come with me, and we met at the central room on the second floor. We faced each other, three people on each side. The demon lord's lower half was coiled on the ground, and the White-Faced Ogre and Flame Devil sat to his left and right. The two looked like a normal housewife and an ordinary merchant compared to him, so it was a bit of an odd sight.

There was some tension in the air. That was probably between the demon lord and the Flame Devil. They weren't on bad terms, but for some reason, the air always became heavy whenever they were near each other. Maybe the Demon Dog didn't like this atmosphere and had made an excuse to dodge this meeting. On the other hand, the White-Faced Ogre seemed unaffected by them, maybe because she was used to it. I guess those two had always been like this. It seemed like it was best to ignore them and move on to our discussion.

And so I asked the three of them, mainly the White-Faced Ogre, about what had happened to the Goddess of Darkness's religion.

She replied, contrite, "Um... we had to pay heed to the primary religion of this land..."

"...So in order to make Ares your base, you had to convert to the religion of the Goddess of Earth?"

She nodded with a somber expression.

"Also, it would have been impractical for us to continue after we had lost both

our temple and all of our clerics.”

“You lost your clerics? All of them?”

“They chose to remain at the temple back then...”

“But didn’t Goldfish run away?” If I remembered correctly, he was the elder of the temple of darkness at the time. I could imagine him choosing himself over the Goddess of Darkness, though. I see, so although their elder was a problematic one, all those under him were devout believers. Everyone who was connected to the temple of darkness chose to share the temple’s fate, and thus no one was left to uphold the religion of the Goddess of Darkness. Just as the White-Faced Ogre said, they had had no choice but to convert to the religion of the Goddess of Earth.

“...Er, you couldn’t have converted just like that, could you?” Clena rebutted hesitantly.

Come to think of it, she was the only one here who was originally born in this world. Her common sense, as a native to this world, told her that such a thing would be preposterous. I could empathize with them, though. It was like how you could go to a Christmas party, then visit a shrine for New Years a week later.

I recalled learning that the demon lord conducted sieges against religious powers in his previous life. His way of thinking in regards to religion may have differed from ours in modern Japan, but I doubted he was pious either. I took out the temple guidebook I found earlier and showed it to Clena, who flipped through its pages.

“What’s this...? Huh? Is this okay?”

“Ahh, how nostalgic. The demon lord poured his life into this book to increase the number of visitors to the temple.” The White-Faced Ogre’s eyes softened as she looked wistfully at the guidebook. So the demon lord really was behind these guidebooks?

As Clena looked around in confusion, Haruno took the guidebook from her.

“This was to increase business for the shops near the temple, or more specifically, to increase tax revenue, right?”

“More visitors to the temple means more donations.”

“And that’s how you convinced the temple to take part?” Haruno looked straight at the demon lord, but he gave no response. But he wasn’t denying it either, huh. So the Goddess of Darkness faith, or rather its temple, was nothing more than another tool at his disposal.

“Well, faith is something that can change whenever the need arises,” said the Flame Devil, who then reached into his pocket and took out emblems representing the Goddesses of Darkness, Light, Fire, and Earth.

Oh yeah, I did see him at the temple of light before. So he was a follower of light, too?

“Though I admit that I do not follow the Goddesses of Wind and Water. I have not had a chance to visit their temples.”

“You don’t have an issue with being so flighty?”

“Oh, you devout types are so rigid. Joining a temple and making a little donation makes doing business so much easier,” the Flame Devil laughed. Clena’s jaw was about to drop to the floor.

“As you can see, I have carried the Goddess of Darkness’ emblem with me this entire time. Perhaps I am her most devout follower right now!” he laughed even harder. No wonder Rakti’s powers weren’t returning.

“Hmm...?”

I suddenly remembered something. The souvenir that Cosmos gave me. The immortal who fought and lost 100 battles, Phoenix. He was, in a sense, our savior, being the one who summoned Yukina to this world. But the hero summoning spell was cleric magic, and a pretty high-level one at that.

“Um, out of curiosity... Is Phoenix a cleric of darkness?”

“Hm? Ahh, after he was dismissed from being a general, he cooped himself up in the temple. I am not aware if he became a cleric after that.”

I see, so he became a shut-in after getting fired. Since Goldfish was now dead, the top follower of darkness might really be Phoenix. While I mulled over my thoughts, the demon lord asked me inquisitively, “Lad... Don’t tell me you are

planning to use him? He would be of no use to you.”

He hadn’t won a single one of the 100 battles he fought, so of course the demon lord wouldn’t recommend him. His voice had carried an unexpectedly worried tone. Anything involving me would also affect his granddaughter, Clena, so that was understandable.

“But that’s as a demon general, right? He might be of use as a temple elder.”

Phoenix might be a high-ranking cleric who could pull off difficult spells like hero summoning. The demon lord had said that he wasn’t aware if he had become a cleric or not, but hero summoning wasn’t a spell that you could randomly slap together either. If we wanted to restore faith in the Goddess of Darkness, then we also had to rebuild the temple of darkness. As far as I knew, the only cleric we could possibly appoint as a temple elder was Phoenix.

“Well, why don’t we give it a try? Even if he’s not devout, he knows enough magic to become a high cleric. He could at least take the position of elder in name only,” the Flame Devil commented as if to back me up while undermining everything I just said at the same time.

“I never received word of him fleeing the temple after he placed himself there, so perhaps he did take his practices seriously...?” the White-Faced Ogre added. Hopefully he had learned some piety during that time, too.

“...Can’t you use cleric spells, too?”

“I only learned them because they would come in handy.”

The demon lord tried to nominate me. It sounded like he really didn’t want to use Phoenix. I may be the person closest to the six goddess sisters right now, but if you asked if I was religious, I’d hesitate to answer. I didn’t think I would be ready for life as a cleric. Though if we really had no other candidates, I might consider it. Phoenix really was more qualified than I was, so if possible, I wanted him to do it.

Also, the ancient cleric spells that the goddesses had been teaching me didn’t count. The MP costs of those spells were out of this world, and I could feel why they had become obsolete with every fiber of my own being. If becoming a temple elder required that level of magic, then they would have run out of

candidates long ago.

“You are thinking quite hard about this. Does this mean that you are considering reestablishing the temple of darkness?”

“I just want to do something to help Rakti.” That was my primary reason. I wanted to reinstate the temple of darkness as a means to help her, but not because I had become her follower. I felt more like her older brother, or maybe her guardian. Either way, she’d been trying to act like my older sister lately, so she’d probably puff out her cheeks and whack me with her little fists if I said this in front of her. Yeah, Rakti wasn’t an object of worship to me, but an object of protection. Her acting that way was yet another adorable side of her.

“But Touya, where do you plan to do that?” Clena interjected with a worried tone.

“Where? I haven’t really thought that far yet.”

“That will not do,” the White-Faced Ogre reprimanded. “The religions in this world are, in essence, tied to the land in which they have taken root. Fire, Water, and Earth hold especially strong connections to their territories.”

“What about the other three?”

“The sun rises and falls no matter where, and wind always blows throughout the world.”

I saw what the White-Faced Ogre was saying. The Goddess of Fire’s religion had taken root near volcanoes, followers of the Goddess of Water lived under the sea, and adherents of the Goddess of Earth developed their city underground. The spirits had a strong presence in each location, so belief in the goddess who governed each element grew. You could also say that they simply couldn’t ignore the power of the spirits where they lived. Maybe that was another reason why the demons from Hades had converted faiths as well.

The other three faiths weren’t tied to a particular location. That was how Light was able to exert its influence so far, and why Wind had been able to reestablish its head temple somewhere else after being driven out of Athena.

“So where exactly do you think you can build the new temple of darkness?” the Flame Devil asked me again, grinning widely.

I had been hoping to rebuild it in Ares, where the demon lord's army was based, but perhaps that was too naïve. The Goddess of Earth was the type to smile and say "go ahead," but that wasn't necessarily the case for her followers. That, and it would be difficult to put the temple of darkness here, where the presence of the spirits of earth was so strong. So this was why Clena had been worried.

On the bright side, the religion of darkness wasn't stuck to a particular location. Maybe we had to avoid places where white nights occurred, but judging by what the White-Faced Ogre mentioned earlier, it didn't sound like this world had those.

I considered using the island the Phoenix had used as his hideout, but that was right next to the water religion's place of worship. I wanted to find a place that wasn't already inhabited by other believers.

"Do we have no choice but to go somewhere uninhabited...?"

I bet another reason why they moved the temple of wind to the forest of Thebai was because no other religions had claimed that area. The issue was whether or not such a place existed within the Olympus Alliance... Any city with humans would already be occupied by another religion, so that was a no go. The void was not only right under Jupiter's nose, but also a barren wasteland.

I glanced at the demon lord. The void had once been his domain. If I suggested that we rebuild the temple there, he might insist on coming with me. If that happened, I bet Jupiter wouldn't stay quiet.

"Do any of you have any other places in mind?"

Haruno thought for a moment, then shook her head. She only had knowledge of the countries she personally visited, so that was to be expected. Neither the White-Faced Ogre nor Clena had any suggestions either. The demon lord had just recently awakened, and he had yet to catch up on the world's current state of affairs. He remained silent with his eyes closed and a pair of arms folded.

"A place not yet occupied by another religion signifies a place uninhabited by humans. Which, in turn, signifies a place that would be difficult to inhabit. If you wish to reinstate the temple in a place like that, you must be willing to start from scratch in the wilderness." The Flame Devil was the only one who offered

something constructive, but it was also a harsh reality.

In the end, we didn't get anywhere. The White-Faced Ogre said that she would try asking some of the regulars at the White Orchid Corporation about it. She mentioned that this was how she kept up to date on information regarding the surrounding areas anyway. I decided to talk about this with everyone else as well. Maybe tomorrow, after Sera calmed down a little more.

That night, I brought this up with the Goddesses as well. They told me the same thing that the Flame Devil had brought up. Rakti was happy with my idea, but she also latched onto me, apologetically crying, "I'm fine staying like this. Don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

The other goddesses had similar reactions. They agreed that it would be a difficult task, but they were all in favor of it. The Goddess of Earth looked glum, saying how she wished we could rebuild it in Ares. There was nothing we could do about that, so I hoped she didn't feel too down about it. The idea of not worshiping the Goddess of Earth even while living in an underground cave was honestly pretty scary.

Judging by the Goddesses' reactions, there seemed to be a reason why they were eager to restore the temple, or more specifically, faith in the Goddess of Darkness. When I mentioned this, the Goddesses started awkwardly mumbling, but told me that at this rate, Rakti would lose the ability to maintain her corporeal form, and we would no longer be able to go to this dream world. Since this dream world was Rakti's sanctuary, that would mean I wouldn't be able to meet the Goddesses anymore. *So that was why.*

"Rakti is like a little sister to me. Now I have all the more reason to pull this off."

"I'm your older sister!"

"You're so cute, big sis~"

Ignoring her words of protest, I picked up her petite body and spun her around. Her cheeks flushed red as she pouted, but eventually she gave me a bashful smile. Yeah, I had to protect this other little sister of mine.

"...Wah!" I felt envious stares piercing my back and turned around. All five of

the other goddess sisters were gazing at me with expectant eyes. “Umm...”

“Are you sure you only have one ‘cute big sis,’ Brother?”

“You’re right, I have five more.”

After that, I picked up and spun all of them. When I was done with everyone, Rakti begged me to pick her up again, and we all ended up going for three rounds.

From then on, my days got much busier. First, we called for the ketolts and glaupis who had been waiting at the port. For lodging, we borrowed the guest villa that the White Orchid Corporation owned. We couldn’t keep using the Unlimited Bath, since I wouldn’t be able to move from that spot. There was a storehouse next to the villa that the cyclopes could use. It had a high ceiling, so they could stay there comfortably. We did try to pay rent, but they refused. Apparently, since it was the demon lord’s granddaughter borrowing the place, they didn’t want any money.

As for Phoenix—or rather, his skull—he had yet to calm down, so we couldn’t put him back together yet. However, something about the dark spirit stone inside the Japanese tatami room struck a chord with him, so we placed him next to it. I guess he was supposed to be another one of our guests now. He wouldn’t yell if he was next to the spirit stone, so whenever we left the Unlimited Bath, we would wrap him up together with the spirit stone and take him with us.

Meanwhile, Cosmos had signed up for the arms competition. The princess was actually thrilled with the idea. She said that a hero should leave records of his achievements in a competition like this. She was more surprised that Haruno and I weren’t joining. Thus, their party left to rent an inn close to the arena where the competition would take place. They also might not have liked the idea of receiving favors from the demon lord.

I hadn’t seen Kannami again since that day. He had given up on persuading us and was going up to the surface every day to train. They were staying at an inn next to a road leading outside.

“What’s it like above ground here, anyway?”

“’Tis very hot.”

The Demon Dog said that above ground, the sun’s rays blazed on a desert almost entirely devoid of plant life. I did remember seeing that reddish-brown earth when we arrived at the port city, but I hadn’t realized it was so hot.

“Is it like the void?”

“I would assume it similar. I heard that long ago, the Torano’o tribe traveled away from Ares and eventually arrived at the void.”

No wonder everyone lived underground. The demon lord’s castle had also been underground, and I remembered it being much more pleasantly cool there.

Though the underground city was much cooler, the residents still needed their sunlight. The people of Ares valued their time in the sun very much. Resorts were constructed above ground, and mini-golf and falconry were all the rage. The former was native to Ares, but the latter had been introduced by the demon generals. Now, both had become popular pastimes.

The avian monsters that were trained for the sport were called “falcons,” but they were not the same falcons from our world. They apparently even had falcon shows, where they competed to see which one was the best groomed. The demon lord had taken an interest in this and had been going above ground every day lately.

“He got all pumped up and said that he’s going to catch a big and majestic one.”

“So step one is catching them? The Demon Dog showed me the one he owns, and it was really colorful.”

They looked like tropical birds. The Demon Dog’s bird wasn’t that big, but it had vibrant yellow feathers, clear eyes, and a sharp beak. I was curious about keeping a bird monster as a pet, but I honestly didn’t have the time for that right now.

Let me summarize the events of the past several days. We needed to buy a lot of things so that everyone could live at the villa even when I had to close the door to the Unlimited Bath, but that in itself involved me having to leave the

Bath often.

First, we visited the temple of earth, since I needed to discuss the matter of the temple of darkness with them. If they said they were against it, then my idea of restoring the temple would turn into nothing more than a fleeting dream. The temple of earth wasn't against the restoration itself but didn't want it to happen in the underground city. There was plenty of free land above ground, but they didn't recommend trying to develop anything there. Not only did it get unbearably hot, there were also extreme temperature fluctuations between night and day. So basically, "Don't do it in Ares."

Next, we were invited to the royal palace. At first, I thought it was because the demon lord had been revived, but they were actually more interested in the earth altar inside my Unlimited Bath. They had gotten word of it from the temple. I was worried that they would try to seize the altar, but it turned out that they just wanted to pay their respects. And so, we headed to the royal palace with the courteous White-Faced Ogre as our guide. Our group also included Haruno, Clena, Rulitora as our bodyguard, and Roni as our attendant.

"The formal wear in Ares... Oh, it's like the outfit that the daimyo wears in historical movies!"

Haruno told us that those outfits were called *kamishimo*. The name itself came from the Edo period, but the clothing existed during the demon lord's time as well. Hence, I was now dressed like an actor in some historical play. In a fancy daimyo getup, at that.

"They were influenced by us. We have been here with them for 500 years, after all."

The demon lord's army had peacefully assimilated into Ares, but Ares must have absorbed some of their culture in kind. Falconry had spread in a similar fashion.

The girls were dressed in magnificent kimono, as if they were princesses. Roni's kimono was a bit less showy compared to the other two's, but she looked adorable all the same. They didn't have any kamishimo for lizardmen, so Rulitora was dressed in his usual armor. Though lizardmen did live in Ares, they normally wore loincloths. The Torano'o tribe had been similar.

The White-Faced Ogre told us that marsh lizardmen like the ones we saw at the port lived underground in Ares, but sand lizardmen lived above ground. However, they were a different tribe called the Merek tribe, and they had thorns growing across their bodies.

“Are they related to you, Rulitora?”

“No, I believe that was the name of the tribe that drove my ancestors away to the void...”

“...Why did that happen?”

“It was a war over water sources.”

Back then, the sand lizardmen above ground and the dark elves underground often fought to claim the limited water resources in the desert. Many of the palace guards were from the Merek tribe, so there was a high chance that Rulitora would come face to face with them.

“Will you be okay, Rulitora?”

“It is just a story from many hundreds of years ago.”

He said that it ended up being a good thing that their tribe was driven to the void, where they didn’t have to fight over water, so they had no long-standing grudges. Thus, nothing of note happened when we crossed paths with the Merek royal guards. They did look at Rulitora out of curiosity, but it was more due to the dragon bone armor that he was wearing. It was one of our finest possessions, after all.

Then we had our audience with the royal family... They were dark elves who almost looked like an idol group. The prince and princess were said to be close to 100 years old, so I didn’t even want to think about the ages of the king and queen, who could also have easily passed for pop stars.

They paid their respects to the earth altar without any particular trouble, then we had a luncheon. We would be presenting food to the royal family, so the chefs of the palace came to help us cook. They had learned about miso soup from the temple elder, so they requested that we make the “the goddess’ soup.” They too thought it was dirt soup at first, so I guess it was stuck with that reputation now. Well, we could still serve it to them all the same, so for now I

just told them that the correct term was “the goddess’ miso soup.”

Anyway, I was excited to see what the palace chefs would cook up using miso and soy sauce. The ones who would actually be watching them were Haruno and the other girls though, who would be helping them cook. In the meantime, Clena gave me an impromptu lesson on table manners so that I wouldn’t embarrass myself, at least not horribly.

Finally, it was time for the luncheon. Was it just me, or was the royal family’s reaction to the miso soup way bigger than their reaction to the earth altar? Anyway, I brought up the temple of darkness during the meal. The royal family also asked us to do the restoration outside of Ares. They added that since they’d had good relations with Hades in the past, they could offer us aid. Basically, they didn’t want us to encroach on their land but would be happy to establish friendly relations.

The busy days continued, and I was finally about to find some time to relax a week later. The arms competition had already started, and Comos and Kannami were dominating the preliminaries. I really wouldn’t have had the time to participate.

I also tried asking the ketolts and the glaupis what they thought about the temple of darkness, but none of them seemed against it, perhaps because the Goddess of Darkness was originally a goddess of demi-humans. I wondered what the king of Hephaestus would think. I asked Pardoe, who said that he would probably have had the same opinion as the king of Ares. In other words, he would be happy to help as long as it was outside their country.

The glaupis asked me to consider reestablishing the temple of wind as well. I asked who would be the temple elder in that case, and they said that Prae knew enough magic for the position. I refrained from asking whether her personality would be the best fit.

I already had my hands full with the temple of darkness, so working on the temple of wind at the same time was a tall order. Prae said that she also wanted to restore the temple of wind, and I did want to help her, but it was physically impossible for me to rebuild two temples in two different places at the same time.

“Hmm...?” I suddenly had a thought. Did it *have* to be two different places? Ceres had both a temple of light and a temple of earth. Hepheastus also had a temple of light and a temple of fire. It wouldn’t be absurd to build a temple of darkness and a temple of wind in the same place.

The king of Ares and the temple of earth probably wanted to keep us out of Ares because they didn’t want us to compete for followers. However, the goddess sisters all got along with each other. I’m sure they would allow this. In fact, I think they’d be happy about it.

“And maybe we could construct all the other temples too...?”

I was afraid of how the temple of light might react if we only reconstructed the temple of darkness. But what if we also constructed a temple of light, and the other four temples? This might work. It would be something I needed to talk with Sera about. I immediately headed over to her.

These days, Sera had been poring over holy books in her room in the villa. Hence, she had been put in charge of watching over the place while the rest of us were out. We could always rely on Sera and Sandra while we were absent.

“Are you there, Sera?”

This room on the second floor had a sliding screen door, so instead of knocking, I called out to her. A moment later, the door slid open and Sera poked her head out.

“...Do you need something?” she asked, looking up at me. She seemed tired.

I hoped this conversation would lift her mood a bit. I told her that I wanted to consult with her about something, and she invited me into her room. Each room in this villa was furnished simply with a desk, a chair, a bed, a small cabinet, and a clothing drawer. Sera had brought her own clothing drawer and collection of books. The room was as starkly decorated as mine, but the air felt different, maybe because it was Sera’s room.

“What is it that you wanted to talk about?” She gestured for me to sit down in her chair, then she plopped herself down on the bed. The remnants of body heat on the chair made me embarrassed, making me think about how she had just been sitting here. But I couldn’t get carried away by that. I sat up straight

and told her about the idea that I had just come up with, about building all six temples together in one place.

“...Are you suggesting that you will enshrine all six Goddesses in one temple?” she sighed and asked after I finished talking.

“No, I’m thinking of building all six temples in one location.”

She sighed even longer after I said that. Was it that strange of an idea?

“Oh no, that’s not what I mean.” She waved her hands after noticing my look of doubt. “Um... There is one problem with that idea...”

“A problem? What is it? I can try to modify my plans to cover for it...” I asked, leaning forward.

“Th-That’s...” she stuttered. I kept staring at her, not saying anything else, and eventually she sighed again and continued. “...I think the temple of light would be the only problem.”

“...Can I ask why?”

“The Goddess of Light is the oldest of all the goddess sisters. Because of that, it’s always been agreed that she is the most highly ranked goddess.”

“So if the other temples were next to them...”

“...They would likely not want equal treatment.”

In the worst case, they might even drive all the other temples away. Before that happened, they could also induce strife between the other temples.

“Then how about just leaving the temple of light out...? No, that wouldn’t work.”

“...That may cause a conflict that splits the Olympus Alliance in two.”

“But the Goddesses get along so well...”

“I believe you. From what I have researched, there is nothing in the holy scriptures that indicates that the eldest sister is also ranked the highest. However, that somehow became an accepted notion, and it still is today.”

Is that what she had been reading about all this time? If only everyone was as kind-hearted as Sera was, then we wouldn’t have to deal with all these troubles.

“Oh, but what if we made you the elder of the temple of light?”

“I can assist you as much as I can, but as long as I am working for another temple of light...” she trailed off, then we both sighed.

“I’ll try talking about this with Rakti, too.”

“That’s true, it would be best to ask a goddess about issues concerning herself. I’ll continue studying as much as I can about the history of the Goddess of Light’s religion.”

I would continue investigating this from the Goddess’ side, and she from the human’s side. She was a cleric, as much of a specialist as one could be on this topic. I could trust her with this. She called out to me as I was about to leave the room.

“Um, I don’t think your proposal to bring all six temples together is wrong.”

“You brought up some good points, too. Thanks for hearing me out.”

“I’m glad I was able to help,” she said with a feeble smile. She really did seem tired. I wanted to find a solution as quickly as possible, not only for Rakti but for Sera as well.

I went looking for Rakti after that but came across a peculiar sight in the villa’s garden. Rakti was sitting on top of a rock in the garden and Yukina was praying to her. Prae was crouching to the side, cheerfully grinning at them.

“...What are you doing?”

“Oh, Touya. You’re gonna rebuild the temple of darkness, right? So I thought I should start by becoming a follower~”

So that was why she was praying to Rakti. She looked a little uncomfortable sitting on her rock.

“But it doesn’t really feel right. Like, Rakti’s just a kid.”

“I knew you weren’t praying for real! You know I’m Touya’s big sister, right?!” Rakti hopped down with tears in her eyes. Prae went over and softly patted her head with her big hands. Damn, she beat me to it.

“Does that mean you’re my big sister, too?”

“Yeah, I am!”

“...Pff.”

“Did you laugh just now?! You’re laughing! Touyaaa!”

“Okay, there, there...”

“...Yeah, you’re not the big sister.”

I also didn’t feel right calling Rakti my big sister. That was the second reason why I wasn’t a follower of the Goddess of Darkness myself. The first was that if I chose one goddess to follow, the other five wouldn’t stand for it. They wouldn’t get angry at me, but I bet they would sulk.

I talked about my idea of building the six temples in one place, and Rakti reacted with the same apprehension about the temple of light as Sera. Prae was ecstatic about rebuilding the temple of wind. She jumped onto me from behind, enveloping me, and rested her chin on top of my head. She wasn’t light at all, but for now I let Prae indulge herself. It was sounding like the temple of light’s aggression may become a real problem, though.

“But they seem better than before. They have less reason to be aggressive now.”

“Does that mean they might be more accommodating now?”

“Right. They couldn’t afford to back then, and that was why they banished the demi-humans.”

The attack on Hades 500 years ago was because they had been driven to a corner. But if we wanted all six temples to be treated equally, I wondered if they wouldn’t complain about that. Even though the goddesses themselves thought it was the right thing to do.

“The Goddess of Wind wouldn’t care about that,” Prae said from above my head.

The Goddess of Wind was the other goddess I was hesitant to call an older sister. She didn’t look as young as Rakti, but she still looked about high school age. She was the class clown type, and was someone I’d enjoy having as a classmate. I bet she also wouldn’t care about the hierarchy of the goddesses.

“If only we could all get along~”

I could see traces of the Goddess of Wind’s benevolence in Prae as she smiled at me. Come to think of it, she had been able to speak with the Goddess of Wind before. Maybe she had been gradually influenced by the goddess’ personality.

“If only we had some way of making the temple of light behave...”

“Then maybe we could ask momma to scold them?”

“‘Momma’?”

“The Goddess of Chaos. Isn’t she the momma of all the Goddesses?”

My eyes opened wide at Prae’s suggestion. Oh yeah, that might work.

“What do you think, Rakti? We could build a temple for the Goddess of Chaos...”

“That could solve things, but how do we get everyone to recognize Mother’s existence? There are no records of her left, or rather there never were any.”

So she had left nothing behind that could prove her existence.

“If there was one way... It would be to use one of Mother’s spells.”

“A chaos cleric spell, huh?”

“Yes, a high-ranking cleric should be able to tell that it is a cleric spell, but not something from the six goddess sisters. They should be able to realize Mother’s existence from that.”

“...They can tell?”

“We can~”

Even Prae could? Thinking back, she *had* known Rakti’s identity at a glance. Maybe this was the difference between a full-fledged cleric and one still in training. I told myself to pay more attention the next time I used a spell.

“It sounds like this method would only work for high-ranked clerics, but do you think that’s okay?”

“It would at least be a step in the right direction.”

“I’d laugh if a temple elder couldn’t tell.”

“I don’t think that would be a laughing matter, Yukina...”

The “high-ranking” in this case didn’t refer to their position within the temple, but their skill as a cleric. I hoped that the temple elder in Jupiter was powerful enough.

“By the way, as for people who could learn to use that spell...”

“That would only be you, Touya.”

“I knew it.”

Rakti said that step number one was being able to remember the Goddess of Chaos. If we wanted to increase our chances of that happening more quickly, then I should pray to her every morning and night. It was a matter of us meeting in the middle.

“...So how do you pray?”

“Have you never prayed before?!” Rakti exclaimed.

“I’ve done it with Sera and the others a few times, but I just imitated what they were doing and never really thought about it...” I said.

“I think you have to recite something. Phoenix would always be mumbling when he prayed for a long time,” added Yukina.

“That’s probably a verse from a scripture. Memorizing and reciting is the foundation of prayer.”

“I haven’t memorized any scriptures.”

Seriously, Prae?

“Then what do you do?”

“Umm, I talk about what happened that day with the Goddess of Wind.”

She was no longer able to hear the Goddess of Wind now that she’d lost her corporeal form, but she still prayed every day, believing that it would reach the goddess.

“Oh, that’s okay, too. I’m sure your prayers have been reaching Sister Wind. I

think Mother would also be happy with that sort of prayer.”

“I can do that, too!” Yukina exclaimed.

I see. I think I was more suited for that type of prayer as well. Yukina seemed up for it, so we would start praying to the Goddess of Chaos tonight.

That evening in the bath, I told Clena and Haruno my idea of building all six temples in one location, as well as all the opinions I had gathered so far. We had been busy ever since arriving in Ares, so we promised to share the events of the day with each other in the bath every evening. Recently though, I couldn’t help but feel awkward whenever there was a pause in our conversation. I couldn’t look straight at them, so my eyes wandered everywhere else. However, if I looked down, I’d see those four melons, and if I looked around, I’d be goggling at everyone else. Thus, the ceiling received most of my attention during bathtime recently.

I knew what had started all this. It was the Hoshikiri that the demon lord had given me. The original version of that katana had been given to the Dark Prince in his former life when he inherited his family’s estate from the demon lord. Here, he had not given it to his granddaughter, Clena, but to me. When I thought about what that meant... I couldn’t help but get overly self-conscious.

Haruno had noticed it too. I couldn’t say if that made her more competitive, but she had been using every opportunity to glue herself against me. That, in turn, caused Clena try to one-up her. It was hard to endure when the two of them were squeezing up against me like this. In many ways, really. Especially when we were in the bath. Meanwhile, everyone else just stared at us coldly.

The only way I could counteract this was by keeping our conversations going. And so, in order to keep my mind on other things and run away from this situation, or at least postpone it, I kept talking about the temples. Clena had the same opinion I’d heard from everyone else so far.

“Hmm...” On the other hand, Haruno had some different thoughts. “I suppose logically, the mother would be above the goddess sisters...”

“Do you think there’s a problem?”

Haruno said that the issue wasn’t logic, but sentiment. She had witnessed the

wrongdoings of a pastor in Athena, so she had some unpleasant memories associated with the temple of light. Sera and the temple knights shivered at that comment, but I decided to ignore that for now. Sentiment was a tricky thing to deal with, though. We couldn't argue against it using logic.

We'd start getting dizzy if we stayed in the bath for too long, so we moved to the lobby. We changed into yukata, lounged on the massage chairs, and continued pondering.



“We’re getting nowhere... Is there anyone else we could talk to who’s knowledgeable about this...?”

“Someone more knowledgeable than Sera? That would just be the temple elder... Oh, maybe the princess?” Roni responded.

“Princess Franchellis? I wonder...” She did participate in the hero summoning ritual, but that didn’t necessarily mean that she knew more than a full-fledged cleric. She might know a few secrets about the inner workings of the temple, but I doubted she would tell us. “We’ll need to talk to her about this sooner or later, anyway.”

“Shall I make arrangements for you two to meet?”

“...No, let’s save it for later. I bet she wants to focus on supporting Cosmos right now.”

This plan was still in its early stages, so we didn’t have to bother her right now. There were plenty of other things we needed to be working on, anyway. I shelved the temple of light to the back of my mind.

“Roni, can you make arrangements for us to meet the White-Faced Ogre and the Flame Devil tomorrow?”

“Oh? But...”

“Oh, it doesn’t have to be tomorrow. Whenever they have time.”

“No, that’s not it...” What was she worried about? After I tilted my head and prodded her on, she timidly added, “They said that they would be staying over tonight. The demon lord and the Demon Dog, too.”

I sunk into my chair. Well, it was nice that I could talk with them so quickly, but I was tired, so let’s do it tomorrow after all.

I began working even harder starting the next day. Just in case, let me be clear that I wasn’t exactly slacking before this. I just wasn’t the type of person to focus on the religious aspect of things.

Yukina and I prayed to the Goddess of Chaos every morning and night. It was more like we greeted her in the mornings and talked to her about our days at night, but Rakti said that this was perfectly fine. I saw the Goddesses in my

dreams every other night. To be accurate, I also saw the Goddess of Chaos on the opposite nights, but I couldn't remember those dreams. This wasn't something we could fix immediately, so I just had to patiently keep at it.

During the day, I was running around raising funds. We hadn't decided where to reestablish the temple of darkness yet, but we needed money for it regardless. The White-Faced Ogre, Flame Devil, and I made a business agreement to sell products generated in my Unlimited Bath. I had also considered liquidizing our hoard of treasures, but unfortunately Ares didn't have auction houses like Neptune did.

Therefore, I decided to supply goods to the White Orchid Corporation. Ares had a lot of demand for cold, clean water. They could also sell soap and towels as luxury items. The only thing from the quern-stone and the faucets that could be sold was sugar. The vinegar was high quality, but the residents of Ares wouldn't embrace the flavor so easily. The same went for the miso and soy sauce. As for salt, Ares was already exporting it. The drinks were in demand, but they were so cheap that there was little profit to be made from them.

However, sugar was not only a luxury item, but also in demand everywhere. It was also high purity, which meant it could easily sell for a high price. This got the cash flowing. The White Orchid Corporation supplied us with containers, which I filled with sugar and delivered back to them. They sold it for me and controlled the supply so that the price wouldn't collapse.

Next, the Flame Devil asked me to entrust him with tatami sales.

"Do you have potential buyers?"

"Though he may not look it, this man has connections with the elite."

"Oh, we simply share some hobbies. It is no big deal." His bragging tone completely invalidated his humble words.

I didn't have any connections of my own, so I gave him some samples and left it all to him. When an order arrived from the Ares royal family the next day, I thought it was some kind of prank.

"Heheheh, just you wait. I'll create a tatami flooring boom throughout Ares."

"He's planning to use this opportunity to popularize tea ceremony as well."

“I mean, that’s not like an evil ulterior motive or anything, so let’s just ignore him.”

I just had to hope that he didn’t have any *other* ulterior motives.

I would need some connections of my own for our current goals. I couldn’t keep depending on the White Orchid Corporation and ignoring other influential figures in this country. The Flame Devil was incredibly proficient at getting me access to those connections. No wonder he was able to make his way into the temple of light, too.

“You can’t just go and meet them without a retainer. Take Roni with you.”

I had just intended to take Rulitora as my bodyguard, but Clena said that that wasn’t enough. For safety’s sake, I needed more guards, and I should also have two maids. It was okay if one of them was a butler instead, or I could have a butler next to me and two maids waiting behind. In short, it was a matter of appearances. She also said that I couldn’t use Rakti as a maid. If I was going to advocate for the temple of darkness, and they later found out that I used the Goddess herself as my maid, there would be hell to pay.

In other countries, we would also need a horse-drawn carriage, but the roads here were too narrow for that, so it was fine to walk. However, that also meant that we needed even more bodyguards.

“In that case... Guess we’ll have to show off a bit.”

I gathered the following members.

“Leave your protection to me.”

First off was the usual suspect, Rulitora. He would be captain of the bodyguards.

“I’ve prepared my special breastplate!”

Since we would be visiting the homes of the elite, I brought Shakova, who was the most familiar with fashion out of all of us. Needless to say, the breastplate that he mentioned was homemade.

“I wish I got to be a maid too. They’re so cute~”

Prae asked to be a maid, but she might not fit inside many of the homes, so

she was a bodyguard instead. I did order a maid outfit for her, though. It would have to be custom-made due to her size, but if it made her happy, I would gladly pay the price.

“I admit, I’m nervous to be included in this party.”

I also asked a glaupis warrior to come with us. His skills stood above the rest.

“If you don’t know how to respond to something, just give me the signal and I can handle it.”

I brought Roni as one of my maids at Clena’s request. She was used to dealing with nobles.

As was obvious from the group so far, I took this many demi-humans with me on purpose. This was to show that I wasn’t prejudiced against demi-humans; in fact, I welcomed them.

“Hey, hey, Touya, does this look good on me?”

It might raise eyebrows if I only had demi-humans with me though, so my other maid was Haruno. Her position in our group was more like my secretary or strategist. I was going to suggest something more businesslike for her to wear, but she herself wanted to dress up as a maid. She had bought the outfit when they went to Ficus Brand the other day.

And so a bit over half a month went by as we conducted our negotiations with the Ares elite. We weren’t meeting people back to back, but I did have the Flame Devil work on making our next arrangements every day.

I tried talking about my plans to restore the temple of darkness and build the other temples, but they all had similar reactions to the royal family and the temple: They wouldn’t mind as long as we did it outside of Ares. I guess that was the nature of the people in this country. However, several of them said that they would send aid when we got started on construction. That alone made these meetings worth the effort. It sounded like a good plan to continue gathering supporters like this.

The arms competition had also been progressing steadily over the past half month. I was surprised that it had taken so long in the first place, but apparently this was normal since they had so many participants. Unsurprisingly,

the heroes were kicking up a storm over there. The Beast King had been knocked out after matching up against Kannami early in the tournament, and right now the semifinals included Kannami, Cosmos, and Achilles. I had wondered if Cosmos was breaking any rules with his Unlimited Bullet, but apparently it counted as magic so it was allowed.

The fourth person to make it to the semifinals was a young knight from an aristocratic family, a rising star who carried some high expectations. His opponent was Cosmos. On the other side of the bracket was Kannami and Achilles. Depending on the outcome here, the finals may be a clash between two heroes of the sacred king.

I had been asked several times why I hadn't joined even though I was a hero. I couldn't just say that I didn't want to fight the other heroes, so I told them that I was too busy with the temple and other matters. Hey, it wasn't a lie.

Anyway, they were livening up the arms competition even more than it usually was every year. The demon lord had been going to spectate every match. Clena had been joining him, along with Yukina and Daisy. Man, those two really had no sense of fear. Well, I guess it was just like going out to watch sports with your family, so there was nothing to be afraid of.

"Roni, what are our plans for today?"

"We don't have any plans to go out, but the White Orchid Corporation said that they're running out of sugar."

"...Didn't we just restock some for them?"

"It sounds like it's selling well!"

"I guess today'll be a sugar generating day."

"Everyone will be happy to hear that."

"Cause it means you get to use the pool," I sighed and shrugged. Roni giggled.

We had been going out so often lately, so we'd hardly been using the Unlimited Bath. I was sure everyone would be excited when they heard that they'd have unfettered access to it all day today.

The semifinals should be starting about now. I couldn't go watch, but I rooted for Cosmos and Kannami to make it to the finals. The excitement from the arms competition was elsewhere. I'll just spend my day in peace and quiet here. At least, that was what I had planned...

"Touya, bad news~!"

...but Yukina and Daisy crushed those plans as they came flying inside.

"Bad news, Touya! It's an abduc... abdububub...!"

"Calm down." Yukina was too panicked to form a complete sentence right now, so I asked Daisy, who was more composed, what was going on.

"Uh, well... There was a kidnapping."

A kidnapping? At the arms competition? Maybe this was a clichéd scenario where Cosmos' opponent took the princess hostage and threatened "if you want her back, then lose in the semifinals on purpose!" or something.

"Cosmos never showed up! So the princess thought that he might have been kidnapped!"

Wait, he was the one who was kidnapped?!

Clena was rushing back here along with the princess, and these two had flown on ahead to alert me. In that case, I should go ahead and get started.

"The sugar can wait. Roni, find a map and bring it to the open-air bath upstairs."

"Huh, to the bath?" she asked in confusion.

I gave her a confident smile. "The bath upstairs, where we can look outside. It has its uses at times like these, right?"

Yukina and Daisy followed me to the indoor open-air bath. After we arrived, it was Rium and not Roni who brought over a map. Roni was getting the place ready for the princess when she arrived. Of course, we wouldn't be taking a bath, so we kept our clothes on. Yukina said that the princess never received a threatening letter or anything of the sort, and she couldn't think of anywhere Cosmos might have gone.

“He was with the princess until this morning, right?”

“They’re staying at the same inn, so that should be the case.”

“The princess said that she had some business this morning, so she left first.”

I wanted to wait until we got more information from the princess, but for now, let’s do what we could to search. There were few ways you could move between neighborhoods or go above ground in this city. From the central neighborhood, where the arena was, there were three roads going to other neighborhoods and two leading to the surface. I projected one of the roads leading to the surface on the screen, the one that was closer to the arena. A bustling crowd appeared across the entire screen. It was like we were watching a live broadcast on TV.

“Try looking around, everyone.”

“Got it.”

“...Okay.”

I couldn’t project more than one location at a time, but we could search faster with everyone’s eyes on the screen.

“Oh, Balsamina might be with Cosmos.”

“Really?”

“She doesn’t seem to be getting along very well with the princess and the rest of the party.”

Since she was rather forcefully persuaded by Cosmos to join the party, she wasn’t fitting in with the rest of the group yet. Cosmos was the only person she was used to, so she spent most of her time around him.

“Cosmos and Balsamina were the last in the inn this morning, and they might have both vanished at the same time.”

Maybe Balsamina had made some sort of request, and Cosmos had put that on priority. That would be a fine outcome to all this. They’d get mad at him later, and that would be the end of that. But I set that possibility aside. We should keep searching under the assumption that he had been kidnapped right now.

I moved the projection above ground, where we saw a big garden resort. The imperial guards were frantically asking the dark elves questions. I checked the other roads, and each of them already had imperial guards doing investigations.

In that case, let's try somewhere else. I positioned the camera high in the sky so that we could see into the distance. The desert above Ares had little vegetation. The only inhabitants were the Merek tribe, whose settlement was located a bit farther off. I couldn't see anything that could work as a hiding spot, and there were no signs of anybody around.

"Okay, next."

I moved to the port, the other main way out of Ares. Just like the last time I was there, it was crowded. Though we couldn't hear anything, I could tell it was bustling and lively. I spotted human merchants here and there. There were also some demi-humans we didn't see at the center city, such as marsh lizardmen. In contrast, I didn't see anyone from the Merek tribe here. Perhaps they couldn't stand the humidity and ocean winds, like Rulitora.

There were more people to search through here, but we split up the work and looked around again. I changed the view every once in a while. Suddenly, Rium raised her voice.

"...I found Balsamina."

"Where?!"

I looked to where she pointed and saw a red-haired demon girl sneaking around behind a row of barrels. Yukina confirmed that that was indeed Balsamina.

"Cosmos doesn't seem to be with her..."

She was alone. I didn't see Cosmos anywhere nearby.

"What's she doing?"

"She seems to be looking around pretty restlessly."

She was fidgeting, too. Was she also trying to look for Cosmos?

"Touya, Clena just came back! She's with the princess' party and the White-Faced Ogre," Crissa ran inside and called out to me.

“Bring them here right now. We might have found a clue.”

“Wha? Oh, yes! Right away!” And she darted back outside.

We waited a short while, then Roni came back with Clena, the White-Faced Ogre, Princess Franchellis, Ricott, and Foley in tow. Of course, everyone was still dressed. Crissa was handling the other imperial guards right now.

“Wh-What is all this...?” The princess was stunned seeing the screen surrounding the bath for the first time.

Clena gave her a sidelong glance and smiled. “It looks like you’ve been taking care of things here.”

“Yeah, we’ve been searching around using this.”

“Okay, I’ll leave everyone here to you. I’ll be going back with the White-Faced Ogre to the shop.”

“Got it. Be safe.”

Clena waved and walked off. The White-Faced Ogre bowed then followed behind her. Now then, time to get talking. I gave a brief overview of this screen, then told them that we had found Balsamina.

“...The goddess would not bestow such a gift to someone who would use it for ill deeds,” the princess mumbled, covering her mouth with a folding fan.

I bet it wasn’t just my paranoia telling me that she was saying that to console herself. She probably wondered if I was using it to peep. I understood why she might think that, but she seemed to have already convinced herself that it was okay, so I made no comment. It was rare for me to take baths alone anyway, so I never had a chance to peep.

“That is indeed Balsamina.”

“Why is she all the way there...? Is she trying to escape?”

Foley and Ricott were inspecting the image of Balsamina right now. Had she been so uncomfortable with them that she would try to run away?

“None of us have been treating her poorly because she is a demon, but she has had a history of bad luck with being forced into parties...” the princess

added as I looked at them.

“Was it that bad?”

“No matter how many times Cosmos tried to persuade her, she refused, until she finally lost to his perseverance...”

“So we’re unsure how much she actually accepts the situation that she’s in right now.”

“Maybe it would be best if we let her escape...?”

The three of them exchanged dubious glances. I could see how it had been difficult for them to get along now. It would have been convenient if she could be tamed by food like the Demon Dog was.

“Maybe she’s looking for a ship she can stow herself onto?”

“What about the possibility that she’s trying to tail the ones who kidnapped Cosmos?”

“I wonder about that...”

The princess and Ricott looked at each other doubtfully. At this point, I couldn’t tell if Balsamina was just being shy, or if she really was uncomfortable around them.

“Did you all find out anything new?”

“We searched the house of Cosmos’ opponent, but did not find anything there...”

The princess said that the opponent was no longer one of their suspects, but now it was even harder to narrow down who it may be. Indeed, now we couldn’t even guess what the possible motive for his kidnapping might be. Was it completely unrelated to the arms competition?

“Touya, she’s going somewhere!”

In the meantime, Balsamina had taken off. She flew closer to the boats and was inspecting them one by one. Maybe she really was searching for one to stow away in.

“It looks like we should go meet up with her.”

“Right, even if she happens to find Cosmos in one of the boats, if they both take off, then we wouldn’t be able to keep track of them.”

“Please excuse us.”

Out of courtesy, we escorted the princess out of the indoor open-air bath to where the rest of the imperial guards were waiting.

Ricott adeptly called out orders, and Foley took two of the guards and went on ahead. The princess, Ricott, and the remaining guards would soon follow behind her.

“Sorry we couldn’t be of more help.”

“No, thank you for letting us know that Balsamina is at the port. Now then, we will be off.”

Ricott gave a quick bow, then ran off in the direction of the port in pursuit of Balsamina. *Hopefully Balsamina knows where Cosmos has gone off to*, I thought as I saw them off.

After the princess and her party left, I returned to my task of generating sugar. When that was done, I decided to take a break in case the princess called for help. I wanted to recover my MP, so I closed the door to the Unlimited Bath and went to the villa to rest.

We never heard back from them, though, and soon it turned to night. I didn’t know if that was a good sign or not, but I hoped that things were going well.

“...She’s late.”

On another note, Clena still hadn’t come back. Maybe she was planning to return with the demon lord for dinner as usual. But even then, it was getting a little too late for her. I was feeling uneasy. Because of the incident with Cosmos earlier, I couldn’t get the word “kidnapped” out of my head. The anxiety wouldn’t let me sit still, so I went outside and saw Rulitora and Lumis standing guard by the entrance.

“Is Clena back yet?”

“We still have not seen her...”

Rulitora and Lumis looked concerned, too. We started talking about going to

the shop to get them when the Flame Devil arrived. He was with his three bodyguards, but still no Clena.

“It doesn’t look like you came here to escort Clena back to us.”

“About that...”

He was acting uncharacteristically unsettled. A feeling of dread welled back up inside me, transforming into alarm bells ringing inside my head.

“...Lady Clena has been kidnapped.”

I knew it, I immediately thought. I’d had a gut feeling that something like this was going to happen. I wasn’t too surprised as a result, but a torrent of distress still washed through my chest. A bead of cold sweat slid down my cheek, and my palms became clammy.

“When? Do you know who kidnapped her? Cosmos was kidnapped too, do you know if that has anything to do with it?” I drew up to Flame Devil and fired a barrage of questions at him. However, he didn’t answer, instead just telling me, “Let’s go inside for now...” Lumis also motioned for us to enter the villa.

Two of the Flame Devil’s guards remained at the front gate, and the third came with us. After we arrived at the lounge, Lumis returned to the entryway, and Roni took her place inside a moment later. She had brought drinks, but I noticed that the tray she was holding was shaking.

“...Did you hear?”

“Yes, from Lumis just now...”

“We’re going to go over the details right now, so sit down with us, Roni.”

“Y-Yes!”

Roni and I sat opposite the Flame Devil, each on our own sofas. His bodyguard was standing by diagonally behind him. I finally calmed down after seeing Roni so shaken, thinking how I needed to be supporting her. I took a sip of the drink she had brought me, then gestured to the Flame Devil to start speaking.

“It seems you have calmed down.”

“Yeah, so tell us what happened.”

“Well then... Clena was attacked on her way back to the villa. The White-Faced Ogre was accompanying her.”

“Who attacked her?”

“The Dark Giant.”

The guy we fought at the water capital, huh. Which meant it must have been an order from the Dark Prince.

“The White-Faced Ogre was able to prevent a fight from breaking out, but the Dark Giant’s subordinates had been hiding nearby. They caught Lady Clena off guard and took her away.”

Roni’s face tensed up. *Don’t worry, it’ll be okay. I’ll make sure to bring her back.*

“Was the demon lord not with them?”

“The demon lord was invited to a party hosted by the Ares royal family today. I heard that he had asked Clena to come with him, but...”

But Clena turned him down, huh. So the assailants took their chance when Clena wasn’t with him.

“I have three questions. Was it a coincidence that they attacked Clena while she was on her way home today?”

“...We have confirmed that a few employees in the White Orchid Corporation were working under the Dark Prince.”

So that was how they’d gotten the information.

“Did the Dark Giant escape?”

“No, the Demon Dog chased after him, and he and the White-Faced Ogre were able to pin him down.”

He added that after the Demon Dog had beaten him to a pulp, he ran off following Clena’s scent. *That dog’s pretty strong, huh.* The White-Faced Ogre then took the Dark Giant back to the shop, where she locked him inside the room deep underground where the demon lord had slept. Then the demon lord placed a seal on the room, so it’d be impossible for him to escape of his own

accord.

“Back in the day, the demon lord would often go easy on the Dark Giant, but he’s not going to forgive him this time around.”

If he were still causing trouble, I’d have taken the Gravesword and given him a good whacking, but since he’s already been captured and locked up, then whatever. Clena was more important right now.

“My last question—do you know where they took Clena?”

“We found out that the Dark Prince has a few bases of operation in the city center, but we have yet to find any leads...”

“Tell me everything else you know right now. I’ll investigate what I can, too.”

“Then let us go to the shop. They may have beaten some new information out of the spies by now.”

“I-I see... Okay, let’s go. Roni, you get ready, too.”

“Y-Yes!”

“I shall accompany you.”

The Flame Devil offered to take us there with his bodyguards, probably out of consideration of the possibility that I could be attacked too.

I put on the Magic Eater, attached the Hoshikiri to my hip, and carried the magic axe Crescent Moon and a round shield in my hands. I wanted to carry the Gravesword on my back as well, but that would be too much weight, so I asked Rulitora to carry it instead.

Besides Rulitora, I had Roni, Haruno, and Rium come with us, and I also took Daisy as our messenger just in case. There was a chance that the villa might be attacked while we were gone, so I left enough combat-ready party members behind. Sandra and Sera would be in charge of them.

After we finished getting ready, we went to the White Orchid Corporation with the Flame Devil and his bodyguards. The armor was really conspicuous in the city streets, but this wasn’t the time to be worrying about that. We arrived outside the shop to find a swarm of people rushing about, even though it was nighttime.

“What’s this...?”

A menacing aura was emanating from the building. Daisy cowered from my shoulder, tightly clinging to me. The people around the shop looked terrified as well. Rium also hugged my waist; she probably also got scared. Rulitora and Roni appeared to be unaffected, but I noticed that Roni’s tail was curled inward and trembling. I was about to go inside to see the demon lord, but the Demon Dog appeared first.

“Weren’t you off tracking her scent?”

“I was indeed, but the scoundrels threw a stink bomb at me...”

His nose was useless after that, so he couldn’t trail them any longer. I noticed that his fur was damp; maybe he had gone to wash the stink off. The assailants must have known that the Demon Dog would be around, and they had taken measures in advance to incapacitate his tracking abilities.

“By the way, what’s this incredibly menacing feeling in the air?”

“...’Tis the demon lord.”

According to the Demon Dog, the demon lord had gone ballistic when he heard that his granddaughter had been kidnapped. The White-Faced Ogre was desperately trying to pacify him in the back of the store, but his wrath couldn’t be contained and was leaking out.

“Thanks to that, the Dark Giant has been keeping quiet, but ’tis both a blessing and a curse.”

“Why did he kidnap Clena then, if this is already making him so scared?”

“He had thought that Lady Clena was preventing the Prince from acting freely...”

The Dark Prince had wanted to become the new demon lord, but ever since reuniting with Clena, he stopped pursuing that goal. But the Dark Giant, one of his supporters, assumed that the reason behind his change of heart was that Clena wasn’t on their side, so he took her by force to push the Dark Prince back on that path. From the information gathered so far, that was what they’d surmised to be the motive behind the kidnapping.

“Also, this was carried out by the Dark Giant of his own discretion. The Prince was not aware of it...”

“...How much can we trust that?”

“We do not believe he is lying right now.”

“This is hardly the first time that man has tried to take matters into his own hands,” the Flame Devil affirmed. I suppose we could trust this bit of information.

The goddesses had told me that we’d already prevented the Dark Prince from becoming the new demon lord, but the Dark Giant hadn’t given up on it yet. It was at least a relief that he wasn’t intending to harm her.

“Tell me everything you’ve learned so far. Including how far you were able to track them, Demon Dog.”

“Understood. Please behold these documents. This is the latest intel we’ve obtained from the spies that were hiding within the White Orchid Corporation. I was just about to inform the demon lord of this.”

The Demon Dog showed me several maps, each depicting a city in Ares, with locations marked on each. There were even three circles marking his hideouts in the city center.

The Dark Prince had probably split up his followers so that they wouldn’t be detected by the White Orchid Corporation. The spies didn’t know where the attackers had taken Clena, but judging by the trail that the Demon Dog had sniffed out, we could narrow it down to two locations. The horde of people in the shop right now were preparing to storm those two hideouts. I was about to ask if we should join forces with one of the groups when Haruno cocked her head and asked, “Hmm... Since they threw a stink bomb to prevent you from tracking them, isn’t there a chance that they went in the opposite direction after that?”

Everyone looked at Haruno. She had a point, that could have been their plan.

“Even so, we cannot ignore these two bases.”

“If we cannot find them in any of the bases, they may have run somewhere

else entirely.”

“...What are you planning to do after this, Flame Devil?”

“Now that it has come to this, I am willing to assist. I will lead the charge on one of the bases, yes.”

He was suggesting that we split up the work and assign a leader to each group.

“What about the demon lord? I doubt he’s going to stay put while his granddaughter has been kidnapped,” Rulitora asked.

“Oh, if the demon lord were to set out to retrieve the lady, then not only the city itself, but the entire cave system would be blown into smithereens...” the Demon Dog responded with a strained smile.

I see, so that meant that we needed to rescue Clena while the White-Faced Ogre restrained the demon lord. I bet he was worried sick about her too, but we couldn’t have him destroying Ares.

“What should we do, Touya?”

“Hmm... How about we have these two go to the two bases as planned, and we’ll search the third one?” If we couldn’t find her there, then we’d search the bases in the other cities, too. The screen in the indoor open-aired bath could get the job done quick. “Though if we do find her, we have no way of contacting you.”

“No matter. We need to take control of the other bases, either way.”

“Okay, let’s go with that.”

I asked them to prepare as fast as they could, then we went to the delivery area. We entered the door to the Unlimited Bath, went to the indoor open-air bath, and checked out the location circled on the map.

“It looks like a normal house.”

“It doesn’t stand out at all.”

Houses in this city only had doors and windows, and since they weren’t decorated with signs like shops were, they looked very plain from the outside. If

it weren't for the intel from the spies, we'd have had no way of finding this place other than a brute force search of every building in the city.

The inside of the house wasn't too lavish, but it was still decorated with elegant-looking furniture. A male dark elf sat not far past the entrance. A female dark elf was cooking something in the kitchen. The amount of food seemed to be a bit too much for two.

"Hmm...? Hey, Touya, isn't that a hidden door?"

We were looking around the rest of the house when Daisy pointed at the floor at the end of a hallway. I zoomed in on the area, and though it was hard to tell, there were indeed slits in the floor there.

"Is there something below?"

We didn't know how to open it, nor could we if we did, but we could still look past it. I moved the screen downward and revealed a staircase that led to an underground room. This room was many times more extravagant compared to the rest of the house. It wasn't a Japanese-style room, but it had a Japanese flair. There was a table in the center of the room with two sofas facing each other on either side of it.

"There she is!"

A silver-haired man sat on the sofa facing away from the door. He wasn't wearing a helmet, but I could tell who he was by the rest of his armor. It was the Dark Prince himself. On the other side was Clena, sinking into the sofa with a disgruntled look on her face. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the Dark Prince seemed like he was trying to persuade Clena of something, while she hardly acknowledged his presence.

This incident had apparently been carried out at the Dark Giant's own discretion, so he was probably trying to tell her that he hadn't ordered it. Clena didn't look completely angry at him, but she didn't seem willing to listen to his excuses, either. She was safe right now, but who knows when the Dark Prince might blow a fuse and take her away somewhere. We shouldn't waste any more time.

I asked an employee back in the shop to tell the demon lord the news, but he

gave me a look that said he was clearly unwilling. Even so, we had to leave to rescue Clena now, so he had to be the one to do it. I told him that he should pass the message on to the White-Faced Ogre, at least.

The six of us left for the house in question. Rium rode on Rulitora's shoulders. We had to push through pedestrian traffic, but Roni and Daisy weaved through the crowd as if they were threading a needle. The rest of us weren't nearly as agile with our heavier armor, but the crowd moved out of the way at the sight of us. Thanks to a combination of the weight of our armor and our individual physical stamina, Roni and Daisy quickly blazed ahead of the pack, Rulitora and Rium followed a bit after them, and Haruno and I lagged even farther behind them.

Haruno looked like she still had some stamina left, unlike me, but I wanted to believe that it was just due to the difference in armor weight. I was tempted to use earth spirits to help us run, but that would involve shifting the ground below us, so I couldn't use it in the city.

We kept running as if our lives depended on it, and we finally arrived near the Dark Prince's hideout. I wanted to take a moment to catch my breath, but every wall in the city was lined with doors and windows, so I couldn't hide myself anywhere.

"Touya, there's a shop over there."

"Looks like it's open. Let's go in there for a minute."

We went inside the shop to stake out the hideout. While I was busy catching my breath, Roni asked the shopkeeper about the residents of the house in question. We paid him for both intruding and the information, which made him break out into a beaming smile; he even brought us drinks.

The shopkeeper said that a dark elf couple had been living in that house for about ten years, but they didn't get along with the neighbors, so he hardly knew anything about them.

"What business do you all have with that house?"

"We came to rescue one of our comrades who was abducted."

"Huh? You don't mean..."

“Did you see her?!” Roni drew up to the shopkeeper’s face, and he quickly nodded.

He believed us after seeing Roni’s frantic reaction, so he told us that a man wearing a full suit of black armor, similar to mine, had gone inside with a silver-haired girl. A full suit of black armor—that was likely the Dark Prince.

“Does that man come by often?”

“Occasionally. He’s the only one who ever visits that house. Though he doesn’t usually show up in that armor. I didn’t recognize the girl, though...”

The girl was likely Clena. The assailants had probably handed Clena over to the Dark Prince at another location, then he took her here.

Okay, I had caught my breath now. That was enough information gathering.

The homes in Ares looked identical at a glance, but the doors and windows could be unique. Since wood was an expensive commodity, doors were usually thin and made from light metal—dense metal would be too heavy to open. Some homes were even just covered by a curtain. The shop we had invaded was like that.

The door to this house, though, was made of polished wood. You could tell that the owners were affluent. There was a window next to the door, but it was covered by a curtain. I made sure to stand away from the window in case someone was looking through the cracks on the other side.

Roni knocked... but there was no answer. Maybe they had a secret knock? If that was the case, we’d have no way of guessing it.

“Let me take a look.” I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath next to the house’s door, then used the screen to confirm that Clena, the Dark Prince, and the two dark elves were still inside. *Okay, no holding back.* I ran back outside and ordered Rulitora to destroy the door.

“Hrmph!” Rulitora smashed his fist into the dense wooden door, demolishing it. We immediately went inside and saw the male dark elf stand up and draw a knife from his hip. However, Rulitora and I swiftly pinned him down, then tied him up with rope.

“...This, and this, and this.” Rium walked over. She took his knife, which had a pattern engraved on the blade, a short wand affixed to his waist, and last, a ring with a small gem in it.

“What are those?”

“He can’t use magic as long as he doesn’t have these.”

They were magic conductors, like Clena’s sword. This guy was dressed like an ordinary upper-class townspeople, yet he was anything but.

“Who are you?!” A woman appeared from another room with a wand in her hand. She shot two fire arrows, but Haruno stepped in front of us and the arrows vanished before they could hit her. That was her gift, Unlimited Reflection. The woman froze when she saw her spell vanish into thin air. Roni used that opening to dash up to her and strike the wand out of her hand while Rulitora circled around and pinned her arms behind her.

“She has a ring too, and...”

“Wha?!”

Rium walked up and took a ring from the woman, but then she poked her head underneath the woman’s long skirt.

“...This too.”

She rummaged around under the skirt for a moment, then came back out with another wand in her hand. The woman had hidden a spare wand under her skirt.

“Identifying these devices is my specialty...” Rium puffed out her chest. As a crystal mage, she must have been able to sniff them out.

The two elves wouldn’t respond to anything we said or even look us in the eyes. We didn’t want to risk them getting in our way, so we bound them up tightly enough that they couldn’t move an inch. We had already kicked up a racket, but the Dark Prince had yet to show himself.

“Maybe he thinks that we don’t know about the secret room yet?” Daisy suggested.

“...Oh, that could be why,” I agreed. The elves looked at us in shock. I see,

they'd thought that we wouldn't figure out that the Dark Prince was here as long as they stayed quiet. Haruno's magic-repelling gift was extraordinary, but mine was just as useful.

"We'll keep an eye on these two."

"All right, I'll leave them to you."

I left Haruno and Rium in charge of being lookout. I could trust those two with it—especially Haruno, since she could deal with the neighbors in case they came to check out what the commotion was.

Rulitora, Roni, Daisy, and I went to the end of the hall. I inspected the floor and quickly found the trap door. It was fitted with a lock, but not a very sturdy one, so Rulitora effortlessly crushed it with his glaive.

"Okay, I'll take the lead."

I positioned myself as vanguard so that I could absorb any surprise attacks with the Magic Eater. Following behind me were Roni, then Rulitora. Daisy rode on Roni's shoulder.

There was a hidden staircase underneath the trap door. It gradually curved to the left, drawing a wide arc. I guess it was circling around the hidden room. We reached the bottom of the stairs. I placed my hand on the doorknob, positioning myself so that I wasn't in front of the door. I slowly turned it—it wasn't locked. I asked Roni and Rulitora to switch positions, then had Rulitora open the door slightly ajar, and I bolted inside.

The inside of the room was the same as what we had seen on the screen. It was ornate but not overwhelmingly so, lending a soothing atmosphere. The demon lord was known for liking flashy things, but it looked like his son didn't take after him.

A table sat in the center of the room with two long sofas on either side of it. Clena was sitting on the sofa facing the door, just like she was on the screen earlier. However, the Dark Prince was standing next to her, looking my way. He was still wearing his armor, but had put on his helmet now. He had probably noticed our presence when I turned the doorknob a bit earlier.

There wasn't a trace of fear on Clena's face; she looked relieved to see us. I

could see the Dark Prince's face through his helmet, but he was expressionless, I couldn't tell what he might be thinking right now. He wasn't holding a weapon. It was hard to tell if this was a hostage situation or not.

Rulitora and Roni had entered the room, but I didn't want anyone to make any careless moves. Roni looked like she was about to pounce on Clena at any moment, but Daisy was desperately holding her back from atop her shoulder.

This was the first time I'd had a long, hard look at the Dark Prince. His armor really did look similar to mine. It likely had magical properties, too.

"This is quite the violent intrusion," he accused, still stone-faced.

"Who's more violent between me or you, kidnapping Clena?" I quickly rebutted. I knew that the Dark Giant's recklessness had started this, but it was the Dark Prince who had kept her captured after that. He didn't talk back to me, so he must have thought so too.

Now then, what next? All I wanted was to get Clena back, but the Dark Prince wouldn't give her to us so easily. Otherwise, he would have already done so by now. In that case...

I took a step forward, which caused the Dark Prince to raise his hand toward me. His palm was embedded with a conductor, like the one my Magic Eater also had. It really was a magical suit of armor. I paid no mind to his actions, approached the table, and sat down on the sofa facing Clena.

"...What are you scheming?" The Dark Prince finally showed an emotion on his face as he looked suspiciously at me.

In contrast, I confidently stuck out my chest, then answered, "We won't get anywhere by glaring at each other. Let's negotiate."

"...Negotiate?"

"We know that this whole thing was the Dark Giant's idea. So I think we can come to a deal... What do you think?"

".....That is fine with me." The Dark Prince hesitated for a moment, then sighed. He sat down next to Clena and gave me a sharp look.

I thought about what we should discuss first, but then I noticed that we both

had our helmets on. This would leave me vulnerable from the neck up, but I was the one who suggested we negotiate. I should give him a reason to trust me first. *Okay then, if it came down to it, I could at least defend myself with my arms.*

I took off my helmet and put it on the table. The Dark Prince narrowed his eyes, but after a moment, copied my actions, placing his helmet on the table as well.

“Before we start, I’d like to confirm one thing—Did you have anything to do with the abduction of Cosmos the hero?”

“Oh, I’d heard about the ruckus at the arms competition. Was that what happened? I know nothing of it.”

“...So it really is unrelated.”

The Dark Prince and Dark Giant had no reason to target Cosmos. I wanted to ask to make sure, but I already assumed that there was a low chance of them having anything to do with it. In that case, I wondered who in the world had targeted Cosmos, but that was a topic for later. Clena was the priority right now.

“One more thing. Was this really something the Dark Giant did on his own?” I questioned. The Dark Prince breathed a heavy sigh in response.

“That is the case. I was honestly shocked when his subordinates brought Clena to me.”

So it was a surprise for him too, huh. I could honestly empathize with him right now.

“Let me ask you something as well. What have you done with him? I heard that you have managed to capture him.”

“He’s being confined in the underground room where the demon lord was sleeping.”

“So you didn’t let him off easy. That’ll teach him a lesson. I was working on arrangements to ensure that my subordinates wouldn’t be caught up in these affairs, yet he goes and does this...!”

I see, so he had been staying in Ares for the sake of his subordinates. Clena wanted him to hurry up and leave to find her mother, but it would have been irresponsible for him to abandon his followers. She must have understood this on a logical level, too.

“He thought that if Clena was at my side, then I would be free to take up the mantle of the new demon lord. Unfortunately for him, I am no longer in the mood to do that...” The Dark Prince laughed bitterly, looking like he had burned out.

The Goddesses had said that the birth of the new demon lord had been prevented when Clena threw her sword—they must have been referring to this. But despite giving up on his own goals, he was still trying to take care of his subordinates. He must have had a strong sense of responsibility.

“Um, about your other bases...”

“I know. I ordered them to surrender themselves to the Demon Dog without a fight. That way, they should at least be unharmed.”

He had planned that far ahead, huh. He must have been researching us.

“My plans have been delayed, but now I can finally go to Juno.”

“Then will you release Clena?”

“Well, that’s...”

He suddenly became evasive. If the Dark Prince wanted to go to Juno, then he should have no reason to keep Clena captured.

“Just earlier, he was trying to persuade me to go to Juno with him,” Clena spoke up to clear my confusion.

“This is a good opportunity!”

“I told you, don’t act like my father until you apologize to Mom!”

They both stood up and started quarreling like a typical parent and child. Roni and Rulitora were dumbfounded by the sudden shift in atmosphere, and they just stood there watching them.

Though the Dark Prince hadn’t willed it, his daughter had fallen into his lap,

and he wouldn't let go of the chance to take her with him to see his wife. Daisy mumbled, "What an idiot," from Roni's shoulder, but the Dark Prince didn't hear her over their quarreling.

"I heard all about it! You're going to reestablish the temple of darkness, isn't that right?!"

We hadn't been hiding it or anything, but he'd even found that out?

"So what about it?!" Clena retorted.

"If Jupiter finds out, they'll send their army your way before you can lay down a single brick!"

So he also wanted to bring her along for her safety. The only reason I was rebuilding the temple of darkness in the first place was because Rakti was with us. If she wasn't, I couldn't say that I would have made this decision, so I understood where he was coming from.

"One correction. We're not just trying to rebuild the temple of darkness. We want to build all six temples in one location," I said.

The Dark Prince sat back down on the sofa, sighing heavily. Clena looked between the two of us, then moved to my side of the table. I scooted over on the sofa, and she sat down next to me. It was a little statement from her. The Dark Prince looked like he wanted to say something about that, but he refrained.

"Wouldn't that just make it harder for yourselves?"

"We figured it would be better than only building a temple of darkness."

"That may be true, but... Do you even have a candidate to appoint as the temple elder?"

"Our current candidate... is Phoenix."

".....Wouldn't that just make it harder for yourselves?"

Perhaps, but we really didn't have anyone else.

"I will not allow Clena to participate in such a risky plan!"

"That doesn't mean you can make me go with you to Juno."

The Dark Prince made a sour face at Clena's quick rebuttal.

"For the millionth time, go apologize to Mom first!"

"Now now, he's just worried about you. We haven't decided where we want to build the temples yet, so it wouldn't be out of the question for you to visit Juno for a bit..." Why was I trying to defend him? Though of course, I wasn't suggesting that she go alone. We would all go with her.

"I know, but I just can't let him have this one. There's this feeling I get, like he's too scared to go alone..." Clena stared at him as she said that. The Dark Prince's eyes wouldn't meet hers, so maybe she was right on the money. In that case, we couldn't go to Juno with him. If we forced Clena to go, then it'd create a lasting grudge for her.

"...You should give up. Why don't you go apologize to your wife by yourself first?"

"Grrgh...! G-Give me some time to consider!"

"No, we can't."

"Why not?!" He was starting to lash out, but I didn't falter. We really couldn't wait for him, after all.

"We don't know how long the White-Faced Ogre can hold the demon lord back."

"Nnngh!!"

Right, we didn't know when the demon lord might come here unleashing hell on us. My words dealt him the finishing blow, and he fell prostrate with his hands on the table, knocking his helmet to the floor with a clang.

"I will... release Clena... on one condition...!" The Dark Prince slammed his fists on the table and wrung out his bargain. We had to spare the lives of the two dark elves upstairs and take them in as our subordinates.

"We were never going to kill them in the first place, though."

"This is my responsibility as their superior. Your comrades are keeping them captured, no?"

I see, so they counted as my prisoners of war right now. This was also a way for him to ensure Clena's safety. This house was too small to be used as an actual base. It was likely just for the Dark Prince's personal use. He had entrusted those two dark elves to maintain his home, which showed just how much trust he placed in them, and now he wanted to send them to us. That was the true intent behind the Dark Prince's condition.

"You may not understand this word, but those two are *suppa*."

"*'Suppa'*? Hm, I think I've heard that before... Oh, ninja?!"

"Hoh, is that what they are called from your region?"

Haruno later told me that 'ninja' was actually a relatively modern word, and back in the day, they were called different names depending on the region.

Those two were ninjas, though? Magic-using ones, at that. They really hadn't looked like anything more than an ordinary town couple. We'd made the right call to disarm them after our surprise attack.

In any case, considering our current situation, we should take them in. I told him as much, and then he went back upstairs and gave them his last order: He would be going to Juno, so they were to vacate this house and join my party.

The two looked at each other for a moment, confused, but eventually just bowed deeply at Clena and I. Accordingly, we returned the weapons that we had taken from them. I asked Haruno what she thought about the two elves joining us, and she smiled and told me that it shouldn't be a problem.

"If you're moving out of this house, does that mean that you're going to find us again after you reunite with your wife?"

Oh, I see, that was why he was moving out. The Dark Prince looked away nervously, so Haruno had probably hit the mark.

"In that case, please come back with Clena's mother. We'd be happy to have you. Right, Clena?"

"...Just make sure you make up with her first."

She was still being curt with him, but it sounded like she had room to forgive him now. That was enough for the Dark Prince, though, since he became

overwhelmed with emotion and started crying on the spot. The dark elf couple took part in his joy as well.

Now then, it'd be nice if this was a happily ever after... but it was too soon for that. We needed to go back to inform the White Orchid Corporation that Clena was safe and quell the demon lord's wrath. The Dark Prince would meet with the demon lord after this to ask him to spare his underlings' lives, and I would go along to back him up.

We couldn't waste another second, so we ran back to the shop and just so happened to find the demon lord exiting the door. He wasn't wearing any armor, but four of his six hands were holding large swords. His majestic physique and threatening aura made him a really convincing demon lord right now.

All the houses in the vicinity had their doors closed and windows shut. Everyone was taking cover, waiting for the storm to pass, so the area was dead silent. The White-Faced Ogre, who was still trying to placate the demon lord, noticed us and called out to him. He turned to us, then lowered his menacing stance. We were just in time. If we had arrived just a moment later, who knows what would have happened to the city...?

He then saw that the Dark Prince was with us and raised his swords again, but Clena and the White-Faced Ogre held him back. He still seemed like he would snap at any moment, but as we explained everything that had just happened, his wrath gradually abated.

"...I see, that's what happened," he said in a composed voice and nodded deeply. "You have my thanks for bringing my granddaughter back unharmed." He then bowed at me.

"Oh, no, of course I would rescue Clena, and the Dark Prince was never intending to harm her in the first place..." I gave a flustered response, since I wasn't expecting him to bow down at me like this.

The demon lord glanced at the Dark Prince, then brought him inside the shop. He would probably be willing to listen to the Dark Prince's requests now. I bet it would take a while, though. We had yet to let everyone else know that Clena was safe, so we saw the two of them off, then left.

When we returned to the villa, we saw Prae pacing restlessly out front and Lumis trying to soothe her.

“Cleeenaaaa!!!” When she spotted us, she dashed toward us at an impressive pace.

Clena braced herself, but it would be too much for her to handle alone. Before Roni could step in, I ran behind Clena and held her up—Prae, that is, who had draped her entire body over Clena. She had pounced on her so energetically that the momentum almost toppled me over, but I somehow kept us standing. If it wasn’t for Rulitora’s backup, the three of us would be on the floor right now.

Everyone else heard the commotion and rushed outside, so we were able to let them all know that Clena was safe and sound.

“We were somehow able to deal with it peacefully. The Dark Prince is meeting with the demon lord right now, and I think they’ll be able to come to an agreement, too.”

“Thank goodness you’re all safe. I hope your family will be able to make up with each other, too,” Sera smiled at Clena. Clena averted her eyes, looking embarrassed. They still had a ways to go, but if her parents could make amends, then I think everything would turn out fine.

“Also, these two will be part of our party now. The Dark Prince sent them to us because he’s worried about Clena.”

“Though if it were up to him, he would have joined our party himself,” Haruno pointed out. Clena wasn’t going to forgive him just yet, so this was all he could do for now.

The man was named Brahms, and the woman was named Mem. They were now Clena’s subordinates, and Roni was their superior. They were a married couple, so they could use one of the rooms together.

I wanted to throw them a welcome party, but we were tired, and the negotiations between the demon lord and Dark Prince were still underway. It would have to wait for another day. For now, let’s just get some good rest.

The Dark Prince came by the next morning after everything was wrapped up.

He wanted to talk to us before leaving for Juno, so we borrowed a room in the villa. Clena and Roni joined me, sitting to my left and right.

“My father was willing to hear me out thanks to you all. I offer you my gratitude.” Those were the first words from the Dark Prince, and he bowed before us.

“So your subordinates that were captured are safe?”

“Y-Yes... Most of them.”

“...Most?”

“Those who were directly involved with Clena’s kidnapping, not so much.”

“...I see.”

That was unavoidable. It wasn’t something I could step in on, either. Though the Dark Giant was still only being kept locked up, so I doubted that they’d take their lives.

“The White Orchid Corporation will be taking everyone in.”

“That sounds like a lot of people, is that okay?”

“Their company can handle it.”

Looking at it another way, the White Orchid Corporation had gained that many new workers, so now they could expand the scope of their business even more.

The Dark Prince had no more obligations tying him to Ares, so he was scheduled to depart on a ship from the port this afternoon.

“Sorry for the sudden question, but will you make it in time?” Roni brought up a reasonable worry. The shop had reserved a gembolic wagon for him, but considering how long it would take him to reach the port, he couldn’t spend much more time loitering around.

“Haah... You’re hopeless,” Clena sighed, stood up, and walked to the door.

The Dark Prince looked at her back and reached out his hand, but didn’t call out to her. Or rather, he couldn’t. I figured I should say something, but then Clena turned around.

“Let’s continue talking on the way there. There’s not much more time, anyway.”

The Dark Prince was briefly taken aback, but then quickly gathered himself. He broke into a broad smile and energetically stood up.

“Roni, find Brahms and Mem, and accompany them as bodyguards.”

“Okay!”

I was going to let them go alone, but Clena had given me a pleading look. It looked like she was asking for help. She’d taken a step forward on her own, but didn’t think she could handle talking with the Dark Prince by herself yet. I guess I should go with them, then. I added Rulitora to our list of bodyguards.

We exited the villa with the Dark Prince, who had a spring in his steps. He and Clena were the stars of the show right now, so Roni and Rulitora took point while the dark elves and I stayed in the rear.

The Dark Prince tried bringing up several conversation topics, but it didn’t take long for that spring in his steps to return to a heavy trod. The two of them were still being pretty awkward with each other, and all of their conversations were being cut short. Clena was only responding with short answers to his questions without ever bringing anything up herself, and the Dark Prince didn’t know what else to talk about besides her mother. He wasn’t sure how far he should be digging into Clena’s personal life.

The dark elves were itching to help, but weren’t sure if they should interrupt, so they were just fidgeting restlessly behind them. Rulitora was blinking at me from the front of the group as if to say, “Do something about this.” I couldn’t see Roni’s face from here, but I bet she was thinking the same thing. All right, guess I had to pitch in here.

“Can I ask something?”

“Hm, what is it?” He latched onto my question. I guess he couldn’t stand the silence either.

“What are your plans after making amends with Clena’s mother?”

“What are my plans...?”

“Are you going to stay in Juno and live with her?”

“Mm, that’s...” The Dark Prince glanced at Clena. She looked back at him dubiously, but remained silent. “I would need to discuss it with her first, but I intend to leave Juno again. Of course, it would be together with her.”

“I see. And then...”

“We’ll go see Clena again, as her parents.”

Clena didn’t respond, but she also wasn’t refusing him.

“I don’t think we’ll stay in Ares for long, though.”

“We’ll figure out a way to find you.”

He sounded pretty sure about that.

“...Clena, you didn’t get Inept Scout cast on you or anything, did you?” That was a spell that allowed the caster to see and hear everything that the subject of the spell could.

“I don’t think he would’ve had the time to do that...”

“I would not use that!!”

I then asked if he had a way to communicate with the dark elves, but he said that he didn’t. I didn’t know what he had in mind, but he seemed pretty confident about finding us again, so I decided not to worry about it for now.

Anyway, the Dark Prince seemed a lot less anxious now, so he returned to prodding Clena with questions. She remained apathetic, but still answered him. They continued exchanging words as we walked, and eventually we reached the gembolic station.

“Take care of Clena.”

“We will.”

“Leave it to us!”

I thought he would say more, but he gave us a bow, told the dark elves that he was leaving the rest to them, then climbed into the gembolic wagon and took off. Clena wrapped her arms around mine and pulled herself closer to me. She was wearing a complex expression, so I let her do as she pleased right now,

and we watched the gembolic wagon disappear into the distance.

“Sir Touya, look over there...”

However, we didn’t have much time to bask in the emotional goodbye as Rulitora raised his voice a moment later. He pointed to a gembolic wagon that had just arrived.

“Oh? Princess Franchellis?”

Out from the wagon came Princess Franchellis, Foley, Ricott, and Balsamina. Clena hurriedly separated herself from me and straightened up. Ricot spotted us and walked our way, but the princess looked like all the life had drained from her, and Foley was keeping her upright. Balsamina seemed uncomfortable.

“Why are you all here?”

“We were just seeing someone off. And how about you? Where’s Cosmos?” I asked, and Ricott looked downward in frustration.

“They got the best of us. As you can see, we were able to find Balsamina, but while their forces were distracting us, the bunch that kidnapped Cosmos left the country...!”

So they had escaped, huh. Balsamina had witnessed Cosmos’ kidnapping and had been trying to track them. Thanks to her, they were able to find out that he’d been taken out of the country.

“The ones who were distracting us... were soldiers from Jupiter.”

“...Is that true?”

“Yes, I could recognize some of their faces. I am not mistaken.”

Why did Jupiter take Cosmos? I could see them taking Haruno or me, since we were Heroes of the Goddess, but Cosmos was a Hero of the Sacred King. Also, if their party had found out that much, why did they come back here instead of pursuing the ship?

“They went as far as to steal our ship! Sir Touya, could we please request your assistance?”

I see, since their ship had been stolen, they needed our help cross the sea. I

couldn't just abandon them in this situation. But even so, the princess needed some rest right now. I took the four of them with us back to the villa.

Kannami had just dropped by when we returned. We had a whole host of visitors today. He looked clearly disgruntled, and an aura of rage was seeping out of him.

"...Did something happen?"

"Actually..."

According to Achilles, the finals of the arms competition occurred this morning. Kannami was up against Cosmos' opponent from yesterday, who had won by default due to Cosmos being a no-show. However, the match was a curb stomp, and Kannami had taken no more than a second to defeat him. Thus, he was left with an unblown fuse and had been acting like this ever since the match ended.

"So he came here to complain, huh. We don't exactly have the time for that right now..."

"I see that Her Highness is with you... What in the world happened?"

I'll take this chance to get them mixed into this, too.

"The group who kidnapped Cosmos also stole their party's boat and escaped with it."

"Hah...! So it's their fault the finals were so boring." Kannami was the first to react. Cosmos would have moved on to the finals had he not been kidnapped, so he wasn't wrong.

"Will you come with us?"

"You don't even need to ask. I would feel guilty ignoring someone who came from the same place as me."

Kannami and I exchanged a firm handshake. Yeah, I knew he would be the type to get on board with this. Now, we just needed to keep moving forward.

First, we needed to inform everyone that we'd be moving out of the villa and traveling again. We had the numbers, so I asked everyone to help with preparations. The princess was still haggard, though, so I let her rest.

“Now that Her Highness’ imperial guards are with us, our numbers have increased by quite a bit.”

“You won’t be able to buy everything in one shopping trip. We’ll help you out, too.”

Kannami’s party offered to help out with shopping, so I left it to them. Clena, Haruno, and I went to see the demon lord.

The White Orchid Corporation had returned to its usual operations overnight. Customers were going in and out of the shop. An employee led us into the inner room, bowing repeatedly all the meanwhile. That was probably due to Clena’s presence. We came across the White-Faced Ogre first, so I told her that we were leaving to rescue Cosmos.

“And about the cyclopes and the glaupis... Can we leave them in your care for the time being?”

“...Please wait a moment.”

I was asking to let them stay in the villa until we decided where we’d build the temples, but the White-Faced Ogre didn’t give an answer and instead left the room. The three of us looked at each other in confusion, but she returned before long to guide us to another room. The demon lord was asking for us.

This room was newly furnished with tatami mats. Besides that, it was covered from floor to ceiling with flashy decorations; I would even say it looked gaudy. Hardly a room that you could relax in. The tatami mats were from the Unlimited Bath. So they were using them here, too?

When the demon lord saw us, he gestured for us to come inside and sit by him.

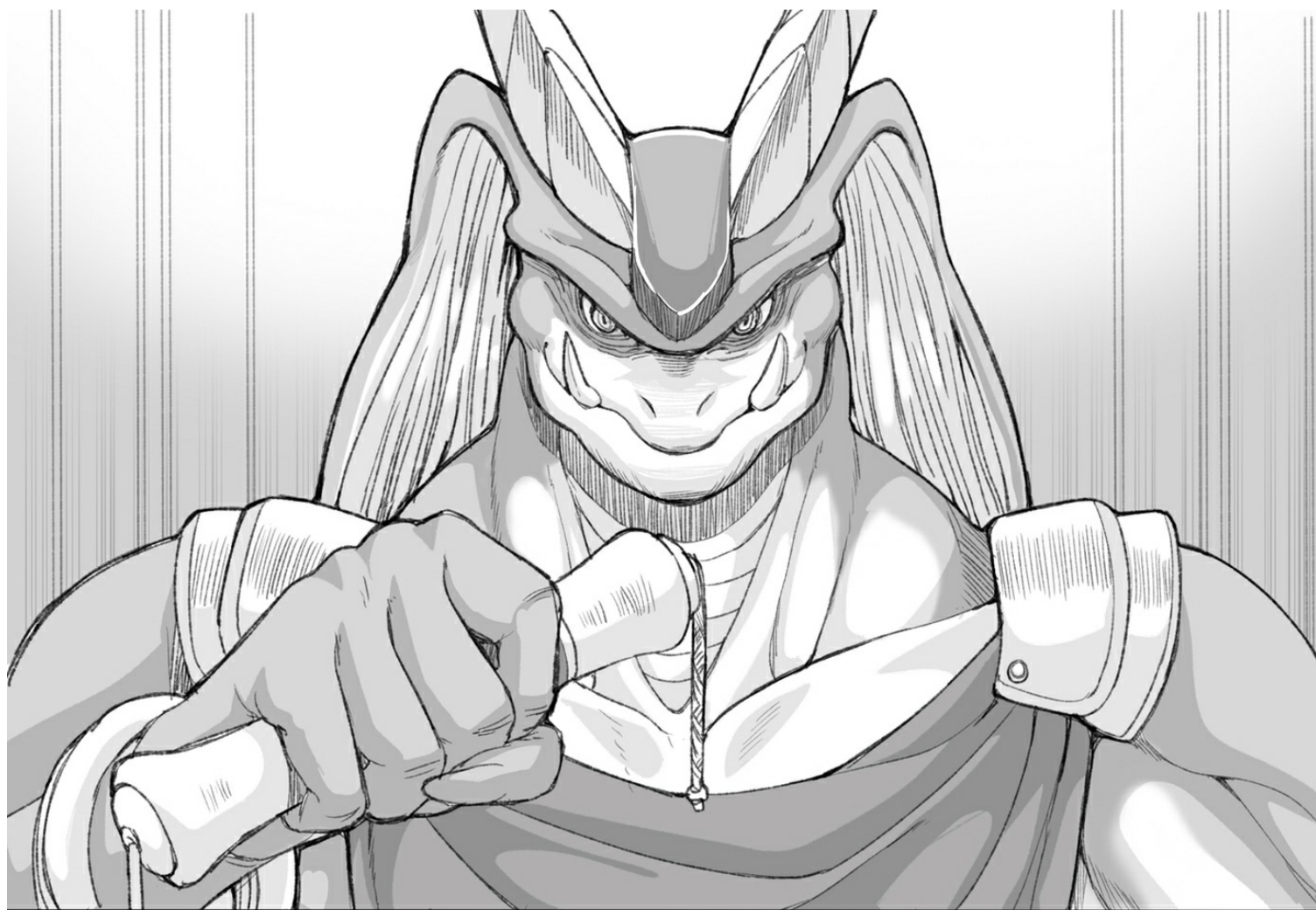
“I heard the news about the competitor that disappeared from the arms competition... It has turned into a messy situation.”

“I want to help rescue him. We can’t just leave it be.”

“Heheheh... Are you indebting the sacred family to you so that you can rebuild the temple of darkness?”

I hadn’t thought that far, but he wasn’t wrong.

“In any case, I owe you a favor for the incident with my fool of a son. This is a good opportunity, so I will present you this.” The demon lord handed me a cylindrical scroll. I unfurled it and quickly noticed that the paper was thick and high quality.



“...The deed to the nation of Hades?”

The document stated that the entirety of Hades was to be transferred to my name.

“A deed... Is that okay? The person who wrote you the deed to the Mino province...” Haruno asked, peering at the paper from beside me. I remembered seeing this on TV once. A historical figure who had given the deed to his land to this demon lord was later betrayed and killed by his own son.

“Are you suggesting that he would once again betray me? Hah, if that were to happen, I’ll make sure he never stands again,” the demon lord laughed off the idea. I guess the Dark Prince would have no reason to turn against him again.

The deed to Hades, huh. It was one of our location candidates to build the temples. We were on good terms with the Torano’o tribe as well, so we wouldn’t have any issues with the locals there.

However, our biggest obstacles were the barren wasteland of the void and the fact that ruins were all that remained.

“To return to the subject at hand, there are not many places where you can reestablish the temple of darkness that would not also clash with other religions, no?”

“Would the forest of Thebai not work?”

“The former location of the temple of wind... I am not so familiar with it, but can you easily gather people and resources there? If it is a far off area, then it would be difficult.”

“Well...” I looked at Haruno, who shook her head silently.

“Though of course, Hades has plenty of problems of its own. But you are forgetting something important. Restoring the temple of darkness, and in turn the religion of the Goddess of Darkness, also means restoring the land of the void.”

Come to think of it, the void had transformed into a wasteland because Rakti had been sealed. If faith in the Goddess of Darkness was restored, and Rakti regained her powers, then the void should also naturally return to what it once

was.

“No matter where you build the temples, the void will be resurrected. When that happens, Jupiter will turn its eyes to the land of Hades. That is not something I wish to deal with.”

His true thoughts leaked out in that last sentence. So that was why he was giving the deed to me. He wanted me to establish the temples in Hades, even if it meant gritting my teeth to all the disadvantages of building there.

The challenges of building in the void had been on my mind until now, but if the land could be revived, then that was a game-changer. Hades immediately jumped to the top of our list of candidates.

“What do you all think?”

“I think it’ll be important to be able to say that the land was given to you by the former king of Hades,” Clena said.

“You can also use it to convince everyone that the demon lord doesn’t intend to return there,” Haruno agreed.

I see. I could convey a sense of legitimacy and security to everyone in the surrounding nations with this. It would only be effective to a certain extent at first, but it certainly took away some of the challenges.

Clena had more to add. “Also, there are nearby countries in all directions.”

“That’s right. If you build all the temples there, you’ll attract lots of pilgrims. Hades isn’t a bad location at all for that,” Haruno nodded.

I was worried about Jupiter being north of it, but there was also Hephaestus to the east, Ceres to the west, and Neptune a bit to the southeast. It was a prime location to gather both people and resources.

“You can enlist the support of the Torano’o tribe, too.”

“And above all, Rakti will be happy with it! Both the land and the people are in your favor! I can’t say anything about luck, though!”

Well, us having to rescue Cosmos right now certainly didn’t suggest that luck was on our side. But that was something we had to handle ourselves. In any case, these two seemed eager to build the temples in Hades. I couldn’t deny the

advantages, either.

“I understand. I’ll gladly accept the deed to Hades.”

“Mmm. Leave the cyclopes and glaupis to us. You may come back for them after you’ve settled the matter of the kidnapping.”

“Thank you very much.”

Now we had sorted out one of our problems. After we rescued Cosmos, we would immediately start heading to Hades.

In essence, the demon lord was lending us his support right now as we set off to rescue a hero who had been kidnapped by the forces of the sacred family. I didn’t know what the heck was going on either, but it was the truth, and it didn’t change what I needed to do. I had many things on my mind right now, like why Jupiter would abduct Cosmos, but for now, we just needed to hurry up and get ready to depart.

Bath Break – The Specialty of Ares, Dungeon Baths

“Hey Touya, wanna go to a bath?” Yukina asked that on a day when the city was bustling with excitement for the arms competition. She couldn’t help but be worried for her older brother, Touya, who was ignoring the competition in favor of other responsibilities that were keeping him busy. The bath she was referring to was not the Unlimited Bath, but a public bathhouse in Ares.

Anyone could tell at a glance that Touya was exhausted, and those around him were suggesting that he take a break, so he agreed to take the day off. He couldn’t take the entire party with him though, so he brought Yukina, Haruno, Clena, Roni, Sera, Rakti, Rium, Prae, and Rulitora with him.

Sera had initially turned down the offer, but she was the most fatigued out of all of them. They wouldn’t take no for an answer. Rulitora was going with them because he’d heard that the sand lizardmen of the Merek tribe liked to use this bathhouse.

The public bathhouse was, of course, in the underground cave. It was located in a small town right outside the city center. It was a popular leisure spot for the people of Ares, but since the arms competition was in session right now, there were fewer customers than usual. The receptionist must have been curious about the competition as well, since she didn’t seem too focused on her job at hand.

“...And why are *you* two here?”

“There are no noteworthy competitors in the matches today.”

When Touya’s party entered the building, they crossed paths with the demon lord and the White-Faced Ogre. It’d be impossible for them to ignore each other and go their separate ways, so they went inside together.

The dressing rooms in this bathhouse were separated by men and women, but they would change into swimsuits and enter the same bath. Rulitora and the demon lord wore loincloths, while Touya changed into a pair of swimming trunks.

“This is amazing...!”

This natural cave had been turned into a bath. The floor was tiled, but the walls and ceiling were just the cave walls.

“Hmm, I think I’ll be fine using a bath like this,” Rulitora said, blinking his eyes. The bath was open and ventilated, so very little moisture built up from the steam as a result.

Though sparse, there were other customers in the bath already, including some from the Merek tribe. At the deeper end of the bath was a group of dark elves enjoying a board game that looked similar to chess. If it weren’t for the arms competition, this place would have been much more crowded.

Touya approached the edge of the bath. He dipped a finger in the water and found it to be moderately warm. The temperature of the water was slightly higher than a heated swimming pool. It wasn’t very deep, though, so it would be difficult to swim in like an actual pool.

“The water here is said to have beautifying effects, so I bet everyone’s going to be here for a while.”

In the meantime, Yukina and the other girls had changed into their swimsuits. They hadn’t bought new swimsuits just for this occasion, so the only ones Touya was seeing for the first time were the ones belonging to Haruno, Sera, Prae, and the White-Faced Ogre.

“How do I look, Touya?”

“Oh, um... It’s really pretty on you,” Touya answered, flustered. Hearing that, Haruno broke into a wide smile. She was wearing a side-tie bikini. The white color drew a pleasing contrast to Clena’s black halter neck bikini. Perhaps this was another symbol of their rivalry.

Sera was wearing a white swimsuit like Haruno’s, but hers was a one-piece.

“Um, please don’t stare at me...”

“Oh, sorry...”

Sera turned away in embarrassment when she noticed Touya looking. However, the swimsuit she was wearing appeared to be a one-piece from the

front, but was cut to look like a bikini from the back—something called a monokini. Though she was trying to cover herself, she was exposing even more skin from her backside.



“Kyah!” She noticed this soon afterward and hid behind Prae. Judging from her reaction, she hadn’t chosen this swimsuit by herself. Haruno or Rin had likely picked it out for her.

Prae’s swimsuit was a tankini with a big ribbon on her chest and frills on her bottom. The swimsuit itself was cute and childlike, but Prae herself was mega-sized.

The White-Faced Ogre walked in front of them, her silver hair flowing behind her. She wore a V-necked one-piece, where the V reached all the way down to her navel. The swimsuit was black with orchids printed on it, and it made her white skin stand out even more. Her bold, or rather gallant, figure made her seem more cool than sexy.

They cleaned themselves, then went inside the bath. Rulitora looked uncertain at first, but soon enough, he sat back and relaxed in the water.

There was a tunnel in the wall; water seemed to be streaming into the bath from it.

“Oh, the receptionist was saying that the water flows from the hot spring through there.”

They’d been told that the tunnel led to several more smaller rooms, and the deeper you went inside, the hotter the water became. It would be more accurate to say that the water cooled by the time it reached the main bath, making it about the same temperature as a heated swimming pool. This bathhouse was all natural, so this must have been the result when they’d built a waterway from the hot spring source to this cave.

“That’s not all, Touya.”

“This is beautifying water... And the closer you get to the source, the stronger its effects are!”

Haruno and Clena spoke one after the other, then nodded at each other.

“Do you want to come with us, Touya?” Their eyes sparkled as they asked.

Touya sorrowfully declined their invitation. Judging by the size of the waterway, Rulitora, Prae, and the demon lord wouldn’t be able to fit inside. The

four of them remained behind while the rest of the girls went deeper inside. They couldn't resist the temptations of the beautifying water. Rakti and Rium weren't as curious about it, but Yukina dragged them with her.

Prae was the only girl left behind, but she hardly seemed down about it. She embraced Touya from behind and enjoyed the opportunity to hog him to herself. Touya imagined that she might be sad about being left out of the group, so he let her do as she liked.

"This is a good opportunity. Why don't you tell me more about yourselves?" The demon lord approached Touya with his tongue flickering. These days, he was often taking Clena to see matches in the arms competition with him, but in reality, there was still some awkwardness between them. He was also being careful not to make her uncomfortable. He wouldn't pass up this opportunity to speak with Touya, someone who knew her well.

Touya couldn't move from his embrace within Prae, and Rulitora was having his fill of his first warm bath. This would likely be a very long bath for the whole group, so Touya willingly became the demon lord's conversation partner.

In the meantime, the girls had entered the waterway. The White-Faced Ogre, who was a frequent visitor, led the way so that they wouldn't get lost. The deeper they went inside, the hotter the water became, and the walls and ceilings were covered in a pure-white froth.

The froth was hard to the touch. Haruno realized that these were minerals from the water that had built up over time. It signified just how rich the water was. This was how the water had gotten its reputation for beauty.

At this point, however, Yukina called out that she couldn't handle the heat. The others also realized how hot the water had become, so they waded into an empty room near them. The water here was about the same temperature as the cedar wood tub in the Unlimited Bath. The room was dimly lit and much more humid than the main bath outside.

"This is... pretty big..." Rium commented.

"They have lots of different rooms to accommodate different group sizes," Roni replied as she stroked the wall. The rock walls here were smooth, indicating that it had been constructed using earth cleric magic.

The White-Faced Ogre sat down near the room's entrance, and the others waded farther inside.

"This isn't as spacious as the bath outside, but it's nice and quiet here," said Sera. She was probably also thinking that no one would stare at her swimsuit in here. She was right that this was the perfect place to soak in the bath in peace and quiet, though.

After they sat for a while, Clena started fidgeting.

"...It's been a while since I've taken a bath without Touya."

She couldn't stop thinking about how she wasn't with Touya today. She had been embarrassed about it in the beginning, but now it had become a part of her everyday life. The Unlimited Bath had grown much bigger now, so there was honestly no reason why they had to continue bathing with Touya. In fact, the demon lord's group took their baths separately from Touya's party.

"You're so used to it now, Lady Clena..." Roni teased.

"Yeah, I can't relax until Touya washes my hair..."

"Actually, I'm jealous that you've been able to take baths together so often that you're this used to it..."

Haruno was clearly envious of her. It would be boorish to ask why.

"Heheh~ I've been bathing with him for ten years now~" Yukina stood up with her hands on her hips, striking a triumphant pose. She was including their previous lives in her experience, so there was no way anyone else could compete.

"Well, I bet I have you beat in intimacy! In the beginning, we had to squeeze ourselves so closely to each other in a tiny bathtub! Right, Roni?"

"Don't bring me into this!"

"W-Well I... Oh no, it was only Sera who took a bath with him back in the temple!"

"Huh?! I only took the children inside for a bath! I kept my clothes on!"

Sera was actually the first one in this group to go into the Unlimited Bath with

Touya. Though just as she had said, they had remained dressed at the time.

In any case, Clena and Haruno found their new rival in the form of Yukina, and they continued chattering about Touya throughout the rest of their bath. Clena would tell them stories about when they traveled together alone, then Haruno would bring up memories from back in Jupiteropolis, to which Yukina countered with episodes from her previous life. The White-Faced Ogre stayed silent throughout the discussion, but she was in fact eavesdropping on them. Perhaps she was going to report it to the demon lord later.

“Um, are none of you embarrassed? I still get so shy about getting in the bath together with Sir Touya...” Sera timidly asked when they finally reached a pause in their conversation. She had started bathing together with Touya at the same time as Haruno, but she was still self-conscious about it.

“...Embarrassed?”

“I’ve never minded it~”

Rium and Rakti tilted their heads.

“Rium, you’re not a kid anymore...”

“...Haruno’s not a kid either, so it’s not a problem.”

Rium happened to be 14 years old. In Japan, she would be in her second year of middle school. Yet she was not the least bit ashamed about bathing together with Touya.

“Um, I’m not as bad as her, okay? I do get a bit embarrassed, too.” Haruno had gotten bold enough to proclaim something like that.

The girls calmed down thanks to Rium, and their so-called “battle of recollections” came to an end. Clena and Haruno sat next to each other and began talking again.

“It’s embarrassing, but when you think about the future, I feel like I can’t back down...”

“Right. I don’t have anyone I can rely on other than Touya.”

Haruno was strong enough that she didn’t need to rely on anyone else, but that was better left unsaid. She was still a young maiden who wanted to rely on

the boy of her affections.

“And even if we stopped taking baths with him, *you* wouldn’t stop, right, Yukina?”

“Of course not!”

“Oh, but you don’t need to force yourself, Sera. We did promise to take a bath with Touya, but that’s already been long fulfilled...”

“You’re right, but...”

“But?”

“.....If Sir Touya stopped washing my hair, I don’t think I’ll be able to survive the coming busy days...”

“Ohh...” Everyone but the White-Faced Ogre nodded in understanding at her words.

“I was raised by Touya’s finger tech, after all!” Yukina proudly exclaimed. She was referring to her previous life, but it still counted in this world.

“I know what you mean, it’s like I’m addicted to it... But it heals me!”

“I know, I know! When he washes my tail, I can’t get enough of it!”

“I like it when he dries my hair...”

“Ohh, that’s nice too...”

Their next battle was a passionate war of words about what they liked best about bathing with Touya.

The White-Faced Ogre was supposed to be rooting for Clena due to her social position, but she was astonished by the levels of her competition and wondered if she could do anything to back her up.

“Eheheh~ Touyaaa~♥”

“Ahh, I’m being buried... but I’m also being healed...”

Meanwhile, she had yet to realize that there was another formidable opponent in the form of the childlike Prae...

Post-Bath – The Author's Booth

Nice to meet you to everyone picking up *Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension* for the first time, and to my long-time readers, sorry to keep you waiting for so long.

How did you enjoy *Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension Volume 6: The Alluring Cave Baths*? This volume was set in Ares, an underground cave nation. You might be thinking that an underground city is a staple of a fantasy world, but there's actually a real-life location that inspired Ares—Coober Pedy in Australia, also called the opal capital of the world. It's been used as a filming location for several movies. The cave bath that appeared in the Bath Break chapter came from a different location. That was inspired by the Miskolctapolca Cave Bath in Hungary. Ever since I found out about these two fantastical places, I've wanted to use them as a setting in my stories, and I finally made my wish come true in this volume.

The demon lord Amann Naga, who I mentioned briefly in the afterward of volume 5, also made his appearance in this volume. How do you like this version of the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven? You might have noticed that the shape of his head differs between his two illustrations—those flaps are normally folded, except when he gets angry.

He's a popular historical figure who gets put into all sorts of works of fiction. His outer appearance is pretty unique in this story, but he knows his economics, appears fearsome but is soft on those close to him, has a sweet tooth, and likes strong flavors such as miso. That summarizes the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven in my mind, and I think it's pretty close to the description of him that has been passed down throughout history.

Thank you so much to Masakage Hagiya for drawing the demon lord Amann Naga so majestically, to my editor Y who offered me lots of advice, and to everyone involved in the publishing and sales of this book.

The Unlimited Bath has evolved so much now that it has the blessings of all six goddess sisters. I hope we meet again in volume 7, where our characters return to familiar lands with a party bigger than ever.

Thank you again to everyone who has read this far.

Nagaharu Hibihana, March 2019.

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Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension: Volume 6

by Nagaharu Hibihana

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Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension

The Alluring Cave Baths

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Volume Six



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