

Chapter 422: No Time? That's Not a Thing

Steven wasn't in any particular hurry to test Yamato with that strange blood. Mainly because... well, his sword's personality was pretty twisted. If he really did end up turning it into some sword guy or sword girl, the whole situation would just feel unbearably awkward to him.

Stowing away the droplet of blood—which, judging from its description alone, was clearly absurdly powerful—Steven finally pieced together why that so-called god had stepped in to stop him.

Most likely, it was after *this* blood.

And when Steven blasted that monster into a shower of loot, the being's ability to sense the droplet must've vanished.

After all, this kill had been different from the others. Steven had been forced to use a bit of Minecraft's kill mechanics, so the blood had naturally converted into an MC-style drop. From that being's perspective, the blood had probably been “destroyed.”

As for the unfortunate Seaborn and the rest of those creatures, they were probably connected to that “Sea God” as well. There was no way those useless things could get their hands on something like a Fallingstar Beast's core—much less the blood of a Sea God.

Most likely, this all had the Sea God's fingerprints on it. Otherwise, why hadn't it intervened while the cult was experimenting, yet rushed in the moment he took action?

From this line of reasoning, Steven felt Iberia's waters getting murkier and murkier.

He knew the Church of the Deep's research capabilities well—they could barely manage turning humans into Seaborn. The idea that they could manufacture that hybrid creature from earlier? Steven wouldn't believe it even if Jesus himself swore in the name of God.

The only faction with the tech to pull off something like that... was Ægir—the ones who created those deep-sea superhumans like Skadi.

And if that were true... combined with Ægir's near trap-like city from before... then the "homecoming" Gladiia had been yearning for may not be the happy reunion she imagined.

Rubbing his forehead in mild irritation, Steven debated whether he should share these intel scraps with his... former... adopted daughter.

While Steven was wrestling with the thought, he reached the shore and spotted Gladiia reclined against the wrecked ship, looking like some mermaid basking in the sunlight after surfacing from the sea.

"Didn't make you wait too long, right?"

With a soft sigh, Steven burst from the water, took a few steps to Gladiia's side, and began shaking out his short black hair, dripping with seawater.

"Not too long. You came back faster than I expected. What about the ones that ran? My tracking marks on them suddenly vanished. Did you kill them all?"

Eyes closed, Gladiia let the moist, sea-scented breeze wash over her before lazily opening them. She shot a quick glance at the boy beside her, then asked in her usual cool tone.

She'd known from the start that this young-looking man would chase down those Seaborn—but hadn't expected him to be *this* thorough.

She'd planned to see if they could hook a big fish using those runaways. But now, that was clearly impossible.

"What, was I supposed to leave them alive so they could make another batch of problems?"

Steven pulled out the strange scales that had dropped from the hybrid Seaborn and waved them in front of Gladiia with exaggerated pride.

There was no way his little swordfish girl could guess just how *wild* of a stunt he'd just pulled.

"You... really *are* stronger than me.... Against that thing, I was indeed at a disadvantage. If it hadn't avoided dragging the fight out with me, the outcome between us wouldn't have been certain."

Just from Steven's expression and the scales in his hand, Gladiia already knew what he'd done. She hadn't spent all that time with him for nothing—she knew exactly what that grin meant.

But oddly enough, admitting that he's stronger than her didn't taste bitter to her at all. If anything, that warm, inexplicable feeling in her chest just grew stronger.

If *this* was what it felt like to be cared about... then it was far more comforting than she ever expected.

“Being stronger than you is normal, isn’t it? And this time, I didn’t just get a few scales out of it. I think... there’s something you probably need to hear.”

Steven’s grin became even more smug at her praise, but it quickly faded. He nudged Gladiia’s shoulder with a rare hint of seriousness.

“...Something important enough for you to be this solemn... does it have to do with me?”

After conceding defeat, Gladiia seemed to have gained a softness a girl her age should’ve had all along. She leaned into Steven, resting her head on his shoulder, her arm looping around his—pressing it between her exceptionally well-developed peaks.

“More or less,” Steven admitted. “But for you... it’s probably not good news.”

He pressed his lips together, then chose honesty. This was something she had been pursuing for so long—continuing to hide it would only drain her trust in him.

And since he *did* trust her... why should he hold back? Even if the truth led to trouble, it wasn’t like he couldn’t handle it.

“If you’re talking about the Church of the Deep likely collaborating with Ægir... I already know.” Gladiia raised a hand, brushing her fingers lightly across her neck before handing Steven a few documents marked with Ægir’s insignia.

That was one of the reasons she had tracked down this shipwreck. But the result... brought her no happiness at all.

“Besides,” she exhaled, brows knitting as she felt the slick, Seaborn-like texture of the scales between her fingers, “I don’t have much time left.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Steven replied with a shrug. “Why don’t you ask this old man of yours first?”

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Note: Character Illustration is in this Google Drive:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1iuyfwNVFHzi9H4rWNT_IAm7jTSiah_M