


3 RHORA THE
DERANGED

HINAGI ASAMI

Illustration by Kureta

The **OTHER-**
WORLDER,
EXPLORING
the **DUNGEON**





"Why, good morning, Shuna. Who might this young lady be?"

The girl stared at me in disgust.

The **O**ther-
Worlder,
Exploring
the **D**ungeon

3

RHORA THE
DERANGED



I saw Lana's
porcelain skin.
She seemed to
be asleep.

The dark voids Rhora
had for eyes drank in
Lana's body.



“By the
way,
Yaya.”

“What’s
this?”



The OTHER- WORLDER, EXPLORING the DUNGEON

3

Rhora the Deranged

HINAGI ASAMI

Illustration by Kureta

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NEW YORK

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The OTHERWORLDER, EXPLORING the DUNGEON 3

HINAGI ASAMI

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IHOJIN, DANJON NI MOGURU Vol. 3 KYOKAISO NO RORA

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Maudubaffle
Ocean

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Campsite

Remlia Port



PROLOGUE

Here's the thing about me. I—

—stumbled into a mission that dispatched me to a foreign dimension, a world where I now spent my days as an adventurer. I'd had good times—and agonizing moments; I'd consecrated a covenant with a gorgeous goddess and gotten married (in a sham wedding). I'd gained a little sister, met friends I could wholeheartedly trust, and lost some forever. Lots of ups, lots of downs.

This cycle of meetings and farewells made me the tiniest smidge more mature as a person, but as an adventurer, I still fell squarely in the initiate category. What's worse, I had perhaps unwisely spread unsavory rumors about myself, a choice that continued to drag my personal reputation through the mud. I desperately needed to fix the situation, but I'd have to go above and beyond to prove myself if I wanted to clear the stains on my name.

Above all else, as the party leader, I had to prioritize the safety of my comrades before anything. I wouldn't let any more of them die, no matter what. Nothing could stop me from keeping that promise. If any of us had to fall, it would be me. That was how I'd atone for letting my best friend perish before my eyes. This had become my life's mission, though I hadn't told any of my party members that. I swore to keep this vow and prided myself on upholding that duty.

With renewed determination, my friends and I delved further into the dungeon. But as expected, that proved a formidable task. There was no such thing as an easy path—just a never-ending cycle of gaining ground and returning to home base. Even so, little by little, we began to make progress. Although we didn't exactly have an abundance of time on our side, we moved cautiously, at the pace of a casual stroll, slowly but surely taking one step forward at a time. That was how we approached adventuring.

All that aside, disregarding everything I had on my plate, I now inexplicably found myself...making pasta.

It all started five days prior when my merfolk friend, Ghett, came upon a phantom ship that drifted into a nearby port of Remlia shortly thereafter. I investigated it thoroughly but found no clues as to which country the ship came from. There had been zero signs of any crew members aboard. The only thing she carried—a load of flour.

If you were to bake the whole load into bread, it would feed the entire Kingdom of Remlia for a week; it wasn't an inconsequential amount, but it wasn't worth the trouble for such a prosperous nation, especially since the person who had found it first was not one of its citizens.

In a show of great generosity, King Remlia graciously granted ownership of the ship's load to its discoverer, though his true motivations were probably more along the lines of *I'll be damned if I stir up trouble with another race over such a measly heap of flour*. That discoverer, Ghett, had then said, "I don't eat flour, nor do I want it. Take it," and passed the whole lot on to me. I probably don't have to spell this out, but it would take my household and party ages to finish using it all up. That left us but one choice.

But first, a brief detour. In Japanese, we often refer to the concept of a "dietary staple" with a more symbolic meaning than the corresponding perceptions held in the Western world such as Europe and the United States. Rice, which serves as the foundation of our cuisine, supplies a well-rounded helping of nutrients. So nourishing is this crop that you only need to have two extra side dishes with it to sustain yourself. You can argue that wheat products count as a "staple" in that same vein given the large populations of people who have them regularly, but for some reason, whether it be for taste or nutritional value, you don't hear many people say their diets consist exclusively of bread or wheat foodstuffs. This country, the Kingdom of Remlia, followed the Western model. Wheat, potatoes, meat, and beans were the foundation of a whole variety of dishes that filled its people's stomachs.

Going back to what I was saying, the kingdom had no use for the flour found on the phantom ship. Compared with flour made from wheat grown in this land, it looked a little yellow, which made it seem of inferior quality to those

unfamiliar with it. Even if I wanted to sell it for cheap, I'd still have to set the cost higher than the whole-wheat equivalent made from unrefined grains that was sold here. Dirt cheap prices would send the local markets into turmoil and turn the merchants' ire against me.

I'd had a Remlian artisan bake some bread out of the new flour as a test product, but it garnered only negative reviews. Its hard crusts and doughy insides made for an unusual, crumbly texture. Personally, I did not find the taste nor texture to be unpleasant, but it didn't beat the bread currently on the market. As a rule, to have any hope of outperforming the most popular baked goods, your new product would have to be tastier, cheaper, and simpler—qualities the phantom-ship flour simply did not have.

In any event, I'd tasked the artificial intelligence robot I'd brought with me to this dimension to analyze our newest acquisition. The results showed the phantom variety bore many similarities with the durum semolina flour found in the modern world. In other words, it was more well suited for making pasta. After that, I built a warehouse to turn the flour into pasta, dried it all, packaged it, and dubbed it "Phantom Pasta." Using the experience I gained from the failed mayonnaise business, I came up with a strategy and presented the pasta to the king, in part to lay the groundwork for the project.



A little later, I received a late-night summons to the palace—more specifically, to the royal kitchen. Waiting for me there was the ruler of the castle and king of adventurers, Remlia ole Armaguest Rhasvah. The king's friend and highly regarded father of adventurers—Pops—joined him. A beastmaid clad in a maid's uniform—the king's illegitimate daughter, Lanceil—rounded out the group of three.

King Remlia and Pops were making their way through the bowls of pasta topped with the meat sauce I had sent to accompany it. They looked neither disgusted nor enraptured by the dish, whose noodles were clearly far past al dente.

"Forgive me for calling you at such short notice. How fares your

adventuring?” A very on-brand bit of small talk from the king of adventurers.

“With great difficulty. We’ve had quite a few setbacks.”

“Yes, I imagine. I’m afraid there is no avoiding hardship in this line of work. By the way—”

Pops jumped in, cutting the king off. “This grub came from the Left Continent. I recognize the taste.”

“The Left Continent?” I asked.

The Kingdom of Remlia was located in the Right Continent. You’d have to cross an ocean, slip through an archipelago, cut across the Central Continent, then sail across yet another ocean to reach the Left Continent. In other words, it was ridiculously far.

“I come from there,” explained the father of adventurers. “As did Lanceil’s mother, too. It’s a barren land ruled by war-hungry monarchs. With blood raining and snow falling upon it year-round.”

“Did the phantom ship belong to one of those rulers?”

“Good chance it did. But it’s a mystery how it got here. Not only was it unmanned, but it also carried nothing but flour—which is both strange and unsettling. I had reservations that the flour could have been poisoned, but you were cooking and eating it without any problem. We tested our meals as well; they came out clean.”

I had asked Machina to check it for any poisonous substances. It should go without saying, but I wouldn’t serve others something I hadn’t first tried myself. The flour itself didn’t have any issues.

“Ah.” Actually, there was one problem.

“What?”

“Pops, we did find some bugs in the flour. Strangely enough, they wouldn’t eat anything but wheat grown around here. But please don’t let that concern you. We thoroughly exterminated all of them.” After Machina had discovered the pests, we’d made sure to track down and eliminate all that had found their way to the nearby meadows and farmlands. We did keep a few samples as well

in case we'd need to analyze them later.

"Pests, you say? That only makes the whole thing more suspicious."

"So...you think someone intentionally sent the phantom ship here? To cause an infestation or something?" In that case—

"Two suspects stand out, but instinct tells me only one is the culprit," the king declared, now noticeably repulsed by the pasta on his plate. "Long have the regents on the Left Continent been at war with Ellusion of the Central Continent. In fact, they've been at war longer than they have ever been at peace. And it bears noting the vast majority of the wheat we grow here originally came from Ellusion."

"Meaning—" The royal pair were looking more dubious by the minute.

"However, I cannot fathom why they would obliterate the crops of a nation they mean to loot. Their people have achieved prosperity not through cultivation but plunder."

This made Ellusion our number one suspect. Recently, both a hero and his attending knight from the papal state had lost their lives on Remlian soil. Ellusion undoubtedly suspected foul play, though they had yet to make public their misgivings about the situation.

I guess I could see them trying to destabilize the Kingdom of Remlia in retaliation.

"Now then, Souya. I still owe you a reward."

"A reward, Your Majesty?" I played dumb. I knew "reward" was probably just an official name for the price of my silence. I'd learned more secrets than I ever should. This averted pestilence added another entry to the list.

"I understand you have struggled with your adventuring. It must be challenging to fill the vital roles left by departed party members."

".....Quite."

"Challenging" didn't begin to cover it. An irreplaceable man, our party's protector and shield, was dead.

"As such—"

“I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but have you received any news regarding Arianne Forths Gassim?” I had to know how the situation with Arvin’s elder sister stood. Everything else could wait.

The king gritted his teeth in frustration as he answered me. “No, nothing has changed. There has been no progress of which to speak. The Fifth Pope, the very one who proposed I take this throne, has made a mockery of himself, wandering so far and wide his people ridicule him as ‘the Stray Pope.’ Naturally, his opinion now holds very little sway within the country. Though I dispatched several letters, I have yet to receive favorable word from the administrative branch. I did, however, hear news of Arvin Forths Gassim. Evidently, he has been posthumously reinstated as an official knight of the Church of St. Lillideas. His honor has been restored.”

“I sincerely appreciate that, Your Majesty.” I thanked the king for his assistance, but my feelings were decidedly mixed. I was happy at the fact that my departed friend had regained his honor, but at the same time, I worried for his sister and her health. You never heard good things about anything related to Ellusion. It didn’t take much to imagine the *hospitality* a hostage would receive under such conditions. Even if Arianne did manage to secure her freedom, every single member of her family was dead. Would she have any means to support herself? Maybe there was some way I could reach out and contact her. If she could bear the long voyage by sea, I would love to have her come to Remlia.

“Be that as it may, Souya, we need only one more push—just one. If we can attain one more thing as leverage to negotiate with Ellusion, I give you my word that Arvin’s elder sister will be pardoned. I swear this to you by my grandfather Rhasvah’s name.”

“.....I understand, Your Highness.”

This man was a pro. He knew exactly where my bottom line was and had factored that into his plans. For this reason alone, I could assume he was not lying. More like, if this did turn out to be a lie, I would have nothing more to do with him. I’d sneak into the Central Continent and handle it myself if I had to. Though, it would definitely push me past the one-year time limit I had, but that meant nothing to me. It wasn’t like I had any family left waiting for me in the

modern world. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to lay my bones to rest here. As for regrets—

“Huh?” Suddenly dizzy, my head spun.

“Souya?” Lanceil caught me just as I was about to collapse.

“Little wonder. All the exhaustion of the last few days must be taking its toll. So, Souya, returning to the subject of your reward,” the king began. *Oh yeah, he did mention that.* “Lanceil.”

“Yes?”

“Serve him well.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.” Lanceil glanced over at me, beaming. “My lord, I place myself in your capable hands.”

“Wha.....? Sorry?”

CHAPTER 1

Your Friendly Neighborhood Dark Lord

[77TH DAY]

At this point, I'd made it as far as the fourteenth floor in the dungeon with two hundred eighty-six days left to go. Within that time frame, I aimed to reach the fifty-sixth floor, retrieve a certain resource my AI partners would identify for me there, then return to the modern world. But the deeper one explored the dungeon, the further one descended into madness. For the moment, I was still sane, but whether that'd hold up in the future remained unclear.

"Remain cautious, play it safe. Remain cautious, play it safe," I constantly repeated to myself, but in the end, we just had to work with what we had, facing every new danger as it came up. There was no such thing as a "safe" adventure. And the best way to alleviate these kinds of nerves? Get in that dungeon. How's that for irony?

"Hmm?"

The previous night, I'd stayed up late putting together our strategy, but my memory was hazy. I must've fallen asleep halfway through planning. Once my senses returned to me, I could feel the first rays of the morning sun warming the tent. The tablet in my hands and the AI mini kettle resting by my pillow were both in sleep mode. Annotated, hand-drawn maps and memos lay scattered about.

Right in front of me, I saw her face, fast asleep—Lana, the woman of this dimension whom I'd married under false pretenses. Blond and elven, the mage had a beautiful baby face almost too sweet for her surprisingly voluptuous chest, to which her slumbering younger sibling was now clinging. Éa, Lana's sister, was also blond, drop-dead gorgeous, tall, and lithe, the picture-perfect example of a typical elf. Perhaps starved for motherly affection, Éa absolutely

loved her big sister's breasts so much so that she could not sleep without holding them. Both sisters wore T-shirts and spandex shorts for pajamas. I'd seen them like this so many times you'd think I'd have grown used to the sight, but looking directly at them always made me burn up inside.

Instinctively, I brushed my fingers through Lana's bangs—only to realize I could not move. Our bodies had warmed so perfectly to each other I had not noticed, but someone was clutching me from behind as I lay on my side, and I had only just realized the extra set of hands on my chest. My goddess, the most likely culprit, was currently in her feline form, sprawled out in a corner of the tent with her stomach exposed. That left only one person.

"Lanceil?" From out of the corner of my eye, I saw a silver tail wag. Come to think of it, the soft bust pressed against my back felt familiar. ".....Lanceil," I whispered as quietly as I could so as not to wake Lana. Just two days ago, we had forbidden our newest member of our household from sneaking into my bed, unless given Lana's permission—and yet here we were. I didn't want to start my morning watching the two of them fight. Moreover, I dreaded getting in between them. My body simply could not take it.

I wanted to treasure Lana, but complicated circumstances beyond my control prevented me from flatly refusing Lanceil's advances. Personally, I didn't necessarily dislike the would-be princess, either. But no one in my close circle could empathize with my struggle, with this man's tortured heart.

"Lanceil..... Lanceil..... Lanceiiiiil," I continued to softly call her name. My annoyance at the situation and the warmth from her body seesawed fiercely on the scales of good versus evil in my mind.

Maybe I could stay like this a little longer. No, no, no, that would be no good. Shit would hit the fan.

"Mmmm."

"Ungh!" A sultry moan escaped Lanceil's lips as she tightened her grip on me. Her arms around my neck, she slid one leg over my waist and held me close. Supple mounds pressed against my shoulder blades.

I—I can't shake free. Who'd have thought Lanceil would put both physical and psychological binds on me—? Talk about a terrifying vixen.

“L-Lanceil, please, wake up,” I pleaded somewhat feebly.

“Ahm.”

“Ah!” Instead of responding, Lanceil nipped my earlobe playfully. That alone sent an electric shiver down my spine, but still, she kept nibbling, inflicting some serious, lasting damage on my willpower.

“Wai— Ms. Lanceil!”

“Mm? Yes?” Her warm whisper brushed against my ear. Had she been awake the whole time? Was she just pretending to be asleep?

“What are you doing?”

“I came to wake you as I’ve finished preparing breakfast. I have every confidence you’ll thoroughly enjoy the rolled omelets and soup I made today,” my captor explained.



“Yeah, sure, but before we get to that, what are you doing right—?”

She bit down again gently. “This is all part of my endeavor to become more intimately acquainted so that you will take me as your lover as quickly as possible. I thought I’d try a few things to see what works for you, sire.”

“I appreciate that. Wait, no, you should really think about when and where you—”

“Do you not care for this kind of affection, my lord?” She ran the tip of her tongue along my ear, tracing sensitive corners impossible to defend. It dipped into the canal, instantly giving me a mind-numbing sensation I’d never felt before. I almost passed out. Sure, Lana was my wife in name only, but it didn’t feel right letting another woman put the moves on me in front of her, except that it did feel really—

“.....Mmngh.” Lana blinked her eyes awake. “Hmm?”

Lanceil paid her no mind and, if anything, revved up the heat of her seduction. Her beastmaid blood was in a feverish frenzy.

“.....Huh?” Though usually very quick on the uptake, even Lana struggled to comprehend a scene this ludicrous. She sat up and took a deep breath in. After surveying the situation once more, she nodded to herself a couple times—then rammed her fist straight into Lanceil’s face.



“For breakfast this morning, we have mushroom and cheese omelets, bread, and, umm, this soup with bacon and vegetables called...”

“Pot-au-feu, Lady Lanceil,” Machina offered.

“Yes, exactly, pot-au-feu. I stewed them in the magic pot (pressure cooker), so they’re soft and perfectly done,” Lanceil announced as she and the AI bot set the table.

Mmm, it feels nice to wake up to a ready-made breakfast for a change. Not as good as watching someone gush over how delicious something I made is, though.

“I’ve added extra bacon for you, sire.”

“Lanceil, I forbid you from taking even one step closer to my husband.” My elven wife intercepted the beastmaid on her way to deliver my breakfast.

“But—”

“I forbid it.”

“Very well, I’ll leave it here.” Lanceil gave in, then set the tray down a few steps away.

Lana retrieved the platter and brought it over to me. “Do you have anything to say in your defense for your actions this morning, Lanceil?” she asked, clearly close to losing it.

The vulpine culprit looked bemused. “I must say I don’t see why I should have to *defend* myself at all. I respected the nighttime restriction as it is reserved for marital consummation, but mornings are free to one and all.”

“M-marital consummation?! Why, that’s... We haven’t gotten there yet! But you clearly crossed the line! How terribly vulgar! You should know better!” Lana sputtered, beet red to the tips of her ears. Honestly, she looked super cute.

“I mean, you’re not exactly one to talk, Lala,” Éa pointed out after glancing over at her elder sister sitting atop my lap. She made an excellent point.

“Éa, Souya and I are married,” the elder elf retorted. “What could possibly be wrong with a wife sitting on her husband’s lap?”

“Pretty sure I can hear the pot calling the kettle black, but it doesn’t look like you’ve noticed, so just forget it.”

“Huh?” Clearly, she did not realize. This wasn’t the first time she’d done it, but riding a man’s lap at the breakfast table was a little, you know, vulgar, maybe. I was completely to blame, though; I didn’t have the heart to reject Lana. I mean, come on. The feeling of her relatively plump bum resting on my lap made that impossible. Show me a man who could willingly brush that off, and he’d have either my utmost admiration or utter resentment.

“Ah, this is so goood!” Éa gushed after her first spoonful of the soup. Stone-faced, Lana tasted it for herself, too.

“Ghrr..... It’s delicious. How?!”

Pot-au-feu was made from stewed meat and vegetables. I’d brought granulated bouillon with me from the modern world, so it took practically nothing else to season the soup. Crumbling potatoes, softened bits of turnips and slivers of onion, rounded carrot cubes, and bite-size portions of bacon starred in this variation. I cleaved a chunk of potato in two with the lightest prod of my spoon. Reaching around Lana, I tried it for myself.

“Ohhh.” While a little light on salt, the soup sang with the savory flavors of the assorted vegetables and bacon, and a light sweetness bloomed on my tongue. I brought a generously thick piece of bacon to my mouth; when coupled with the vegetables, it evened out the saltiness superbly. All the other fillings were cut into perfect little portions, too, making this a breakfast I’d have any day. “Yeah, great job.”

“Oooh, ooooh, oooh!” Upon hearing my reaction, the foxy beastmaid hid her face with the tray. Trembling for some reason, she swung her tail furiously back and forth. She normally kept the tail tucked away beneath her skirt; if I walked behind her now, I would get a clear view of her panties. Not like I wanted to look, but...yeah, I actually did want to look. “A-and the omelet?!”

“Let’s see.” I reached toward the slightly burned omelet, slicing it open to unveil a luxurious mix of melted cheese and mushrooms. It was sweet; she’d added some sugar. The saccharine addition and the saltiness of the cheese highlighted the best in the other and brought out a deliciousness further accented by the crisp texture of the mushrooms. “Not a great presentation, but you get full marks for taste. Good job on this one, too.”

“Thank you very much, my lord!! And I apologize, but I cannot contain my excitement and must run off!!” With that, our chef of the morning took off across the meadow, quick as the wind. She looked incredibly happy from behind. I could relate to the feeling, but this was an extreme reaction.

“It’s kinda bland,” my little sister noted, then added a few heaping dollops of mayonnaise to her omelet. Lana took bite after bite of her own, her other hand clenched into a tight fist.

“Machina, I need you to give me another cooking lesson, so—”

“I am terribly sorry, Mistress Lana, but I must refuse.”

“Whaaa—?!” *Nice one, Machina. Tell it to her straight.*

“The truth is, I have so far been unable to dispose of your last cooking creation. Once we destroy that abomination, I will gladly pass on all the secrets I know.”

Not too long ago, Lana had spawned a mysterious mass while trying to make some rice balls. Unspeakably terrifying to behold and difficult to destroy, it had us up against a wall. Try to burn it, and it expanded; douse it with water, and it turned savage. No number of arrows or slashes from my enchanted sword caused it any damage. It was impervious to all manner of physical attacks. We also gave Lana’s magic a shot, but even her fires could not eliminate the monstrosity, though they did just barely manage to shrink and weaken the thing.

For the moment, we had sealed it away in a steel box. Still, the thrashing and clanging within was getting more violent by the day. Recently, we’d started hearing nails scratch against the steel and even whispers of what sounded like an unintelligible language. Machina had a good point. We couldn’t risk unleashing version two or three of that atrocity while the original still existed. It would put the whole Other Dimension in danger. As a representative of the modern human world, I had no right causing any trouble here.

“Ugh... It’s true, the responsibility for that does lie with me. All right. I’ll develop some method to exterminate it first, but afterward, you will teach me how to cook, promise?”

“Of course. Leave that part to me.” That was a close one.

Casually scanning the campsite, I landed on something out of place. “Machina, what is that?”

In the shadow of the AI, I’d spotted a mound, its contents hidden under a blue tarp. It looked as big as about five people lying down side by side.

No, don’t tell me—has she finally gone off the deep end?

“It is only through repeated error that humans develop and mature,” Machina reminded me as she removed the tarp with one of her mechanical arms.

“What the.....?” I lost all words. Before me lay a massacre of broken frying pans and pots, cutting boards snapped cleanly in two, chipped kitchen knives, smashed plates, and the ashen remains of onetime edible foodstuffs.

“We acquired most of the cooking utensils and grocers in this dimension, so please pretend you saw nothing of this. However, do take note of the great effort Lady Lanceil put into this meal.”

“It looks just like when I tried to cook, too. But rrgh. This is, well, yeah.” Lana wanted badly to criticize Lanceil’s work, but she held her tongue as it was a delicious breakfast. There was one problem, though.

“Yaya, this bread’s hard as a rock. I can’t bite into it.”

“Ah, man.” Lanceil had probably taken and used the stale bread I had kept as a reserve. It wasn’t something you could eat straight off the shelf.

Well, let’s just chalk it up to an adorable misunderstanding.

“Machina, take it away.”

“Roger that.”

My AI partner retrieved all the bread and stored it once again in the pantry. The bread felt hard enough. I should use it to cook and make something with it when we returned from the dungeon.

“Oh.”

Across the meadow, a redheaded young boy and a long-haired maiden in knight’s armor made their way toward us. I recognized the boy, but who was that girl?

She can’t possibly be his girlfriend, right?

That said, the boy was at that age, and his androgynous features caught the attention of many ladies, most of them older. It would be stranger for him not to have had a girlfriend or two by this point. All kinds of excitement and nerves set my heart aflutter. As the kid’s guardian, I had to make sure I didn’t embarrass him.

“Sorry, Lana.”

“Awww.” It hurt me, too, but I forced myself to lift her from my lap and sat her down in the chair next to me. After quickly patting down my clothes and fixing my bedhead, I got up to greet the pair.

“Why, good morning, Shuna. Who might this young lady be?” I put on my best smile, trying to imitate my departed friend’s winning grin...and immediately got the feeling I’d made a huge mistake. *I think I owe you an apology, Arvin.* “Hmm?”

The girl stared at me in disgust. Despite her cold expression, she had a cute appearance. Was she maybe a little older than Shuna? The knight had long, curly chestnut hair, wore faded-white armor, and carried a shield and longsword that both felt too big for her stature.

Hmm..... Huh? I’ve seen that armor, that shield, and that sword before.

“Sou, what the hell are you saying? It’s me, Bel.”

“Course, I knew that.” She was none other than Beltriche, one of my party members. “Sorry,” I apologized. Turned out, I’d made a different type of mistake. Never would I have thought I’d fail to recognize one of my closest friends. To be fair, though, I was pretty sure Bel had shorter hair. How had it gotten this long in just three days? Some kind of magic Rogaine?

“.....Whatever,” she replied coldly. *Is she that pissed?*

“Bel, want some breakfast? This pot-au-feu is pretty tasty,” I offered, trying to smooth over the issue with food. Nothing worked better on Other Dimensional youngins.

“Yeah.”

Before I could grab her another bowl, Bel snatched mine, took a seat at the table, and dug in. She ate in silence.

“So what’s the verdict? Though actually, I wasn’t the one who made it today. Want some more meat?”

“No.” She fell into an even deeper silence, eating spoonful after spoonful of her stew. It surprised me to see someone who despised vegetables as vehemently as Bel gobble them down so readily. I’d have to relay that to Lanceil

later.

“Souya, I need you for a sec.”

“You want some, too, Shuna?”

“I’m good. C’mere.” The redhead gestured for me to follow him away from the camp.

“What’s up?” Something felt just a little off. *We’re about to go in the dungeon. Is he gonna be okay?*

“Here’s fine. Give me a minute,” he said, stopping as soon as we could no longer see the campgrounds. Pulling a tree branch out of his bag, Shuna stuck it in the ground. “O King of the Tree Spirits, Lord Ukhazol, I, your humble follower Shuna of Azollid, raise up a prayer in your name and entreat you to reveal your form and voice before us. May my request reach your hallowed—huuuh?”

The kid hadn’t even finished his incarnation before a blinding light shot out from the branch, and a tiny man about twenty centimeters tall appeared. With a hoe in one hand, straw hat on his head, and a sweat-catching cloth around his neck, the mini dude looked like a typical, everyday farmer.

“Shuna, my boy. Doin’ okay? Ya know you can call me more often than this, right? All the gramps and grannies round here keep askin’ about ya. I’m bound to these islands, ya know, so I’ll have ta show up in this sorry little state, but at least I can hear ya out if ya get the urge to vent about anythin’.” What a folksy little god. While not exactly dignified, he was kind and easy to talk to. Humans who were adored and loved by many and then became deities often shared those characteristics.

“Thank you, Lord Ukhazol. I reached out today because I wanted to talk to you about Bel. Oh, and this guy’s my party leader.”

At Shuna’s introduction, I politely greeted his god. “My name is Souya, the Otherworlder. I’m also an adventurer and honored to serve as Shuna’s party leader. Your devotee’s swordsmanship is unparalleled among his peers.”

“He’s still a real kid, though, ain’t he?”

“Well, I’d say he acts his age.”

“Ya know, he finally shot up a bit not too long ago, but four years back, he was just a tiny pip-squeak, taggin’ along behind Bel or Legure like a little chick. Soon as he lost sight of ’em, he’d start cryin’ and wailin’, and let me tell you, it was no easy feat gettin’ him to simmer down. I stopped counting how many times he called for me, bawlin’ his eyes out, but ya better believe I carried him home on my back over one hundred, two hundred times.”

“Ahh, I see.” *What is this guy, Shuna’s doting uncle? Whoever he is, that firecracker’s gonna blow his shit if he keeps going on like that—*

“Excuse me for interrupting, Lord Ukhazol, but about Bel.” When Shuna spoke up, he sounded much calmer than I’d expected. He really was growing up. Maybe that had something to do with the first steps into manhood he’d taken not too long ago?

“Sorry, sorry. I got so happy seein’ yer face after all this time, I got a bit carried away.”

“Um, I only left the island like three months ago.”

“Is that so? Feels longer seeing how you’ve grown quite a bit. You’re not foolin’ around with the ladies, are ya? The big cities are chock-full of temptation. Trust me, as a god and a fellow man, I can see how it could be alluring, but if ya get involved with the wrong woman and—” The god prattled like a loving and doting parent.

“Lord Ukhazol, I’m sorry, but this isn’t the time.”

“Right, sorry. Force of habit.”

Shuna moved on to the topic at hand. “Bel’s been real weird lately. Something kinda similar happened once before, but this time, it’s different. Souya, you didn’t even recognize her, did you?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly right. Speaking of, is superfast-growing hair a thing here?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Thought so. “It’s not just that, though,” Shuna continued. “She’s been downing all these vegetables she hates, actin’ all cold, ignorin’ people, starin’ daggers all over the place. Don’t even get me started on the dinner she made last night. Bel’s not an amazing cook or anything, but she’s

never served anything literally inedible. Last night's meal, though, was just nasty. A few of our older Gladwein brothers had some by mistake, and they had to get carried off to the Jumichla Healing Temple. Something is definitely wrong."

So her dinner sent them to the hospital, huh? At least her failed dish didn't physically attack them like ours.

"Lord Ukhazol, do you have any idea what's going on with Bel?"

"Shuna, my boy, I'm afraid yer worst fears are true; something or someone has possessed Beltriche. She's got that darn Divine Medium trait, ya know, which is why we've seen something similar in the past. If we were dealin' with a demonic phantom, sprite, animal spirit, or a deity who'd lost their believers, I could shoo them right outta her, but this time, I got nothin' that might help."

"Whaaa—?" Shuna gasped, aghast. I had the same reaction. Being possessed was no joke.

"Ya know, I was just a simple man who did his best to protect our island from salt erosion until the day I died— Er, actually, I guess I kept pluggin' away plantin' trees and all that after I kicked the bucket, too, but *there ain't nothin' special 'bout me*. Even as a god, I ain't got any graces too fancy to spread round. What I can say, though, is that whatever's got hold of Bel ain't evil."

I threw a question at the deity. "Would a benevolent spirit take over someone's body without permission?"

"Gods these days are born of endless obsession and deeds bigger than anythin' humans can wrap their minds round. Even those y'all claim to be virtuous or worship as saints still go an' smush people like bugs. What gods deem as good or evil is worlds apart from human morality. I bet to an Otherworlder like yerself, this all sounds like crazy talk, don't it? But that's just the way of things."

This was the same for humans, too. All you had to do was claim authority over others by placing a crown on your head, and your actions would thereafter be judged against a different set of rules, one far removed from the simple concept of good versus evil. As long as you could argue you acted to protect your country, you could easily deceive and kill any number of people. Compared with

that, the scales of justice regulating the behavior of the gods must have been far beyond the scope of human understanding.

“But that’s...”

Seeing how overwhelmed Shuna had become, Lord Ukhazol gently assured him, “Shuna, my dear, dear boy. Let me tell ya something to calm yer troubled heart. While I may be one of the weakest among the Legion Gods, I am still a deity in my own right. If I catch wind that whatever’s taken control of Bel’s usin’ her for any nefarious means, I’ll stake my divinity to exorcise it. That is, if Bel wants me to, of course.”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

Lord Ukhazol had on an inscrutable expression when he answered the boy’s question. “Bel was the one to invite the possession, on the condition that the spirit share its power with her. She chose this herself.”

““What?”” Shuna and I both sputtered.

“Must’a been round about ten days ago, Bel came to me for advice, askin’ if I knew how to get strong real quick. She told me she had to do somethin’ or she’d drag the party down. That ring a bell at all?”

Sure does.

Back when I still hadn’t figured out how to rearrange our formation to fill the gaps left by Arvin’s death, Bel came to see me at camp. We had a light meal and chatted, then I walked her back to the city. Come to think of it now, she’d started using and training with Arvin’s old equipment the very next day. According to Gladwein’s followers, Bel looked comfortable, and her movements were not of someone trying to wield heavy gear for the very first time, but I’d just chalked that up to previous experience.

“Sorry, Shuna. I think this one’s on me.” I didn’t have the wherewithal to really consider anything at the time.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Shuna glowered at me.

“Bel once asked me in a roundabout way how we’d set up our party formation without Arvin, but at that time, I still hadn’t figured it out yet and

griped about the whole thing. If only I'd given her a clear answer, then maybe —"

"Wait, that's it? I thought for sure you'd... No, forget it."

You thought I'd what? Wait, wait, wait, I'd never lay a hand on Bel—I'm not that stupid. And it may be just for show, but I am technically married. Oh, but we did take elven vows, so I guess polygamy wouldn't be an issue? Regardless, that'd just ruin our party's morale.

Clearing his throat to grab our attention, Lord Ukhazol said, "I can't tell y'all exactly what kind of deal Bel's made with this being, but what I can say is this: If the worst should happen, and the girl asks me for help, I'll go in an' save her at all costs. Same goes for you, Shuna, my boy. For now, wait and see how she gets on. Girls her age can be fickle. For all we know, she might wake up tomorrow, decide she's had enough, 'n' give that thing in her the boot. Don't y'all think too hard on this, especially you, Otherworlder. Exhaustion is written all over yer face. Seems my followers have given you a rough time."

"Not really. If anything, I'm the one dragging them around."

"That's a yes, ain't it?"

"N-no, really."

"Isn't it?"

Crumbling under Lord Ukhazol's intense pressure, I reluctantly admitted, "..... Y-yes." Miffed, Shuna quickly turned his face away, unintentionally confirming the charge.

The King of the Tree Spirits turned to directly face me. "I could apologize 'til I'm blue in the face, but that wouldn't do much for ya. So here, Otherworlder, let me bless ya with some of my graces. Though I doubt they'll do much for yer expeditions, they can't hurt to have, either."

"Uuugh," Shuna groaned unhappily. *I mean, I'll take it as long as it doesn't interfere with anything else.*

"Hold out your finger."

"Okay." I held out my index finger toward him, and Lord Ukhazol touched a

digit to my fingertip. A small bright light bloomed where they met.

This feels exactly like E.T., except there's a miniature grandpa on the other side instead of an alien.

"Right, my graces are now yours. It ain't much to speak of seein' as how I'm lower on the ranks 'n' all, but go ahead 'n' use 'em all you want."

"Sorry, what does it do again?" Seemed important to know.

"Ye're now the proud owner of the Tree Spirit King Lord Ukhazol's power to... grow delicious vegetables!"

"That's.....amazing!!" Now that's my kinda grace! I better make more room in our garden!! We'll plant some garlic, cherry tomatoes, eggplant, herbs, bell peppers, cucumbers... The sky's the limit. Our diet's about to go wild with variety. I can make my very own Eden here!!

"But wait, that's not all. Before ya start plantin', raise your arms up to the heavens 'n' call my name. I'll throw in some preventative pain reduction from all the aches of farming."

"Magnifique!" Hell yeah, this is what I call an Other Dimensional miracle—talk about a godsend! "Wait, can I just go ahead and do a full covenant with you? I'll worship you like crazy, I promise." It felt kind of like cheating on Lady Mythlanica and Lady Glavius, but this directly affected the offerings I could make for them. They probably wouldn't mind if I made an exception just this once.

"Ahhh, as a *fellow Otherworlder*, I wish I could, my friend, but ya'd have to come all the way out to my island for that. My divinity's tied to this land, ya see. I've said it once, and I'll say it a thousand times, but I'm nothin' fancy."

"Nooo!"

"Souya, don't be so dramatic. What good will planting some random vegetables do for our adventuring?"

"What. Did. You. Say?" He didn't get it. I seized him by the shoulders. "Do you have any *inkling* how much work it is to prepare all our portable provisions and snacks for breaks in the dungeon?! Can you even *imagine* how much easier my

life will be if I can grow my own tasty vegetables?! Can you?!”

The produce we got from the local farmers had an overpowering bitterness and primitive taste. But the biggest issue was the sloppy management of the items, which meant I had to sift through my haul after I bought it. Almost every day, I’d cut into something only to find wriggling worms inside. If we could plant our own vegetable garden at the campsite, Machina could take care of it and genetically engineer higher-quality strains. To top it off, our friendly god’s divine blessings would guarantee they’d taste good. I couldn’t ask for anything better. I’d have to start plowing the field straightaway.

“I mean, yeah, you’re a good cook, for sure. I’ll give you that. But if it’s that much of a pain to deal with, then why don’t you just buy the adventurers lunches?”

“Are you insaaane?! I can’t just feed growing girls and boys lumps of bread and butter!! They don’t even provide a fraction of the essential vitamins and nutrients your body needs, you know?! And don’t get me started on how utterly unmotivated you all got when we used meal packs from the market. When we broke for lunch, you all looked over at me with sad puppy dog eyes and sighed, remember?! I sure as hell will never forget that! As if that weren’t enough, you didn’t even have a third of your usual fighting spirit, did you?! I can’t afford to slack off on our diet! Which reminds me, Shuna, you need to eat more vegetables. Actually, I’m just gonna start force-feeding them to you.”

“Fiiine, my bad. The tastier, the better. But I’m not eatin’ that flying-rabbit food. Not a chance in hell.”

I’ll show you hell—one where you’re crazy for vegetables! You’ll never even see it coming. One day, you’ll wake up and realize you just can’t live without them. Oh, wait, that’s just normal physiology.

“Hmm. I reckon I know more or less what ye’re made of now, Otherworlder. Keep it up and look after my devotees.”

“Of course.” Lord Ukhazol entrusted Shuna in my care. He didn’t have to tell me, though; I meant to look after them both all along.

“Shuna, leave the situation with Bel to her ‘n’ me. You go on an’ focus on doin’ yer part. A human life is over as quick as a flash. Spend all yer days frettin’

'bout someone else, and before ya know it, you'll be an old man too weak to get up out of bed."

"Okay, Lord Ukhazol, I understand," the usually hardheaded Shuna obediently agreed. We didn't get to see this side of him much.

"And eat yer vegetables."

"....." *Answer him, man! Can't you see the God of Produce is talking to you?!*

"Take good care of yerself now and do all in yer power to work for the greater good. There's more ta life than the sword. Ya can learn ta fight like the greatest hero there be, but that ain't gonna help ya when ya take yer hoe to the soil. People are meant ta face all sorts of challenges outside the battlefield, too, ya know. And you, my boy, have a home waitin' for ya. If the city ever gets to be too much, ya can always come on home to the island." The homely god sounded like an anxious parent worrying over their child who'd moved away to the Big Apple. "Ack, there I go again, gettin' all preachy. Let's leave it here for today, my boy. You call me again any time now, ya hear?"

Lord Ukhazol waved at us, and I waved back. He was a tiny little man, but a solid god.

"Souya."

"Hmm?"

Shuna turned and asked, "What're we gonna do about Bel? We still goin' in the dungeon?"

"Well, there's only one thing we can do. We've got to plan everything again from scratch," I told him. ".....Today's expedition is canceled!"

What a mess.



"*Raaagh,*" I groaned like a zombie, rolling around in my tent. My plan, my beautiful plan I'd spent three whole days putting together... Now I had to do it aaall over again.

Why did we have to get blindsided like—? Well, I guess I should be thankful it

happened out here instead of in the dungeon. Good thing I'd drilled the RCC (Report, Contact, Consult) basics into Shuna over and over again. I don't even want to think about what could've gone wrong if he'd ignored Bel's condition and we'd all gone adventuring as planned.

I tried asking the current Bel a bunch of questions, but she refused to answer a single one. The *entity inside Bel* instead declared an *I will not respond unless the matter concerns the dungeon* policy. This was the trickiest type of being to deal with. They seemed easy to work with but actually followed their own unique codes. If that set of rules didn't mesh with the rest of the party, we'd have some real problems.

Before all this happened, Bel had proven exceptionally talented at negotiating with other parties. One smile from an angelic young girl like her disarmed and charmed like magic. Lana's own people hated her, Shuna and Éa had hot and cold personalities that made it difficult to get along with others, and neither my appearance nor notoriety did me any favors. Without Arvin or Zenobia, Bel was our only diplomatic hope. And now we'd lost that advantage, and for what?

This is just not my day. What the hell are we supposed to do now? We've got to team up with another party to take a shot at the gatekeeper on the fourteenth floor. Am I gonna have what it takes to make that work out on my own? Though if worse comes to worst, I guess I can always try bribery.

For what it was worth, I gave Lana, Éa, Shuna, and Bel a generous bit of coin to observe what had been going on around the city. I also ordered them to spend the whole day deepening the bonds between them. I probably should've gone, too, but first, I had to readjust our plan of action. To be more exact, I had to start entirely from scratch.

"Graaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Mr. Souya, you seem stressed." Machina rolled up my tent's entrance flaps. And just like that, I had a partner I could fully rely on.

"Sure am. It's your time to shine, Machina."

"Agreed." An adorable smile flashed on the pot-barreled robot's screen. "Okay, ready to get going?"

“Huh? Go where?”

“It’s a surprriise! You’ll see when we get there!” she declared and led me off to this secretive spot.



Machina slung a bulging rucksack filled with provisions over her back, and I picked up another backpack carrying condiments, plates, and utensils. Unsold pasta made up the majority of the food we lugged. My Phantom Pasta creation I’d been so sure would take off flopped—hard. No, seriously, it was such a disaster, it felt like some cruel joke.

Aside from that, I geared up the same as always: poncho over my camouflage fatigues, ryvius and coral necklace hanging from my neck, my decked-out AI gizmo glasses on, a woodsman’s hatchet at my side, and a karambit in my pocket. Arrows, my unstrung bow, and enchanted sword were tucked away in a quiver that hung from my waist. Not the classiest getup, but adventurer etiquette required one to show up in full battle mode.

The two of us set off across the meadow, moving away from the city. Our objective: a change of pace. A little while before this, Machina had been rolling around the meadow (to blow off steam) when she got herself impossibly stuck, wedged in between two boulders. As it happened, someone chanced upon her and helped her out. Today we were going to thank them for the favor. Personally, I was more interested in scoping out this savior who had seen Machina—just in case.

“.....Huh?” As we strolled over the grassy fields, I realized something felt a little off. “Hang on, Machina.” I take that back—“a little” didn’t cut it.

“Yees?”

“What is that supposed to be?” I asked, pointing at the Machina Unit’s nether regions. A white sphere affixed to the bottom of the unit spun three hundred sixty degrees to propel my metallic partner over the meadow. Modern-day laws and a special treaty prohibited AI bots from acting autonomously, though Machina had come up with a whole range of excuses to get around those restrictions in the past. This, however, was a blatant breach of contract.

“It is an emergency measure to get me out of trouble if I ever get stuck again. I can’t expect someone to come save me every time, sooo—emergency measure, e-mer-gen-seeee?”

“No, no, no, you know you can’t go around breaking the law like that. You’re not even trying to hide it.” Eventually, she’d cut loose and do goodness knows what. And I had a bad feeling I’d lose all control over her.

“Mr. Souya, this modification is necessary for our expeditions.”

Ugh, it’s like déjà vu. Except she’s the one throwing my own words back at me.
“Are you really gonna use that excuse to justify every little thing?”

“Hey, Mr. Souya, Mr. Souya, guess what? I have kept a meticulous video record of the moves *necessary for our expeditions* you have made—*every single one*. Oddly enough, most of the clips happen to show you cozying up to different ladies, but I’d be happy to share it with Mistress Lana if—”

“That’s one good emergency measure right there! You gotta do what you gotta do!” *Shit. She has me by the short hairs.*

“Exactly! I knew you’d understand! I had no other choice!”

“Of course! Plus, we’re in the Other Dimension, after all! Even cheating isn’t against the rules here!”

“Nice try! That could not be further from the truth!”

“.....Fine.” *C’mon, you should have agreed with me there.*

“The elven race sees jealousy as an extremely ugly emotion, perhaps due to their tradition of polygamous marriage. They believe it is only natural for elves to embody beauty itself, so one can imagine how they might view envy as an acknowledgment of defeat. However, that does not necessarily mean Mistress Lana would feel comfortable watching you flirt with other women. I do not have the authority to restrict your sex life, but I would urge you to think veeeeeeery carefully before you fool around with a woman. Oh, sorry, should I append ‘or a man’ to that as well?”

“Absolutely not!!” Love is love, but I loved the ladies.

“For now, please exercise extra care around Lady Lanceil.”

“I’m trying, but she’s a force to be reckoned with.” She came on strong, both emotionally and physically.

“Maybe all beastfolk share this trait? Lady Lanceil does indeed take a very proactive approach, but do you think she really means it?”

“No, my money says she’s working under the king’s orders.” King Remlia must have ordered her to do it. He had no shortage of reasons to gather intel on me. Case in point, all the foreign technology, machinery, and goods I’d brought with me from Japan. Plus, we couldn’t forget he’d been covertly hunting beasts.

King Remlia didn’t trust his allied nation, Ellusion, at all. Actually, maybe international ties didn’t rely on trust at all, but on a web of lies and deception sly snakes and wily foxes spun to fool the other.

“In that case, I’ll go ahead and raise the safety locks two levels just for Lady Lanceil. Sound good?”

“Please do.” I seriously doubted the possibility, but if Lanceil wasn’t simply following orders but acting out of pure feelings toward me, then.....what would I do? “So are we almost there yet?” I asked, shifting between my internal and external dialogues.

“It’s just up ahead.” The only things close to the campsite were the Heuress Forest, where the elves lived, and the Remlian farmlands that bordered it. Apart from that, the meadow stretched on uninterrupted as far as the eye could see.

Now that I think of it, does anyone else even live around here? “Hmm?” I stopped in my tracks.

“Is something wrong?”

I’d paused at the site of my battle against a certain hero—the same place I’d fought the enchanted sword now peacefully stored in my quiver. Red flowers bloomed all over the spot. Their spiky leaves and stems pricked any skin unfortunate enough to come in contact with them. Even the tubular crimson flowers looked thorny. Though strikingly similar to the red spider lilies said to line the shores of the afterworld, they were, in fact—

“Thistles, Mr. Souya.”

“Why are they only blooming here?” No, that wasn’t true. The flowers traced across the meadow as if chasing after something, marking a path with the blooms left in their wake. To me, the deep-crimson petals appeared to also be purifying the ground of some evil curse.

“Fascinating, isn’t it? This shade of red is almost the exact color of human blood. You can refer to *Machina’s Believe It or Not, Otherworldly Mysteries* for more information.”

Is that really a thing? I am so down to read that.

“Careful with the thorns! These flowers grow in denser clusters where we’re going,” Machina advised, then continued happily plodding along. We walked roughly five kilometers, following the thistles like a trail made of breadcrumbs. The entire way, I traveled with emotions I couldn’t name or fit into any neat compartments. Then up ahead—

“This can’t be real.”

—we came to a vast blanket of innumerable crimson thistles. Beautiful, yet hellish. It was here I’d slain that unsightly beast. It was also the very same spot where we’d crash-landed into this dimension and found an abandoned dungeon whose history none in Remlia could recount.

“*Mr. Gaslark—!*” Machina called out to someone as she rolled away, leaving me frozen in place, dumbfounded at the sight before us.

“Ohhh, you came.” A small figure waved from within the ocean of red blossoms. At around a hundred twenty centimeters, he stood about as tall as Machina. The hood of his cape completely hid his face from view, but I caught glimpses of thin, green arms and legs beneath the fabric. It was way too late in the game for a little green skin to throw me off guard, but I didn’t see that every day. Actually, I had a pretty good guess I knew who he might be. Following after Machina, I approached the hooded figure.

“Mr. Souya, Mr. Gaslark represents the people who came to my rescue.”

“Gaslark Oz Melphorjuna Ghazuzuosm Oggeumuzeus,” the green creature introduced himself. Sliding off his hood, he revealed a perfectly bald head, pointy ears, and the long, hooked nose of—a goblin. He looked exactly like the

kind that starred at the top of every RPG's weakest monster list, except for one crucial distinguishing feature: the undeniable intelligence that shone through his eyes and expressions. He felt somehow familiar, so I greeted him without much added formality.

"Souya, the Otherworlder. Thank you for kindly coming to my partner's aid. It's not much, but we've coming bearing a few gifts to show our appreciation."

"Machina spoke naught but truth. Verily, thou holdest no prejudices toward other races, dost thou? Might that be because thou hailst from another world? Even so, I imagine most races would find it natural to discriminate against those of differing appearances, would thou not agree? But seeing thou dost not have such beliefs, that must imply thy parents, or perhaps thy master, taught thee exceptionally well, or that thou hailst from a magnanimous land. In any event, allow me to extend a warm welcome to the domain we small-statured goblins claim. Treat us as equals, and we shall return the favor."

I hadn't been looking down on him or anything, but he was clearly an upright, noble representative of his people. "Pardon the question, but by any chance, did you and your kin plant these flowers?" I asked, using the first chance I got to address my most burning question.

"Yeah, dude." *"Yeah, dude"*? "Look, talking all formal like that gets old quick, so let's just speak casually. Y'all are cool to do the same."

"Uh, great. Thanks." *He's a total bro!* Where did we ever get the impression that goblins were mean-spirited, slimy, sneaky gremlins?

"Those are crimson mortalis. The other night we heard this crazy *bang, bang, bang* pounding above our home. And the next day, we find out someone had made a huuuge mess of our lands. People are cold, man."

Immediately, I dropped to my knees in *dogeza*. *Shit, these flowers hurt! Suck it up!*

"That was my fault! I'm so sorry! I had no idea anyone lived below the ground!!"

"Yeah, I know." *You knew?!* "I mean, I don't really know what kinda of trouble you above-grounders get into, but it sounded like you were really goin' for it,

so. No hard feelings.”

“Th-thank you so much.” *Damn, so forgiving. Is it really safe for goblins to be so easygoing?*

“The ground was wicked contaminated for sure, but it’s nothin’ we can’t purify. You’re good.”

“You can do that?!” Wait, goblins knew how to exorcise curses? But I’d heard there was basically no way to lift them. “Can I ask you—?” I started to ask the friendly imp another question, when—

“Get away from my brother, goblin!”

—out of nowhere, Éa showed up, interrupting our conversation at the most frustrating moment. An arrow nocked on her readied bow pointed straight at the forehead of the little green man—who stood next to her brother lying prostrate on the ground.

I get how bad this looks, but why did she have to show up now?

“Éa, calm down.”

“Are you okay?! Did he do anything to you?!”

“I’m fine; just listen to me!”

“Goblins are a nasty race that snatch people and violate them until they die! Step away!”

“Hey, elf.” *Ah, shit. He’s pissed. And you do not want to get on the bad side of creatures on the more intelligent end of the spectrum.* “Tell me, are your folk so twisted that they get off raping pigs and horses?”

“What did you say?!” Éa’s emotions had clearly passed its boiling point.

“To us, elves and heims look like nothing but boars and mares. Only perverts get their rocks off looking at livestock.”

“*Excuuuse me?! That literally makes no sense!*” was my little sister’s Valley-girl retort.

The green dude made a good point. If humans didn’t find goblins attractive, then it wouldn’t make sense for goblins to be into humans. Like Gaslark said,

only real weirdos would break that mold.

“All right, elf, riddle me this: Can you honestly tell me you’ve got friends or relatives who have been sexually assaulted by one of us?”

“Yeah, a friend of a friend!” *Right, that’s definitely a lie.* It was probably just gossip fabricated to titillate or a story spun to bad-mouth someone. I could imagine the beauty-obsessed elves did not look too kindly on goblins to begin with.

“Éa, just put your bow down, or I’m seriously gonna get mad.”

“No. Way. In. Hell!” Once Éa’s temper flared, she wouldn’t listen to anyone. It’d been that way for ages.

.....*Huh? Ages?*

“Wait, rewind. Otherworlder, why’s she calling you ‘brother’?” the goblin asked. Yeah, I’d be curious, too.

“This is my little sister.”

“A heim? With an elven sister?”

“Mr. Souya’s wife is an elf!” Machina helpfully added.

“Dude, are you insane?”

“Eyes on me, goblin!” Éa barked as soon as she wasn’t in the spotlight. Even with an arrow pointed straight at him, the little green guy didn’t so much as flinch.

“Éa, I’m telling you that’s enou—” She’d gone too far. Just as I was about to restrain her, my blood ran cold, paralyzing me. A frigid gust blew through the crimson blossoms.

“Our sovereign has arrived.” As soon as the goblin spoke, a black whirlwind spun tightly together and coalesced into a human figure—a skeleton draped in a black cape. It had the bone structure of a shorter heim and blue fire smoldering in its eye sockets. A necklace of triangular golden shards hung from its neck, each fragment a piece from the remains of a shattered royal crown—the mark of one who had slain a king.

Pops had once told me over drinks about an ancient tradition of the Right Continent. Apparently, those who committed regicide would snap apart their victim's crown, string together the broken hunks of gold along with the ears or finders of the fallen monarch, then wear it as a necklace. Assassinating a king held no glory; it heralded the collapse of a kingdom. Those who nonetheless murdered monarchs gained, in this world, the title of—

“Behold, the one true ruler reigning over we diminutive subjects, the Dark Lord of the Forbidden Land, Gormlaith Melphorjuna Gastolfo.”

—Yeah, what he said: *Dark Lord*. My heart raced. The beast within me began to stir.

“What the hell is that?” Éa asked, trembling. I couldn't blame her. This opponent was on an entirely different level. An incomprehensible, icy black aura diametrically opposite any godly presence emanated from the figure. I'd felt this sensation once before when I'd first dropped into this world. Images of a colossal creature writhing in the darkness, of tentacles blooming open like petals came back to me. Why had these memories slipped my mind for so long? It was truly mysterious.

“Agaccion!” Answering my call, the enchanted blade leaped from the quiver.

“Agh!” The shout surprised the goblin, but I couldn't worry about that now. Apologies could wait.

“Destroy that bow!” Agaccion slashed Éa's weapon in half. The bowstring snapped, sending the nocked arrow straight into, of all places, Machina's head.

“Eyaaaaaaaah!” the bot shrieked, but I ignored her.

“Y-Yaya, what are you—? Wait, what's wrong with your eyes?”

Forcing Éa to her knees, I pushed her head down. “Please allow me to sincerely apologize for my younger sister's brazen irreverence. A child she may be, but that cannot absolve her from the sin of turning her bow on your subject—nay, on a *person*. We shall accept any punishment you justly decree; however, I beseech you to allow me to accept it on her behalf. To begin, may I offer you one of my arms?” Calling Agaccion back to me, I stretched out my left arm.

The Dark Lord considered this silently for a long moment, then whispered into the goblin's ear.

“Thus says my sovereign: ‘O beast of golden eyes, thy humble apology has tempered our rage. Keep thine heim arm; we have no wish to fill our halls with such trifles.’”

“My heart bleeds with respect for your magnanimous wisdom and generosity.” Had I been alone, I might’ve taken another course of action, but I couldn’t risk a violent confrontation with Éa there. I’d only put her in harm’s way. And I could never use my last resort around other people, much less those I’d sworn to protect.

And who the heck is the golden-eye beast? Me?

“Éa, you apologize, too.”

“Why?! All I did was worry about you! I didn’t even do anything!” Éa yelled back in anger, swatting my hand away. While blissfully ignorant, my elven sister sure had nerves of steel to act so audaciously before a regent of evil. She was treading dangerous waters and picking a fight with the worst possible opponent.

Every world is full of injustice, and sometimes, you just have to apologize even when you’re not to blame, my sweet little sister. Plus, they seem like reasonable people (I hope), so your best bet is to spit the words out. Not to mention, we’re ten out of ten entirely in the wrong here.

“Look, I’m asking nicely. Do it for me.”

“I don’t wanna!”

She left me no choice. Softly, ever so softly, I brought my hand down on Éa, the momentum driving the motion, but I slowly reduced the speed as I closed in so that by the time I finally slapped her, I might as well have been stroking her cheek. It was the most I could muster.

“Éa, you let your prejudices and incorrect assumptions sway you and threatened innocent people at arrow-point. These two recently came to Machina’s rescue. Do you really think that’s a fit way for an heir to the Heuress bloodline to behave?”

Stupefied, Éa crumpled her face up into a teary mess. “.....B-but I...I di-didn’t... didn’t do...,” she stuttered, huge teardrops spilling down as she began to cry. “Yaya, you shtupid piiiiiiiiiig!” The dam broke loose. *What the—? I didn’t see that coming. In the past, she’d always just get pissed and beat the shit out of me.*

“Weeeaaaaaah!” she wailed. It was pretty hilarious, actually. No, what was I saying? I’d messed up big-time. The elf, whose appearance looked like a fully grown woman, bawled and sobbed like a child.

“Machina! Help me out!”

“Uhhh, ummm, uhhh!” she fretted.

Ugh, you useless piece of junk! And this is all your fault to begin with! You better remember this!!

“Weaaaaah! Muuuheaaaaaah!” Unconcerned by the Dark Lord standing before her, my little sister howled on, her tantrum growing louder. It was clearly grating on Gaslark’s nerves.

“All right, all right, it’s all my fault, so stop crying already. Cheer up,” I pleaded. Rummaging through my pockets, I found a piece of emergency candy I carried for Lana. “Here, say *aaah*.”

“Mngh.....” Once she popped the strawberry candy in her mouth, the elf grew quiet. I started to stroke her hair, and she clung to me like a koala. Despite the mortification I felt at doing this in public, I plopped her down on my lap and rubbed her back to soothe her. Yeah, you better believe I got a guilty pleasure out of role-playing as a father to grown-ass woman. Or more accurately, playing her big brother.

“Hey, Machina, Ms. Sixth-Generation AI Bot.”

“Yes, what can I do for you?”

“Could you not have sensed her coming? I left Yukikaze at camp because I had *you* with me, you know. ♪”

“I-I-I’m terribly sorry. My sensors haven’t been working so great recently.”

“Then tell me that. Report everything to me immediately.”

“Eeep! Mr. Souya, are you angry?”

“Ha-ha, no, of course not. But, why don’t you and I have a little alone time after we get back?”

“You’re totally angry! Nooo!”

“Weeeaaahhh!” Éa began to wail again.

“Shh, it’s okay, it’s okay,” I cooed. “That was scary, I know. I’m sorry.” I continued to stroke her hair.

I shot Machina a look saying, *You’re dead*. An *EEEEEEK!* popped up on her screen.

“More candy,” the disconsolate elf demanded.

“Sorry, Éa. Those’re for Lana.” Tears welled in her eyes.

“Lady Éa! Guess what? I’m about to make you something soooo much better! Just hold on like a good girl for a little while, okay?!”

“Really?”

“Really, really!”

“Hey, uh, can I cut in a sec?” the little gremlin asked apologetically. “My sovereign says: ‘Shall we postpone until the morrow?’”

“No, it’s all right! I’ll whip dinner up for my master’s little sister in a jiffy! Also, I’ll be putting my livelihood at risk if I don’t smooth this over!”

From a little distance away, Machina quickly pulled out a portable burner, laid out the cooking utensils, and got a cooking fire started. Strangely enough, the goblin and Demon Lord both stood close by, studying her work.

“Mr. Souya, this stressful situation has reduced my capabilities by fifteen percent. I’ll share my video feed just in case, so please let me know if I’m about to make a mistake,” the AI bot announced. Video footage of Machina’s point of view while cooking appeared on my glasses’ screen.

Éa had completely switched over to cuddle-monster mode, nuzzling up against me as she held on tight. A guy could use something like this every once in a while.

“Now, I’d like to prepare a meal to thank you for kindly saving me and as an apology for our rudeness. Oh, also, to cheer Lady Éa up and calm Mr. Souya down! I’m going to put my whole heart into this! First, we fry the ingredients together,” Machina explained, then pulled out a slab of thoroughly spiced pork thigh. “I’ve marinated this pork in a spice blend Mr. Gaslark kindly gave me.”

“Wait, what kind of spice?” I had to know. I didn’t have the best history with Remlian spices. Tongue-burning and sour, they drew up foul memories in me.

“It’s a mixture of several plant species the goblins raise underground that are similar to cumin, coriander, cardamom, and turmeric. It also contains a blend of herbs foraged in the Heuress Forest; these are kind of like cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon. Together, they combine to form one Other Dimensional seasoning, hereafter known as ‘Long-Ears Seasoning’!”

Yeah, that name needed to go. “Machina, *long-ears* is a derogatory term for elves. Don’t use it.”

“Known as ‘Remlian Seasoning’!”

“Good bot.”

“Ooh, that smells good.” My little sister perked up. The aromatic seasoning tugged at my heartstrings. It was a nostalgic fragrance, the kind that lured children home from a day out playing. It also happened to be my late grandfather’s best recipe. Though to be fair, my grandfather made nothing but the best.

“The meat has been parboiled, so it only needs a tiiny bit of grilling. Then all that’s left to do is add a generous helping of crushed tomatoes, a good splash of white wine, and grated apple, and this part is done.”

The metal chef then took out a frying pan. “Next, we make a paste to add more flavor. Simply add grated onion, garlic, and ginger to your pan and sauté them juuust like this,” Machina continued, cheerfully stirring the ingredients around. She’d worked as a cooking robot back in the modern world, and it showed; she expertly handled the task with her metal arms and fingers. “Once they’re nice and fragrant, add the spices and milk, then mix, mix, miiix ♪, mix, mix, miiix ♪, mix up real good, mix up real good. ♪ Moe—”

“I’m gonna stop you right there.”

“Yes, Mr. Souya.” She’d gotten dangerously close to showing an aspect of Japanese culture that would be misunderstood here. Even so, some damage had already been done. “Now that the paste is done, we add it to the pot and let it simmer for a little while.”

She dumped the paste in and stirred everything together. Once I got a good look, I saw she was using the pressure cooker. Machina covered the pot and left it to do its thing. She then stepped away from the cooking and turned to set up our folding table and chairs. The Dark Lord laid out the tableware.

Wha—? Huh?! No, no, no, this is all wrong! We can’t let our guest set the table!

“Éa, I have to help out as well. Can you get down?”

“Nuh-uh.” She refused to leave my side. In fact, she doubled down on her viselike grip. *How is it that both sisters react the exact same way?! I can’t stand being trapped!*

“So, uh, I’m pretty sure I heard you say somethin’ wild before. Did you really get hitched to an elf?” the laid-back goblin inquired.

“Oh yeah.”

“What clan’s she from?”

“Heuress.”

“Huh? Wait, Heuress? As in, the forest over there?” he asked, surprised. “Ahhh, yeah, you know what? Now that you mention it, I’ve seen that gauntlet somewhere before.”

“Yes, as in the Heuress Forest. Her name is Laualliuna Raua Heuress, daughter of Mellum Raua Heuress. And this one’s her younger sister, Éa,” I explained, gesturing to the crybaby on my lap. “King Remlia gave us his blessing, but my wife’s father was against our marriage and even disowned her because of that.”

“Ahhh, yeah. Elves do that, don’t they?” Éa looked like she was about to say something, but I squeezed hard to keep her quiet. A few strokes over her silky hair, and she calmed down again. “Gotta say, you’re kind of an oddball, dude.”

“Um, thanks.” I’d bet money I was the only Japanese person to ever have a goblin call him weird. Though to be fair, most non-Japanese people probably saw us all in a similar boat.

“Here, for you.”

“Huh?” The little green man handed me a small pouch. I peeked inside and saw a bunch of seeds.

“You’re into flowers, right?”

“Not exactly. I was just curious about those red ones.”

“Perfect, then; those are seeds for the crimson mortalis.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind.” Were these something he should be giving out so freely? “But aren’t these pretty valuable?”

“Naaah. Oh, but I doubt the above-grounders round here got any. You can harvest ’em from the flowers, though.” Interestiing.

“If you’ll allow another ignorant question, would you by any chance know how to lift a curse afflicting a human?” People from every race and every culture had their strengths and weaknesses. Maybe for goblins, removing a curse was as easy as—

“Not gonna happen, dude.”

Scratch that.

“You mean a heim hex, right? Yeah, I don’t know much about those.”

“Of course, silly question.”

It’s never that easy, is it? Still, flowers that purge curses, huh? They probably only work on the soil where they grow, but that in itself is a worthwhile discovery.

The hook-nosed goblin walked away to join his regent, who was currently setting out bowls and spoons. *Thanks, guys. Also, I’m really, really sorry, guys.*

For a while after that, I passed the time sitting on a bed of crimson flowers, gazing up at the tranquil skies. I felt the gentle rays of the sun luring me to sleep and heard the goblin and Machina chat, noting the gentle clattering of dishes.

Enticing aromas of deliciousness wafted over the meadow. Éa had fallen asleep, her chin still resting on my shoulder.

A black-caped skeleton and a green gremlin sat plopped down at a picnic table while a cylindrical AI bot spun around singing to herself in front of a pressure cooker. Talk about surreal. This had to be the strangest scene I'd encountered so far in the Other Dimension. Yet lulled perhaps by my sister's body warmth, I felt drowsiness creep over me, and my eyelids slowly grew heavy.

Oh yeah. I hardly slept last night. Man, I'm beat. So tired.

.....



“Mr. Souya! It’s reaaady!”

I’d dozed off.

Checking my watch, I saw an hour had passed.

“Whaaa—?!” Startled, Éa woke up.

“Can you taste-test it for me? Though, we all know my seasoning is always perfect!”

“Éa, do you mind?” I slid my dazed sister off my lap and laid her down on the meadow, then draped my poncho over her. She snuggled up and fell right back to sleep. “Lemme see.”

I approached the pot. Inside, I found a dark-brown stew simply filled with nothing but morsels of pork. Machina had made curry using Otherworldly ingredients from scratch. Of course, real curry just referred to a type of seasoning, so more accurately, this was Japanese-style curry. But getting into the fine details on the individual types of the dish would only make things more complicated, so let’s just go with *curry*.

I ladled a bit of the curry into a small bowl and took a bite.

“Da—” *Damn, that’s good.* Hearty and full, the flavors from all the ingredients danced together like Rockettes. But—

“It’s a little sour. Could use some salt, too.”

“What...did you say?” Machina spluttered.

After adding a pinch of salt, I stirred the stew again. “It needs something...to round out the flavors a bit.” I scanned the Tupperware Machina had brought, picked one, and said, “Let’s use this.” And I threw shredded cheese into the pot. “Oh, and a little of this and this.” Milk and honey. Mix, mix, mix.

Experience had taught me that the races on the smaller side here tended to have somewhat childish palettes. Once, I’d hosted a high priest of the Church of Flames and another from the Jumichla Healing Temple. Coincidentally, the two small beastfolk had not appreciated the meal’s strong flavors, instead preferring what you might serve a kid. In other words, our guests today would probably not appreciate the acidity in the tomatoes or the more pungent spices, either.

Everyone tolerated a different level of spiciness. We'd brought along a little jar of crushed red peppers, so I'd just ask our guests to add whatever they liked to their own bowls.

I took another taste. "Mmm, nice and mellow." The acidity had lessened, and the saltiness and hearty flavor came through more. It made me want to mix some rice in. Though perhaps a little unsatisfying for an adult, the curry would probably be a hit for younger customers.

"Grrrrrr." Machina ground her gears, frustrated. I smirked back at her.

"So what will we eat this with?"

"Potatoes from the underground goblin dungeon and pasta with garlic and chili flakes."

"Then let's get to it."

I plucked a potato out of a boiling pot of water and transferred the pasta from the frying pan onto a plate, leaving half of it empty. In that space, I then ladled out the curry, going heavy on the pork morsels. This was no time to skimp. Visually, it wasn't very appealing, so I garnished the potato with medicinal shoots and grated cheese over the curry. For the final touch, I added a few slices of homemade pickled onions.

"Guess that about does it, huh?"

"I reckon it does, partner."

After preparing four more portions, I served the dishes, placing them on the table. Éa jolted awake as soon as she caught a whiff of the meal. For someone who'd been so scared, she seemed surprisingly at ease when she took her seat—right across from the Dark Lord.

"Thank you all for your patience. I call this Goblin curry."

"Curry? And that is...?" my green guest wondered.

"It's actually quite interesting. You see, it all goes back to a former allied nation called Engla—"

Éa clamped her hand over my mouth. "Yaya, I'm starving. Save it."

“Mr. Souya, you should really read the room.” *I haven’t even started yet!*

The goblin grabbed his spoon and dug right in. “Ohhh. Ohhh-ho.” The utensil clacked against the bowl as he went back for more. He used his spoon to slice the potato, coated the chunk in curry, and took his time, enjoying every mouthful.

“.....” The Dark Lord had begun eating, too.

But you’re a skeleton, so how...? Or so I pondered, but the mystery soon solved itself. As soon as the cloaked regent took a spoonful of the curry, everything but the utensil dissolved into light and got absorbed into the bones.

“.....” Wordlessly, the Dark Lord kept eating. *Does it satisfy their taste buds? I can’t tell. There’s no reading this one.* “.....”

Seeming to notice my gaze, the skeleton tapped the little green guy, then whispered something once again. For a second, I thought it was cute—then grew horrified at myself for thinking it.

“Thus decrees my lord: ‘The majesty you see here is one of my most closely held secrets, a magical technique called Ghelmganse Necrosia. The high magic spell digests what sustenance I intake and sends the taste to my soul. Terrifying, would you not agree? Bwa-ha-ha-ha!’ I want to focus on this, though, so I’ll tell you the rest later, dude.”

Our two unusual guests went back to their meals.

“Mm!” Right on cue, my little sister—

“This is so yummy! Don’t the instant-ramen packages come in this flavor?!”

—started wolfing it down. I had a Dark Lord (skeleton), a green goblin, and an elven princess (technically) before me, and the elf by far had the worst table manners. Or maybe the skeletal lord and the little guy were just extra polite.

“Yaya! I want it spicier. And some mayonnaise for the potato! I don’t want the pasta!” She had a point; the noodles didn’t mesh well with the rest of the dish. It didn’t taste bad per se, but it sort of clashed with the flavors. I set the jars of chili flakes and mayonnaise in front of her.

“What a waste. It’s wicked good already,” noted the goblin. “Elves are truly

rude.”

“Shut it! Just shut your big goblin mouth!” Éa snapped, then sprinkled an exorbitant amount of crushed peppers and a huge dollop of mayonnaise on her plate. She then smashed the potatoes and mixed them in with her curry before resuming her meal. “Mmm-mmm-mmmm!” She looked ecstatic.

Taking my own seat, I got started on my curry, too. *Hmm, it’s got a kick to it, but it’s not spicy hot.* A bit simple for my preference, but lovely when paired with the potatoes, which made the juicy pork taste even better as it melted in my mouth.

Ahhh, rice. What I wouldn’t give for some white rice. But Lana just, you know, has such fun cooking it. I’ve only got about three kilos left—I can’t waste a single grain.

“Oh.” Glancing over, I saw the undead sovereign had cleared their plate. “Machina, time for seconds.”

“On iiit!” When the cylindrical bot approached, the Dark Lord handed her the empty dish.

“Hold on, Machina! Gimme more, too!”

“On it like a bonnet!!” Refusing to fall behind, Éa cleaned her plate and held it out for Machina as well. Meanwhile, the hook-nosed gremlin continued to patiently make his way through his meal, little by little. I decided to stop worrying so much and turned my attention to my curry, enjoying the taste I hadn’t had in a while. In the end, the skeletal sovereign had seven servings, Éa had five, the goblin had three, and I came in at two.

“Uuugh, how did all that curry fit in there?” Éa moaned. “That skeleton’s nothing but bones.”

“Hey, watch it.” She was walking on thin ice. *You’re talking to a Dark Lord, remember? One false move, and you could be picking the fight of your life, you know?*

Uncomfortably full, Éa cradled her stomach and stretched out on the meadow, showing poor etiquette.

“Man, you elves really don’t have any manners,” the gremlin called her out. She’d had it coming.

“He’s right; you’re being very rude. Take a seat,” I gently scolded her. Anything harsher might start the waterworks again, and I couldn’t have that.

“Excuse me, Lady Éa, but why did you follow us here? Where are Lord Shuna, Lady Bel, and Mistress Lana?” Machina asked. I’d been curious about that, too, but the tense confrontation had pushed the question out of mind.

“Oh!I forgot. I headed back to camp to get a talkie device, but then I saw you two walking off and followed you.”

“And where are the others?”

“Probably having a drink at the boss’s bar.”

“Go home now,” I ordered. “I’m worried about Lana.”

“I will. Just let my stomach settle a bit.”

“Fine, but at least sit in a proper chair.” It was bad enough for her to expose her little, long legs. This was too much.

“Yaya, carry me.” She stretched her arms toward me. *We’re in public, you know? In front of a Dark Lord, no less.* “Carry meee,” she whined while swaying her arms around.

.....*Guess I can’t say no!*

Sliding my hands beneath her legs and under her arm, I picked the petulant elf up and, as one would call it, princess-carried her over to the table to put her down, but I failed in my attempt. She’d wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Éa, let go.”

“I don’t wanna.” What kind of idiot goes around cuddling with his little sister in front of a regicidal overlord? If this got me killed, it wouldn’t even be funny.

“Machina.”

“On iiit.”

“Hey! Wait, Yaya!”

I peeled my stubborn sister off me and handed her to Machina. “Take her back to camp. Don’t let her go until you get there.”

“Roger that.”

“Waiiiiiiiit!”

Elven princess in tow, Machina scuttled off, disappearing across the meadow. That emergency measure really did come in handy. I turned back toward the Dark Lord and the goblin, both sipping after-dinner tea. “I’m so terribly sorry for my sister’s rude behavior.”

“Thus says my Lord: ‘O Otherworlder, this curry was truly an exquisite feast. If you would agree to reveal your recipe for the seasoning, I shall forgive all your trespasses against—’” The cloaked skeleton poked the goblin midsentence. “C’mon, man, that elf was so rude.”

“Um, I’d be happy to share the recipe if that’s—”

“Don’t be silly! You’ve got to keep your cooking secrets safe! Don’t just give them away so easily!”

Who said that?

“My lord, not sure you wanna speak for—”

“Well, I wanna be part of the conversation, too!” The girlie voice came from the skeleton. Though clearly older, it had a youthful timbre and was cute like Machina’s. The voice sounded like something you’d hear in an anime, a cloying concoction of honey and simple syrup.

“Let me introduce myself again. My name is Gormlaith Melphorjuna Gastolfo. Though currently a sinister spirit who ascended to the throne of Dark Lord, I once devoted my life to the prosperity of the Great Land as an adventurer and descendant of Lady Gastolfo, Goddess of Fertility.”

For a moment, I froze up, and my expression went blank. Then the nerves from the dire situation and a whole crazy mix of emotions bubbled together, and—

“Pffft!”

—I burst out in laughter.

“That’s so mean!”

“S-sorry, hee-hee. Pfft, ha-ha, heh-heh-heh.” I couldn’t help it. The harder I tried to hold it in, the harder I laughed. That voice—it was too much. C’mon, who’d ever expect a Dark Lord to talk like a girly girl?! She was intimidating with her bones and cape, but she had the most adorable, syrupy-sweet voice!

I—I can’t. I’m dead.

Knowing full well how rude I was being, I couldn’t keep my smile in check. I fell over cackling, then pounded the ground. The everyday stress probably added to my strong reaction. My emotions seemed ready to explode, and just as I was about to burst out roaring with laughter—I hit myself repeatedly over the head with Agaccion’s blade.

“.....I’m sorry, that was incredibly disrespectful of me.” Good, now I’m in way too much pain to laugh.

“Um, you’re bleeding.”

“Don’t worry. It’s just a scratch.” The sun was still high in the sky, but I was seeing stars.

“See? Told ya.” The goblin sighed.

“Someone else once guffawed at me like this before. Exactly what is so funny?” the skeletal sovereign demanded to know, arms crossed, twisting side to side, sulking. *Stop, I’m begging you! Don’t add to the hilarity by acting like a pouting little princess!*

I glanced at the goblin, hinting *Tell her!* Ah! He ignored me.

“In any case, you really must keep your recipes, your brainstorming process and its related notes, and any clues to your techniques a secret. You could pour your whole heart and soul into those creations, but there will always be sly thieves who’ll steal your work and parade it around as if it were their own. Do you understand me?”

She made a very good point, but the disconnect between her appearance and her voice threatened to permanently tear my face in two from smiling so much. I pinched my inner thigh with all the strength I had to suppress the laughter.

"All the same, Otherworlder, if you absolutely insist on presenting me with your recipe, I will accept it on one condition: Take this." The Dark Lord fished a needle out of her cloak and handed it to me. Upon closer inspection, I could see detailed lettering carved into it.

"What is this?"

"The key to your gauntlet."

"Wha—?" I looked down at the piece of armor on my left wrist. Though called Heuress's Gauntlet, it was actually a present Heuress had given to his lover, Lümidia. After her death, the Heuress family passed the heirloom down through many generations. The metal glove contained a small amount of magic and was apparently impossible to re-create with current technology.

"The gauntlet you bear belongs to a suit of armor I made ages and ages ago. I'm surprised any of it has survived this long. Unless I'm mistaken, you can't remove it, can you?"

"No, I can't." It wouldn't come off. At this point, it felt like one with my body; I sometimes forgot I had it on. According to Machina's analysis, it was made of a material with antibacterial properties, so there were no problems regarding hygiene. Over and over, I'd tried to remove it, but it seemed like my nerves had fused together with the metal, and every pull put me in excruciating pain. It didn't impede my life in any other way, though, so I'd given up on trying to part with it.

"If memory serves.....there should be a small keyhole on the inside toward the right."

I looked and did indeed find a small hole. Then I inserted the needle into the slot.

"Huh?" Immediately, the gauntlet cracked open and fell to the ground. For the first time in a long while, I took a good look at my own arm. It hadn't changed much at all.

"Now that's much safer."

"Safer?"

“Sadly, an elf of ages past corrupted its functions with a curse, one that enchants and subordinates people of other races. You should now be free of its hold and have full control of your mind once more.”

“Say what?” My head swam.

“Ah man, you got brainwashed by an elf? That sucks, dude.” The green imp came up to me and patted my shoulder in sympathy. If anything, I felt at greater risk of getting brainwashed standing with a Dark Lord on one side and a goblin on the other.

“Does that resonate with you at all?”

“Resonate?” I’d started wearing the gauntlet after getting into a fistfight with the moronic prince, who’d swiftly beat me to a pulp. Lana was the one who’d put it on me to help treat my injuries. After that, the spirit of the hero inside it took control of me and won the rematch, which saved Lana. Did this mean the spirit had tricked me into it?

“From the look on your face, I’ll take that as a yes.”

But it was of my own will to go after and fight for Lana, or so I’d thought. Though, of course, if it was the curse that had driven me to go rescue her, then I wouldn’t have known I’d been played.

“So you’re saying I only want Lana because this thing planted that lust for her in me?!” I blurted out, too confused to hold my thoughts in.

“Umm, who can say?”

“Does this mean it’s all the curse’s fault that I want to squeeze Lana’s bum and her thighs and her breasts like no other?!! Do I only sniff her hair while she’s sleeping because of some stupid hex?! Is that why I sneaked a few nips at her fingers or collarbone?!!!! Wait, that means the spell is why I’m into cute, big-bosomed ladies, right?!”

“No, those are all on you. Don’t try to shift the blame for every one of your personal proclivities on the curse.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I guess I’m just a horny pervert after all. I kinda had a feeling. Also, what the hell am I blabbing about to someone I just met today?!

“Hey, my man. Try putting it on one more time.” I did as my little green pal suggested. “Repeat after me: *Elves are an arrogant, narcissistic, self-absorbed bunch who are the root of all evil and a pretentious race of assholes.* Okay, your turn.”

Seriously? “E-elves are an arrogant, narcissistic, self-absorbed group of bad people. They’re pretentious, beautiful, and have great bodies,” I repeated, sugarcoating it a bit at the end to make myself feel better.

My recitation left the goblin looking perplexed. He and the Dark Lord scuttled a few steps away, crouched down into a huddle, and started whispering. “Dude, the curse isn’t workin’ on him, is it?”

“Maybe its power wore off over time?”

“Nah, curses don’t just wear off.”

“Maybe it doesn’t work on Otherworlders?”

“Naaah.”

“Maybe his body has some unique resistance?”

“Yeah, I could see that.”

“I want to examine his insides.”

“Too bad.”

Shit, shit. They’re gonna turn me into Frankenstein. “Um, I think I might know why.”

“Ooh, what’s that?” the undead skeleton asked, whipping her skull around like a puppy that’d heard the word *treat*. *C’mon, don’t turn around and say that in a cute voice. You’re killin’ me here.*

“It might have something to do with my goddess.”

“Your goddess? I’ve never heard of a god or goddess blocking a curse.”

“Yes, but I consecrated my covenant with Lady Mythlanica.”

“Gaslark, have you heard of her?”

“Nope.”

“Your goddess bears the same name as the Fallen Land of Mythlanica? I know every deity on the Right Continent, and yet I do not recognize her. Perhaps her existence has simply been erased from my mind? A forgotten goddess, one who bound herself to the golden-eyed beast who slew the monster of tainted blood.....,” the Dark Lord mused, hunched over exactly like *The Thinker*.

Though I felt guilty about interrupting her deep concentration, I needed her to clarify something that had caught my attention. “Excuse me, but what do you mean by ‘the golden-eyed beast’?”

“It is how we refer to the heroes who, though now extinct, vanquished the vampires from the Ice City of Neomia in the northern reaches of the Right Continent.”

Extinct? No, there’s at least one left—I know him personally.

“In the days of old, they were called the Final Warriors, the Endguard, the Followers of the Wicked Moon, and the Golden-Eyed Beasts. By ‘beast,’ I mean wolves, a four-legged predator found in the North. According to ancient tradition, wolves were said to devour the dead, luring them into to the afterworld, and represented death itself. I can’t say if that’s why, but their eyes are beautifully clear and pure gold like the magical metal that slays all beasts. Just like yours.”

Machina had told me that my eyes changed colors sometimes. *Golden eyes, huh? Sounds kinda badass.*

“You’re quite fascinating, you know.”

“Uhhh, thanks.” Not nearly as much as you, I can assure that.

The cloaked skeleton took my hands and held them in hers. Her bones were super cold. *“Please do send word once you die. I’d love to conduct an autopsy on you.”*

“O-of course.” Gonna be hard to talk if I’m dead.

“Well, I suppose you don’t need the key to unlock your gauntlet, do you? But I do want that recipe of yours. Hmm, what to do? Do I even have anything else a heim might like.....?” she wondered aloud. *“Could I interest you in an odorless, tasteless, deathly poison? Or a pot that emaciates people simply by placing it in*

the same room as them? Or perhaps a love potion?"

"No, thank you. Oh, but I would like to take this thing off every once in a while, so I'd be grateful for the key to the gauntlet. However, I came here to thank you for saving Machina the other day, so I'd be more than happy to just give you the recipe."

"No! It's not enough! I cannot agree to such an unfair trade and still call myself the Dark Lord!" The ruler of darkness turned out to be quite the stickler for propriety. *Mind letting go while you think? My hands are freezing. I can't even feel them anymore.*

"Then how about this? We're neighbors, after all, so would you mind playing with Machina every once in a while? She can get pretty lonely, her eccentricity tends to get her in trouble, and I've been worried about what kind of consequences there may be to the world while we are in the dungeon. I'll have her bring the recipe over another time."

I couldn't have anyone slaying Machina while we were on an expedition. There was a five-gold-piece bounty out for whoever could defeat the golem that haunted the meadow outside Remlia. That golem, of course, was Machina. I'd already started the process for removing that quest from the boards, but bureaucracy always took time.

"Do you mean I should take Machina as a subject?"

"I was hoping for something a little more casual." I foresaw nothing but disaster if we turned that AI bot into the Dark Lord's lackey. She didn't look like a bad skeleton (person), but she was a demonic overlord, after all. I wouldn't be surprised if she promised Machina half the world for her help.

That reminds me, do they have paladins in this world, too? They usually come in pairs with Dark Lords.

"Casual? That sounds rather complicated."

"Her Darkness has never had a real friend. The heims stole her technology, and some beastfolk tried to make a side dish out of her. The elves did her the dirtiest, though. One got her to blow through her life savings to fix up his forest and agreed to marry her, but then he just tossed her away like a used rag. At

that point, she figured, *What the hell?* and tried her hand at regicide. She's always gettin' stones and shade thrown at her, and she's basically a shut-in."

"....." *A fittingly dark life story for the lord of the damned.* She finally released my hands. My fingers stayed frozen in place. *"So you would like me to be her friend?"*

"Um, yes, please." *Is this a good idea? It'll be fine, right?*

"A friend...from a foreign dimension. Hee-hee." She giggled to herself happily. *"Well, if I must. I swear on my name that I shall anoint Machina as my friend."*

"Thank you very much."

And that's the story of how I created a friendship between a modern-day AI bot and a Dark Lord from the Other Dimension. I just prayed this wouldn't come back to bite me in the ass.



[78TH DAY]

"Lana, I know I've asked you this before, but..."

"Yes?"

My party and I had taken another day off, probably the tenth in a row. It was a serene afternoon, and for once, Lana and I found ourselves alone at camp. Éa, who was usually with us, had run off with Machina to play with our newest friend, the Dark Lord. As soon as the elven archer had woken that morning, she'd turned to me and said:

"I've had an incredible revelation: What if we had udon with curry? It'd make an unbeatable combination, don't you think?!"

"You thought of that on your own? Seriously, you're a genius."

"Right? Go on, tell me how amazing I am!"

"While you're at it, I need to get rid of that mountain of leftover pasta. Got any brilliant ideas?!"

"That pasta did nothing for the curry. I'll think about it later!"

With that, the promising young chef left camp in high spirits, carrying the udon she'd made from scratch first thing that morning in tow. She had one goal in mind: to make the goblin and Dark Lord gasp—payback, apparently, for how the two had scared her the day before. Éa was a valiant little sister. That royal elven blood did not run through her veins for nothing. She took life by the horns more proactively than any normal person could. Actually, maybe she was just a child at heart.

As for the others, Lanceil had returned to the royal palace to take care of some business, and Lady Mythlanica was pouncing around with the flying rabbits in the meadow. Sometimes, they mistook her for one of their own and would whisk her away into the air, so I had to keep an eye on her.

"I want to know what kind of food you like," I told my wife. "Or rather, what sort of tastes you prefer."

"Taste? Well, this is delicious." She and I were having curry, à la traditional Japanese style with rice. And it was heavenly. The rice was delectable, its sweetness pairing wonderfully with the mild curry, whose savory flavor matched perfectly with the hearty pork. This killer combination made you want to gobble the whole plate up.

All that aside— "I mean, do you wish it had more of a kick to it or was a little less sweet? Where do you stand on sugar or salt levels, for example? Do you prefer firm or soft textures?"

I'd had my elven wife put an apron on before she started. Any curry that got on her white robe would make doing laundry a big pain. Not that I did it—that was Machina's job.

"That's a difficult question. Honestly, I can't think of a single thing I dislike about your cooking. I feel so spoiled getting to enjoy something different every day. That's what makes it even tastier. I imagine only a gluttonous king used to the most lavish fare would find any fault here. We elves live rather simply to begin with, and I doubt my preferences would be of any use to your craft."

The humble elf had gotten one fundamental point completely wrong. "Lana, I'm not asking you this to make myself a better cook."

"Hmm?" She turned her head, looking perplexed, spoon still in her mouth in a

rare deviation from her perfect manners. But damn, was it cute. Setting my high-resolution glasses to camera mode, I took a burst of photos, blinking to operate the shutter, then saved the images to my personal file folder.

“I’m asking what you like because I want to make things you’d enjoy.”

“Oh, I see.” Hmm? Kind of a lackluster reaction. “I think I’ll help myself to another serving.”

“Be my guest.”

Lana got up and walked over to the open-air kitchen. First filling her plate with a heaping mound of rice, she then smothered it in curry and topped it all off with a ton of pickled vegetables. She returned to her seat. Silently, the elf stirred her curry around; with quick, precise, and efficient yet graceful movements, she continued making her way through her second serving, carefully chewing each mouthful and leaving no pickles behind. Having lost the thread of the conversation, I turned to my own curry as well.

Oh, shit. I forgot.

“Hang on a sec, Lana.”

“Okay.” She waited. I went and got a couple of eggs from the pantry.

“Here, mix this in with your rice,” I instructed.

To show her how it’s done first, I cracked the egg over my rice and mixed it in, then dribbled the tiiiiniest bit of soy sauce over it and took a spoonful. Infused with the soy sauce, the raw egg melded together with the rice to create a subtle, delectable taste. It had a rustic simplicity to it, which from time to time would inspire an insatiable craving. To this mixture, I then followed with a bite of curry, its mild spiciness blending with the egg-and-rice pairing, along with the juicy morsels of meat. All these players, and yet every one of them matched like they were made for one another. I couldn’t imagine a better combination of flavors.

This meal featured two of the biggest names in Japanese home cooking—raw egg on rice and curry—costarring in a beautiful production. Never had I dreamed I’d get to experience this magic in this foreign realm. Raising chickens had been a brilliant move; it was worth violating some religious tenets in the

process.

“.....” Lana’s face froze in shock. “Darling...I must admit I was surprised to learn you used uncooked fish for the *tekkadon* fish-and-rice bowl you made, but now raw egg? Do all Otherworlders have iron stomachs?”

“Don’t worry, the stuff that causes food poisoning is only found on eggshells, and I’ve already thoroughly disinfected them. Plus, we’re using the freshest eggs, so it’s quite safe. But if it makes you uncomfortable, I’d happily slow-boil or poach them for you.” Truth was, I’d found a raw egg–disinfection kit among our supplies. Still, I could see how the Japanese devotion to indulging in raw foodstuffs like horse or chicken sashimi, young sardines, or even live octopus to tap into their full flavor potential might seem insane to an outside observer.

“Oh, no, I don’t want to have you go through such trouble. I’ll—*gulp*—have it.....raw,” she bravely declared through tear-filled eyes.

“If it bothers you that much, just let me boil it.”

“No!” she refused, blocking my hand as I tried to reach for her egg. “It is not a wife’s place to second-guess her husband’s commands!” *Hey, I’m not about that toxic masculinity.*

Clumsily, Lana cracked open her egg on top of the rice on her plate and added a heavier dash of soy sauce, then mix-mix-mixed it all up. Bracing herself as if about to battle a hideous monster, my brave wife brought a spoonful of the egg rice to her mouth.

“.....” Nervously, I watched her. “Hmm? This is actually pretty good,” came her super-normal reaction. Then perhaps unwittingly, her spoon sped up, and her curry quickly disappeared before my eyes. Adventurers tended to have hearty appetites, but Lana put them all to shame. Nevertheless, elves hardly ever retained body fat; I could almost hear the women back in the modern world gnashing their teeth in envy. At the same time, while strong and healthy, elves had a much harder time recovering from severe illness. I had to make sure the girls, more than anyone else, had balanced diets, or I risked them falling seriously ill down the line.

“Do you by any chance think it might be a good idea to make rice balls out of this egg-and-rice combination?” Lana asked.

“Yeah, not bad.” I got the feeling something like that already existed in the modern world. But we’d have to take every precaution if our mad-genius mage decided to try out a new recipe.

“Squad Member Souya, I have a question of concern I must ask.”

“What’s up?”

Yukikaze, peeved at the recent dearth of adventuring, had voiced said question from where she stood hard at work atop the kitchen counter. “What exactly is the purpose of this task?” The mini kettle’s arm was scraping a loaf of bread back and forth across a grater.

“You’re making breadcrumbs for me since we’re waiting on the blender to be fixed.”

“And the purpose of that is?”

“To make fried pork cutlets and have pork-cutlet curry. Éa’s gonna love it.” I wanted to open my sister’s eyes to the expansive world of curry and, in the process, see if she could develop some iteration that would complement the pasta we had. Actually, maybe it was best to leave the noodles out of this. “You feel less stressed when you’re doing something productive, don’t you?”

“While technically true, you are the first and will be the last person to ever busy this wide-range battle-strategy program’s hands with breadcrumb production.”

“Uh, sure.” Without another word, Yukikaze returned to her task. I looked over at Lana to find she’d cleaned her entire plate.

“Thank you very much. It was, as always, delicious.”

“It was nothing.” I took my time savoring my own portion. After all, this rice was precious. We had used four cups for this lunch alone. *I should probably tell Lana our stock’s going to run dry soon.*

“Darling?”

“Hmm?”

“Why do you want to cook according to my preferences?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

The imaginary question marks hanging above our heads seemed to crash into each other.

Wait, are you seriously asking? “Isn’t it obvious? I want to make you happy.”

“You what?” C’mon, this is embarrassing. Read between the lines, I’m begging you.

This young lady had a tendency to be dense. Every once in a while, the most obvious things just flew right over her head.

“In other words, you are trying to adjust and come up with recipes in order to woo me?”

“Uh, yes.”

Lana lifted both arms up and held them robotically in front of her as if holding a clay pot between them. She lifted the clay pot up, brought it down, and peeked inside it. This odd dance was her go-to whenever she got flustered. It went on for a while until, suddenly, she seemed to regain her senses and prostrated herself at the table.

“I’m so sorry! All this time, I completely misunderstood what you meant and have been giving you the most inappropriate answers!! But there’s no need to woo me now. Nothing will ever cause my heart to sway anymore!”

Is that because you’re already head over heels for me? Or because you’d prefer a pair of filthy socks over my affection?

“It’s just, I’ve only ever read about romantic relationships in books, and those stories are full of exaggerations and sometimes leave out the most important parts. Also, my father only ever tried to placate my mother when he was secretly doing unspeakable things behind her back. It even made me question if perhaps you might not be doing something similar,” she confessed.

“.....I’m so terribly sorry.”

Your father and I have that in common, at least. But I swear, the unspeakable things I’ve done would never hurt you or Éa.

“I’m not Lanceil, but please allow me to make this up to you!” The apologetic elf crawled halfway onto the table, making the dishes rattle.

“There’s nothing to make up for, though. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I misunderstood you, and that alone calls for punishment. Please teach me a lesson!”

She scooted even farther onto the table. My eyes locked onto the two bouncing beauties before me.

Punishment, huh? I get the feeling it’s more of a reward if you’re the one asking for it, but I’m up for it, so maybe I’ll—

“Alert. Squad Member Souya, alert. Unidentified figures approaching, two in total: a heim and a beastperson in full battle gear. Chance of hostility: fifteen percent. Incoming from two o’clock, currently thirty meters away.”

—deal with this mood killer. Tell me this isn’t déjà vu.

“Now, my love, do as you will.” *Wait, we’re still doing this?* I could just make out two figures out of the corner of my eye. “Though I loathe Lanceil with all my being, I do respect her in one regard. Watching her, it’s become painfully clear that I am terrible at asserting myself, and that impulsive sexual overtures may sometimes be the key to breaking the ice.”

That’s not true. But, Lana, there’s two people closing in on us, you know.

“I simply cannot allow myself to let this chance where we get to enjoy each other’s company in peace slip by. D-darling, first—*haah, hff*—t-touch me. Run your hands along my breasts or the nape of my neck, or perhaps my ears if you don’t mind, and—”

“Fooound you, Lauanyuna!”

“Who the he—?!” Lana growled menacingly, turning toward whoever had spoken.

Before us stood two adventurers. The one who’d called out to my wife had drawn herself up to her full height. She was a blond mage with shoulder-length ringlets who looked maybe twenty years old? Her eyes brimming with verve and intelligence, she painted a cheerful, charming, beautiful picture, one

accentuated by her curvy frame. Outfitted with a lantern, a small pouch, ryvius vials, and leather-padded equipment, the mage wore a scarlet dress that had been modified to look like a so-called traditional adventurer's outfit. In her left hand, she gripped a large staff covered in jewels at the very tip, with an elaborate wooden design to hold them in place. My money said she was a young lady from a well-to-do family. That's the kind of vibe she had.

Her maid followed close behind. A tall, reptilian beastmaid, she had thin, vertical pupils, brown skin, scales trailing over her cheekbones, and a black tail peeking out beneath her skirt. Her long black locks were pulled into twin ponytails, and I could see what looked like horns in her hair. She also wore adventurer gear over her uniform, though she didn't seem to be carrying any weapons.

"And you are?"

"Wh-why you! Don't tell me you forgot my name?!"

"You're as obnoxiously loud as always, Freyja. I heard you stomping over here a mile away."

"I'd expect nothing less of you, Lanialiuna, the only mage I've ever deemed worthy of the title. It appears your long ears are more than a simple display."

"It's *Laualliuna*. Are you the one forgetting names now?"

The maid took a step forward. "A pleasure to see you again after so long, Lady Laualliuna," she greeted Lana, bowing ever so politely. "My mistress has not forgotten. She simply has made no effort to remember."

"It's good to see you, Lazalisa. I understand you have your orders, but I'm surprised to see you still attending to her. She must trouble you ceaselessly."

"Tremendously."

"You're supposed to say *no, never* there, Lazalisa," the well-to-do maiden chided her servant.

Hold up. "Lana, care to introduce me to your friends?" This was new, a breath of fresh air. Lana never spoke to anyone like this. Even around people she knew, the elven mage was always calm and demure. I never would've imagined she

could be this sassy.

“This—,” Lana begrudgingly began to say, when—

“Pay close attention, peasant. My name is Freyja Deus *Gastolfo*, descendant of Lady Gastolfo, Goddess of Fertility, certified student of the honorable Hoense School of Magic, and greatest mage in the world. Furthermore, I am also an adventurer and recipient of the title sanctioned for generations by the Central Continent’s Adventurers Guild—*Champion of Light!*” she declared with a very *How do you like them apples?* self-satisfied grin. She was the kind of person you’d expect to start laughing in a shrill, high-pitched cackle.

.....Hmm? I heard that name, Gastolfo, just yesterday. Looks like the Dark Lord and the Champion of Light are part of this ancestry. Could this be a coincidence? Please let it just be coincidence.

“She was my classmate at Hoense.”

“Gotcha.” Lana said no more by way of introduction.

Freyja studied me intensely. “Lanyanyaliuna, who might this be?”

“My husband.”

““What?”” Freyja and her maid both gasped in astonishment.

“This is the man I married. His name is Souya, the Otherworlder. We have an official marriage certificate signed by King Remlia.”

“Hi, uh, nice to meet you.” Hearing her call me “husband” immediately flustered me. I even forgot our wedding was a sham.

“Wh-wha-what did you say?!” Freyja reeled, almost toppling over, but the trusty maid caught one of her ringlets just in time. *You sure about catching your employer like that?*

“Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined you, Launyanyan, who was the least interested in boys, would beat me to the altar, much less with a heim!”

“So, Freyja, what did you want?” Lana looked pissed. I’d never seen her this ticked off. Her cold demeanor had its own icy charm. It turned me on in a new way.

“I hear you’ve become an adventurer, Lananana.”

“Yes, although not by choice.”

“Grh! Then why?! Why?! Why did you not send me word, however brief?! When I was the one who asked you to become adventurers with me?!”

“No reason.” Talk about curt.

“Urrrgh! You’re still the most heartless elf I’ve ever laid eyes on! How dare you toy with my heart so?”

Her grip still tight around one of Freyja’s ringlets, the beastmaid said, “Milady, you and I have been in Remlia for merely fifty days and only just learned of Lady Laualliuna’s entry in the adventuring profession ten days ago. But above all, I believe Lady Laualliuna has had no need to know of our residence here. You have not yet accomplished anything worthy of note.”

“Urrrrgh! Even so, she could have sensed the emotional resonance when in her dear friend’s presence or, like, tapped into the passionate connection linking us fellow Hoense mages through which we feel and lead the other in turn.”

“Freyja, I have never once shared any such repugnant tie to you, nor do I ever intend to.” The devastatingly gorgeous ice queen Lana had shut her down.

Clearly fed up with the situation, the reptilian attendant said, “Milady, in truth, you and I have passed Lady Laualliuna seven times already, and not once did you recognize her ‘presence.’”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Lazalisa?! You’re supposed to tell me these things!”

“My apologies, milady, I assumed you had intentionally disregarded her presence. Only now do I realize I gave you far too much credit.” *What an odd pair.*

“.....So....,” Lana began, her voice cold enough to freeze. “What do you want from me?”

“Hee-hee-hee, Lalalanlalanla.” *Hey, that’s crossing a line.* “Why, you lucky lady! You mage turned adventurer, I have wonderful news for Y-O-U! Out of the profound kindness of my heart, I have decided to bestow upon you the

unprecedented! Unparalleled! Honor of allowing you to join my expedition!”

“I’ll pass.”

“Hee-hee, you’re more than welcome. Please, there’s no need to feel indebted, for this is something so trifling among comrades who have tackled the greatest odds to develop our skills together. A word of warning, however, as the enemies we shall face are formidable indeed, and while the mage I once knew would be up to the task, I—”

“I’m not going with you.”

“Of course, I just knew you would accept. After all, out of all the students who passed through our alma mater’s doors in its long history, you managed to get kicked out in record time and destroy more historical structures than anyone before. You, the greatest mage of calamity, are the only person I have deemed my equal.” She froze. “Wait.....whaaat?! Why not?!”

Oh goodness, it’s like I’m watching an old comedy routine. Maybe we can harness the power of stand-up comedians, skits, and entertainment to save the Other Dimension! It’ll be a monumental success!

Yeah, not happening.

“You could at least hear her out first before you turn her down, Lana,” I suggested.

“Certainly,” she agreed, using that same icy tone on me as well. “Freyja, explain yourself. I will listen to whatever drivel you have to say. You should thank my husband as long as you live for the great generosity he has shown you.”

“Hmph, my thanks, peasant. However, I am certain that once you hear my proposal, Launyanyan, you shall leap at the chance to assist with—”

“Cut to the chase. You always—always—take forever with your preambles.”

“.....Okay.” Ah, that one hit her hard. “Lazalisa, you tell her,” the blond maiden ordered, crestfallen, then turned her back to us and crouched down to sulk.

In her place, the reptilian maid stepped forward and said, “Very well, I shall

explain in your stead. Due north of here in the very heart of this meadow lies an abandoned dungeon. Ancient enchantments once sealed it off from the world, but something has since destroyed the barrier cast over it, unleashing a terrifying ghoul unto the world. Its name: Gormlaith, the three-time murderer of kings, ruler over a diminutive race, golden-eyed destroyer, the Herald of the Setting Sun, is none other than the Dark Lord of the Forbidden Land, who once had the entire Right Continent cowering in terror.”

Oh, her. The one having curry udon with my little sister as we speak.

“Gormlaith? Doesn’t ring any bells. Nor have I ever heard of such a lord anywhere near the forest.” Lana tilted her head quizzically.

“Champions throughout history have covertly locked the Dark Lord away from the world for ages. It is no wonder news of it has not come to you, Lady Laualliuna,” Lazalisa replied.

“‘Covertly’……. Why the need for such secrecy?”

“I’m afraid I cannot reveal that, as it is our sworn duty to protect this information.” I could almost see an inconvenient truth about this world coming to light. The Dark Lord and the Champion of Light wouldn’t stir up trouble just to get the credit of vanquishing the other, right? You’ve gotta be kidding me. I don’t want to get involved with that mess.

“I see. Freyja, I have a question for you.”

“Whatever could that be?” Elated that Lana asked her anything, Freyja whirled back around. Poor little puppy.

“Two years have passed since you graduated from the Hoense School. Presumably, you have spent far longer than I as an adventurer, bearing the Champion’s title passed down through generations at that.”

“Why yes, my explorations have taken me all over the Central Continent.”

“Yet you still haven’t made any other friends aside from Lazalisa?”

“…….” Freyja’s smile stiffened.

“Lady Laualliuna, there is a very good explanation for this.”

“No, Lazalisa, I beg you! Not that! You can tell her anything but thaaat!” the

master pleaded, clinging to her servant. She looked like a woman about to get dumped by her lover.

“Milady.” Lazalisa rather violently shook the beggar off. “I am hungry and, if I may continue, have reached my limit with lying to rest every night in a horse stall. If forced to continue this impoverished lifestyle, I assure you I will go home.”

“Urrrgh!” Freyja groaned in frustration.

“So?” prodded Lana, still completely stone-faced.

“The fact is, we achieved incredible success with our expeditions in the Central Continent’s dungeons, though the credit for this rests not in my mistress’s own capabilities, but in the outstandingly talented party members with whom we worked. However, milady convinced herself otherwise. In a fit of arrogance, she broke from her party, went on an extravagant spending spree, then returned here to the Right Continent.

“Out of respect for my mistress’s honor, I will not mince my words,” the maid continued. “What followed has been a series of blunders on a cosmic scale. Milady joined a hastily arranged party in an attempt to complete a reckless quest, only for the group to immediately disband. In a rage, she turned to retail therapy as an outlet, depleting our financial resources on an assortment of truly expensive pieces of art, for example, which she unwittingly purchased. But when our dire straits soon compelled her to sell the artwork, she was able to recover but a mere fraction of the cost. Our remaining party member ran off with the last of our funds, calling it compensation for the party’s breakup. And though we desperately needed money to support our daily expenses, my lady found it impossible to relinquish her pride and take on smaller jobs.

“That was when milady sensed the Dark Lord had risen once more. Calamity never strays far from the evil ruler, and left alone, it will bring this kingdom to its knees. Only a Champion of Light could save this nation from certain doom. Once the deed is done, my mistress plans to leverage the debt of gratitude that King Remlia will surely owe her for saving his realm to request an exorbitant reward and therefore secure our financial stability. However, even milady’s absurdly intense firepower and my skills would almost certainly prove

insufficient to vanquish the Dark Lord. Coincidentally, we learned of your whereabouts, Lady Laualliuna, just as we were putting these plans together. In the history of the Hoense School of Magic, there are very few people who will not crumble before the combined forces of the two mages honored with the title *Leader of the Final Flame*.”

The reptilian beastmaid lowered her head in a deep bow. “I beg of you, Lady Laualliuna, lend us your strength in this endeavor.”

“E-exactly, Nyaunyau. I am generously offering to share with you the renown that will come from slaying the evil Dark Lord.”

“Milady, I swear I will leave you this instant if you do not properly ask *Lady Lau-a-lliuna* for her assistance.”

“L-Lana, will y-ou pl-ease...he-lp me.....?” Freyja implored, her voice hardly audible.

Her face devoid of expression, Lana replied, “I understand. And I refuse.”

“But why?!” Freyja cried, then tried to fling herself onto Lana, but the beastmaid caught her midjump and pinned the pigtailed lady securely under her arm.

“Lazalisa, and you, unlucky, penniless Champion, you’ve both failed to understand a vital point. I belong to my husband, who is also our party leader. I can’t make such decisions without his permission.”

A hungry gleam in their eyes, Lazalisa and the suspended Freyja turned their gazes on me. Lazalisa made the first move.

“Whoopsie,” she murmured as she tugged at the neckline of her clothing, revealing the bare skin of her left shoulder. “Milady, now you.”

“As a yet-unwed maiden, I could never tempt a man so salaciously,” she scoffed. I supported her devotion to chastity.

Time to put my two cents in. “I have a few questions. First, this Dark Lord—what would happen if you left them alone and choose not to vanquish them?”

Freyja answered, “Vexing though it may be, I would submit a request for reinforcements to the Central Continent’s League of Champions. I cannot turn a

blind eye to this evil presence and still wear my Champion title proudly.”

I knew this Dark Lord and her goblin subjects had absolutely no intentions of launching any aboveground raids. All they wanted was to live in peace and quiet, deep below the earth. Just like the self-sufficient merfolk, goblins had all they needed in their underground city to support themselves in the abandoned dungeon where it lay. Their regent’s agricultural magic and livestock-rearing technologies made that possible. Our spheres of existence had no overlap. As long as above-grounders didn’t disturb their way of life, there would be no risk of war.

*But what if the goblins’ sovereign was slain, destabilizing their way of life.....?
I can’t read them well enough to know what they’re like deep down, but would anyone sit around idly and let themselves starve to death?*



For three-hundred ninety years, the Dark Lord, Gormlaith, and her goblins had lived in peace until I came around, sullied their lands with evil energy, and broke their barrier to their city. *But it's not my— Yeah, this is my fault.*

“I understand. As a Remlian adventurer, I also cannot turn a blind eye to this threat to the kingdom. Champion of Light Freyja Deus Gastolfo, I will help you with this task. Together, let us defeat the dreadful Dark Lord.”



That decided—

“Pardon me, Your Darkness, but tomorrow I’m bringing a Champion of Light here to vanquish you.”

—I informed the skeletal ruler.

“*Huh?*” everyone present spluttered, their voices rising in incredulity. Just to paint the picture, Éa was busy boiling udon, and Machina was ladling out portions of curry to the thirty-odd goblins gobbling it down with forks. We’d all gathered for a sort of stand-up dinner. At the moment, a respectful line of mini diners awaited another serving. The evil sovereign stood on the same line, patiently and politely waiting her turn. Surreal for sure, but a peaceful scene.

“Is she really a Dark Lord? And look at all these goblins! I’ve only ever read about them in books before, but there are so many…….” Lana, who had come with me, was flabbergasted.

“Lala, you want some? It’s really good. If you do, just get in line.”

“Oh, okay.” Lana did as her little sister instructed and took her place at the end of the line. The goblins around her stared.

“What’s with all the talk about Champions, man? You’re harshing the vibe.” Gaslark walked over, a bowl of curry udon in his hands.

“I’ll explain the gist of what happened,” I assured him. “Let’s find a quiet place to talk.”

“Nah, we’re good right here.” *If he’s good, then I’m good.*

“Your Darkness, the Otherworlder says he wants to chat.”

“Can I get a refill first?”

“Just take mine.”

“Okaaay,” the caped skeleton chirped, then left her place in the middle of the line to join us. Taking the bowl Gaslark offered, she sat down gently on the grass, her legs curled under her, and stretched out a little to the side, then started to eat the noodles. Taken out of context, the sight was enough to confuse pretty much anybody.

“So what’s up?” Gaslark popped a squat next to his leader. I felt it would be rude talking down at them, so I joined them on the grass.

“Earlier today, an adventurer by the name of Freyja Deus Gastolfo, who called herself a Champion of Light, came to my campsite to ask for our help in defeating the Dark Lord. Right now, though, she’s out like a light in a food coma.”

“Ahhh, is it that time already?”

.....Are Champions a seasonal occurrence?

I heard the daintiest *gulp*; Gormlaith was slowly slurping her noodles. *Don’t laugh. Hold it in.*

“When do you think you’ll have the barrier back up and running again?”

“Way ahead of you, man. It’s already fixed.”

“Huh? Then does that mean the Champion can’t reach you here?”

“Well, all the barrier does is create an illusion. Once you see what’s really here, it won’t work on you anymore. You and your crew made it through no problem, right? Also.....” Gaslark shot a glance over at his sovereign.

“It’s all right, Gaslark. You can tell them. In the name of all udon, let us unveil the truth.”

“The barrier uses blood from Her Darkness’s previous life to function, so anyone related to her can slip right past.” I knew it, they *were* related.

“I don’t know this Freyja per se, but I assume she must be descended from

either my younger or elder sister."

"I see." Now I got why the Champions wanted to surreptitiously seal away any Dark Lords who could be traced back to their bloodline. Or wait, did the presence of a regicidal ghoul in the Gastolfo family cause them to beget a Champion of Light?

"She strong?" the goblin inquired.

"She's, uhh..." I motioned for Lana, now ladled with curry and udon, to come over. She took a seat next to me. "You're gonna stain your robe. Here." I took off my poncho and tied it around her neck.

"Thank you, my love." She smiled at me sweetly.

"This is my wife, Laualliuna Raua Heuress," I introduced her.

"Just Laualliuna—I no longer have any relation to the Heuress family. Your Wicked Majesty, please forgive me for coming to you empty-handed. I had very little notice I would have the honor of meeting you."

"They're huge..... I'm green with envy," the Dark Lord growled maliciously through gritted teeth. Lana signaled an SOS with her eyes, silently asking, *What do I do now?*

"It's fine, Lana. We're not exactly standing on ceremony today, so don't worry. More importantly, can you tell us about Freyja?"

"Of course, darling." The Dark Lord gnashed her teeth even louder. Taking what I said to heart, Lana dived into her explanation. I swear, that she had a lot of guts. "Freyja Deus Gastolfo is a Leader of the Final Flame, a title accorded to only thirteen students in the entire history of the Hoense School of Magic so far."

"Sorry, 'Leader of the Final Flame'?" I cut in.

"Should five of these masters appear in the same era, the world itself could fall to ash beneath their awesome might.' It's an honorary epithet tied to the superstitious lore the Great Pyromancer Robbe left us. It's also, by the way, a title that I've earned as well." Lana beamed proudly. *Damn, so three more of you, and the world's done for.*

“W-well, I bear a mage’s title, too, I’ll have you know. They call me the Herald of the Setting Sun,” the skeletal overlord chimed in, strangely committed to holding her own in this competition.

“‘Herald of the Setting Sun’? Ohhh, yes, that ancient title. For destroyers of kingdoms, I believe,” Lana mused. “.....Heh-heh.” Quietly, she scoffed. Whenever it came to magic, it was like my wife became a completely different person; her confidence, which was second to none, at least in this area, reared its proud head. Maybe that’s why she always acted elfishly arrogant on the subject.

“So, Lana.”

“Yes, darling.....? *Ahm.*” This Leader of the Final Flame dug into her udon. She had been eyeing her meal anxiously for the last few minutes and finally lost all self-restraint. Determined not to fall behind, the Dark Lord chowed down on her noodles, too.

“What kind of damage could Freyja do if she went all out?”

“Well, *slurp*. And..... *Ngh. Shlrrrp, shlrrrp*.....turtle’s, *gulp*. About half *shlu-slurp* meadow.....”

Look, I know I told you not to stand on ceremony, but it’s still rude to talk with your mouth full.

“l...ee. We ca...et her...burn all the...slurp, slurp.” Though obviously missing vocal cords and an esophagus, the Dark Lord started copying Lana’s garbled speech, which surprisingly, she seemed to have understood. The two continued this otherwise unintelligible, choppy exchange for a good minute, all while still eating. Gaslark and I squinted disapprovingly like Tibetan sand foxes at the two for their horrid table (meadow) manners. The experience taught me that mages of a certain caliber or of higher ranking probably shared some common qualities.

Approximately five minutes later: “So basically,” the goblin began, piecing together the gist of the ladies’ fragmented discussion. Guess he’d managed to follow it, too. “Looks like this Freyja Champ could raze half the meadow if she wanted, though they don’t know if she could take Her Darkness on and win. Though, if she goes overboard, she’ll burn up all the crimson-mortalis flowers.

Since they haven't finished purifying the evil energy from the land, the cursed bits will fly off in the wind with the rest of the ashes and cause trouble elsewhere. And we could try hiding deep in the dungeon, but another Champion would barge in looking for us anyway. Not cool, dude."

"I'm amazed, and honestly somewhat pleased, to learn a descendant of the Gastolfo line has become such a powerful mage. Still, it would be incredibly dangerous for the curse's remains to scatter, because it will take at least a century for that tainted dust to be purified. There is no telling what havoc they might wreak on the ecosystem in that time. And if they were to touch a normal heim, then—"

"Your Darkness, we can talk research and theories later," Gaslark interjected. "In other words, we'd be in deep trouble if the Champion made a mess around here, but Her Wicked Majesty is stuck to this place. What are we gonna do?" The goblin poked me a few times. "Also, dude, you seriously want to do the Dark Lord in like that?"

"Who, me? Never."

"Riiight?"

Ha-ha-ha! The two of us let out a jolly chuckle together. Man, I totally vibed with this guy. It's like we were on the same wavelength, you know? Like our energies did the talking for us. Whatever that means. I got along with Ghett, too, and he was a merman. Maybe I just bonded well with inhuman races, in more ways than one.

Combing through all the info at hand, I started to put a tentative plan together.

Well, anyway. I think we've got this.

"So in summary, all we need to do is protect this area around the dungeon from harm and either vanquish or seal away the Dark Lord—or, at least, *make the Champion think* that's what happened. That should about do it."

"Hmmmm, that sounds tricky, don't you think? I doubt she's dumb enough to fall for it, either." The skeletal sovereign made an excellent point. I couldn't be certain of my judgment on a woman whom I'd only met earlier that day, but—

“No, it’ll work. I am devoted to Lady Mythlanica the Malevolent, for whom deception and trickery are child’s play. I guarantee you we’ll fool the Champion of Light, secure the meadow’s safety, shield you from harm, Your Wickedness, and protect the goblins and their way of life. You need only leave it to me.”

Honestly, I was getting used to this kind of thing.



[79TH DAY]

The next morning, the adventurer and titled Champion Freyja Deus Gastolfo; her maid in service, Lazalisa; along with myself, an Otherworlder; and my elven wife, Laualliuna, gathered together in an impromptu, four-person band as Dark Lord vanquishers. I’d wavered over whether to ask Éa, Shuna, and (the person inside) Bel to join us, but in the end, I decided against it, not wanting to risk my party members sustaining any injuries over this nonsense. Frankly, I didn’t even want Lana coming, but leaving her out would sort of defeat the point, so there was no choice but to bring her.

“So, Champion, may I ask how you plan to attack?” I asked.

“Pay close attention, young apprentice.”

“.....” Just out of Freyja’s sight, Lana puffed up her cheeks, annoyed. Clearly, she didn’t like hearing me speak deferentially to Freyja.

“Lana and I will cast an extra-special, extra-unique, super-duper humongous gargantuan spell and destroy the Dark Lord, along with the rest of the meadow, to the ground in one fell swoop.”

“My lady Champion, did you not hear what I said at breakfast?”

“Breakfast? Oh, that oily stew with crushed potatoes and seafood. It was superb. The tea, I give zero points, but one cannot expect greatness in that respect from a humble peasant’s kitchen.”

I’d explained while we ate, but it must’ve gone in one of this dense girl’s ears and out the other. Her cheeks still puffed, Lana glared at Freyja. “Okay, let’s go over this one more time. The area by the dungeon is covered with red flowers

planted by the Dark Lord. If we disturb them, they will disperse deadly poison that'll travel far and wide, devastating much more than the meadow."

"Inevitable casualties, I'm afraid." Like hell it's inevitable.

"Milady, this meadow abuts the Kingdom of Remlia's farmlands. Should your actions ruin these fields, your honor as a Champion and the honor of the Gastolfo name will plummet to the depths of hell. Also, claims of restitution would be sent out to your family as well."

".....Well then, what would you have me do?"

"Don't ask me, milady," the reptilian Lazalisa replied curtly.

Mages from the Hoense School tended to have a few screws loose, and it looked like Freyja was no exception. Was that what happened if you became good at exclusively one thing?

"I have a promising idea. May I propose it?"

"Yes, of course, umm.....Zortenmorgen?"

Not wanting to deal with the trouble of correcting her, I let the name stand. "First, I'll lure the Dark Lord out and lead it away from the dungeon. Once we've created enough distance, you, my lady Champion, will entrap the evil ruler with your spells, then the two of you will use your magical prowess to deal the final blow and vanquish the ghoul. How does that sound?"

"Positively primitive."

Looking serious, Lana shot daggers of hostility at Freyja. The Champ remained blissfully unaware.

"May I offer my own opinion?" Lazalisa asked.

"Yes, go ahead." I was all ears.

"Master Souya, from my observation, you do not appear to be a vanguard. I take it a bow is your weapon of choice, but I fear arrows will inflict little damage on Gormlaith. I would be more than happy to serve as our decoy and guide the Dark Lord away."

"No need to worry," I assured her and unsheathed Agaccion—without laying a

finger on it, I motioned for it to move. Freyja's and Lazalisa's faces lit up with astonishment at the sight of the sword suspended in midair. "This is Agaccion the Holy Blade, the legendary sword passed down through generations in the Church of St. Lillideas—or rather, an enchanted replica we fashioned with technology from my world. I call it Flamesgrein. One flick of my hand, and it will unleash an unparalleled onslaught upon my enemy. It also protects me and will cut down my foes of its own accord. With this in hand, I do not imagine I'll face quick defeat, even before the Dark Lord."

Actually, this was the real Agaccion the Holy Blade, but I couldn't tell that to just anybody. After stealing it from its previous owner, a hero, I'd scraped all the silver-colored coating off the sword to reveal a blade of deep red, like a diamond in the rough. This was just my theory, but I had a feeling that Ellusion, or rather its hero, had stolen it from yet another master like I had, as evidenced by the silver camouflage. Something about this crimson blade must have posed too great a threat to a hero's honor to wield uncovered.

"It's marvelous," Lazalisa cooed, her face flushed as she stroked Agaccion, caressing it almost erotically with her fingers. "This scarlet sword blade carries the scents of the stars. I sense a nostalgic yet mystifying power residing within. And yet, for the life of me, I cannot fathom how it was made. Though crude at first glance, it is a work of rare beauty."

Freyja rapped her spellbound maid with her staff. "There you go again, drooling over inanimate objects. Stop this foolishness at once."

Lazalisa snapped out of it, immediately returning to her usual expressionless face. "Apologies, milady. Lord Souya appears confident he is up to the task, so I will leave the role as decoy to him. Instead, I shall guard you and Lady Lana." Did she have a soft spot for all insentient items? Or maybe a sword fetish?

"Okay, let's review the plan once more." A very happy Lana came to stand by my side. "First, I'll rush in and engage the Dark Lord in swordplay, then guide it to the mark I made last night. Then our Champion of Light will trap the ghoul, and together with Lana, you guys will finish them. Lazalisa, you'll stay with them to handle any unanticipated attacks. And that's it."

"Well, I suppose it will have to do," said Freyja. A look of scorn instantly

clouded Lana's visage. The elven mage became exponentially more expressive whenever Freyja was around.

"Shall we?"

So we set out for our date with the Dark Lord, the four of us treading softly in a line. Wanting to relieve some of the tension before our battle, I started chatting about completely unrelated topics. We talked about Lana's and Freyja's days at the Hoense School and of the historical structures they had destroyed. For a second, I thought I caught Lazalisa throwing me a sultry look, but my untrained virgin eyes were unsure. That had to be it.

"So these red flowers are the poisonous ones, right? I didn't think they could be so dangerous the last time I saw them," Freyja noted as she skirted carefully around them.

Compared with the day before, more thistles covered the meadow. These flowers had a special ability to mature and blossom very quickly when rooted in cursed soil. Once they purified the cursed energy, they withered and died, leaving seeds in their wake. These then also rapidly germinated, drawing out the tainted nutrients in the soil to grow and bloom. This cycle would repeat until all the evil energy had been drained from the land.

Crimson mortalis, Gormlaith had called the purifying plants. However, she and the goblins could not take credit for their creation. During her previous life, the Dark Lord had discovered the seeds, which proved too ancient to date accurately. Given that normal thistles also grew in this world, clearly someone had intentionally bred and developed this iteration of the flower. The cleansing seeds' tumultuous and ironic fate led it into the hands of an evil overlord of all people.

A single black shadow stood amid the deep-crimson-painted meadow, waiting for us.

"Lana, Lazalisa, Nu...whatever your name is, umm, Lana's husband-in-training!" The fact that Freyja wasn't necessarily wrong irked me. "Show some spirit! The moment of truth is upon us!!"

The shadow coalesced into the figure of a small but intimidating cloaked skeleton. Blue light smoldered in her eye sockets. Hanging from her neck was a

testament to the royal slaughter committed, and in her right hand, she clutched a monk's khakkhara staff topped with metal rings. This was the mighty Dark Lord, Gormlaith: curry fanatic, flying-rabbit lover, and ruler of the goblins. It was thanks to her diligent care that so many flying rabbits thrived in the meadow; she regularly fed them, cured their ailments, supported their proliferation, and eradicated their predators in the area. Very few other animals could withstand being touched by the skeleton's frigid hands like these cold-hardy hares. It all made sense.

Anyway—

“How brave of you to appear before me, Freyja, Champion of Light! I am the greatest king among all kings, the Dark Lord, Gormlaith!” a gruff, manly voice declared. We kept it our little secret that it was actually Gaslark speaking, who had hidden off to the side, projecting like a ventriloquist. “Long have I awaited the arrival of one so young as yourself! Join me, become my ally, and half of the world shall be yours to rule! What say you? Will you not lend me your hand?”

“Wh-what was that?!” Freyja's face contorted, astounded. Machina had written the dialogue, though she'd pulled most of it directly from old video game scripts. Every elementary student back in my home country would know exactly what to choose here, and yet—

“Half—half of the world?!”

—our great Champion was seriously wavering.

“Wealth, prestige, authority, a perfect husband, younger than me at that, who would devote himself to satisfying my every desire—”

“Milady, this is obviously a ruse.” Lazalisa cut Freyja's daydreaming short.

“*Gasp!* How awful! This Dark Lord will resort to the most hideous devices!” Man, this girl had issues. So many issues. No wonder she drove Lana crazy.

Welp, time to make my move.

I unsheathed Agaccion and broke into a run, screaming, “Foul lord of evil! How dare you try to lure our gallant Champion into temptation! I shall drench my blade in your blood!”

“Hit only her weapon,” I whispered to the enchanted sword. Sparks burst into the air and scattered as the staff and sword collided. Though I only lightly gripped the handle to keep it close, the impact made my whole right arm go numb. I’d gone easy on her, but Gormlaith was a genuine Dark Lord. Not many could stand unflinching before Agaccion’s strikes.

A chorus of clashing metal rang out over the meadow. The two of us put on a realistic show, continuously shifting stances and dodging throughout the sword fight.

“Ugh!” I groaned.

The blows reverberated down my arm to my spine. It hadn’t been long, but I’d reached my limit. I winked at the cloaked skeleton. On cue, we both brought down our weapons, locking staff and blade together, pressing closer as if in a competition of brute force. My eyes searched around for the marker we’d blocked out. Then far away, I saw a triangular yellow flag pop up with a *ding*. ♪

Quit it with the weird signals, Machina!

Our weapons still intertwined, the Dark Lord and I ran side by side to the designated spot.

“We’ll make it over without any issue, but how are you going to replace me?” she whispered conspiratorially. *“Surely, a lump of earth will not suffice to deceive anyone.”*

“Don’t worry, I’ve been saving a formidable standin for a moment like this. My only concern is whether we can actually defeat it.”

“What?! Are you sure this is going to be okay?!”

“Remember to disappear on my signal.”

“Oh, right!”

At last, we stood beneath the flag. No crimson blossoms grew in the area; only a small dirt-covered mound protruded from the earth. There were about fifty meters between us and Lana, Freyja, and Lazalisa.

Releasing Agaccion, I commanded, “Pound the ground like crazy.”

Spinning and twirling, Agaccion struck against the dirt repeatedly, sending a

plume of dust to dance through the air with the explosive *booms*. After making sure the Dark Lord had vanished once more into the shadow, I hurried to make my own getaway.

“My Champion! Now!” I cried as I broke free from the dust cloud and ran back toward my companions.

Freyja began to chant, “In the name of the hallowed Gastolfo, I order thee, spirit of the earth, to do any bidding.” Instantly, the ground beneath the meadow shot up and closed in all around where the undead skeleton had stood a moment before.

Damn, that was quick.

I’d never seen a spell activate so quickly and on such an enormous scale. The earthen cage Freyja conjured could have entirely swallowed the giant turtle we’d fought before.

“Let’s do this, *Laualliuna*.”

“Freyja, I’ll chant first. Follow after me.”

“If I must. But this is the last time I’ll let you take the lead.”

Lana thrust her staff into the ground and spread her arms out wide-open. Freyja, a changed look about her, copied her movements.

“My Lord Ezeus, grant thy lowly servant a drop of thy primordial might,” Lana chanted.

““O dancing, singing, wandering spirits, ye who burn a crimson deeper than the blood that flows through our veins, O hallowed fires, become the Final Flame and engulf all before thee,”” Freyja joined in, her voice coupling with Lana’s.

“Behold the dragon’s breath, the prison of the unsetting sun, which like purifying flames falling from the heavens, devours and consumes the world of mortal life,” Lana continued. Then, closing out the enchantment’s final stanza together...

““May our power gather here. O replicas of destruction and calamity, darker than red, behold the sacrifice we have prepared at our fingertips! Through

these primeval tenants of the world, we decimate thee to the last! Hoense Romea Dragbane!””

A ball of fire burst into life above the dirt prison. Electric shocks shot out of the small yet effulgent black flame, which ever so slowly descended to the ground. Suddenly, an emergency alert from Machina came through.

“Mr. Souya, my sensors have identified a reaction nearly on par with thermonuclear fusion in the area. Do you think maybe they’re malfunctioning? It must be, or you and the rest of your companions would have vaporized from the heat radiation. In fact, the energy source in question would have the potential to obliterate the entirety of the Great Land. Oh, whoops, my mistake. It would blast a hole through the planet.”

“I think your sensors are dead-on.”

This dimension apparently had something called an Arch Deus Intervention protecting it, which would snuff out any destructive force that threatened to devastate the world. The divine grace wouldn’t immediately neutralize the source that triggered it, but it instantly nullified any excess heat or aftereffects. Even now, the temperature felt close to seventy degrees Celsius, but it wasn’t enough to kill us on the spot.

“Hark my words, you have nowhere left to flee,” Freyja called out, and a part of the ground stretched up and up, then slammed down like a lid to seal the black ball of flames in the mud prison. “I further command thee, O great earthen clod, engulf thy prisoner, bear thy burden, devour thy captive! And...” The great mound swelled and wrapped itself thickly around its hostage. It must have picked up the moisture stored in the soil as well, because it looked almost exactly like clay that had yet to face the fire of a kiln. “...pulverize it to dust!”

At Freyja’s valiant cry, an undulant blast of heat swirled around the bloated mass of dirt. I could only imagine the hell that raged inside. As if to prove the point, the clay hardened into an impressive, eight-meter-large earthenware vessel.

“Did we get it?!” the Champion asked expectantly.

Nope, not yet, I thought reflexively, conditioned by previous experience. But not even the most indestructible monstrosity could take death blows like this

and live to tell the tale aft—

“Not yet, Freyja,” replied Lana grimly.

Or maybe it could. My wife’s voice trembled, more anxious than I’d ever heard it before. A muffled *crash* resounded from within the baked mass of clay, then cracks began running down its sides. The heavy *thuds* pounded repeatedly to a steady beat.

Inside that earthen jail was none other than the magical horror Lana had cooked into existence from her failed attempt at making rice balls. Hoping we could finally get rid of this headache, I had placed it there to serve as the Dark Lord’s body double, but it looked like it wouldn’t go down that easy. To make matters worse, that last attack seemed to have broken the seal keeping it trapped. The ceramic cage shattered into pieces, and *it* came out.

“Huh? Is that a po—?”

Before Freyja could finish asking her question, I answered, “My lady Champion, that is the Dark Lord’s second form!”

“Its second form?!” *Praise the gullible lady!*

She was right, though; it was a pot. Atop of what looked like its head, the black, globular cretin wore a pot. It was hard to believe the Teflon crock had stayed intact after that concentrated onslaught, which had been a billion times more intense than thermonuclear fusion. At this point, the only recognizable part of its appearance was the pot-like thing. But even then, that had already become part of an unimaginable monster that looked like it hailed from another universe. Lana’s absurdly strong firepower hadn’t managed to destroy it, but surely, it would fall before these two ladies’ combined power, I’d thought. Only, that was before I’d watched my plan fail spectacularly before my eyes.

“Milady, Lady Laualliuna, on your guard.”

“Agaccion!”

Lazalisa and I stepped out in front of the mages. The blob under the pot quivered and then—

“Block it!”

—shot innumerable tentacles at us. They rained down like needles, but my furiously whirling blade and the beastmaid’s fists rebuffed every single one. Sparks flew before my eyes as the furious attacks crashed down on us like a waterfall. Agaccion was one thing, but to see Lazalisa block those feelers with her bare hands left no doubt in my mind that, as an adventurer, she was a cut above the rest.

“Mr. Souya, I’ve got a message from the Dark Lord for you,” Machina piped up. “Apparently, the saucepan part is the creature’s core, so if you destroy that, it won’t be able to keep its shape. However, it’s extremely resistant to magical attacks, so you’ll have to use blunt force. Also, she says ideally you should completely crush it to smithereens.”

I had, in fact, overlooked that possibility. So concerned about the contents of the saucepan spilling out, I’d neglected to strike it at all.

“I’ve found the Demon Lord’s weak spot,” I announced. “It’s that pot—I mean, the metallic part.”

“I see. If you’ll allow me,” Lazalisa said as she wrapped her hand around Agaccion’s hilt.

“Wha—?”

A single slash of the sword—that was all it took to generate a gust of wind and force so tremendously powerful it obliterated the furious rainstorm of tentacles. That gale was on par with a hurricane. I felt like I was watching a heroic fairy tale play out in front of me.

“M-marvelous,” Lazalisa breathed, trembling with awe. I’d thought this would be child’s play for her, and boy was I right. The beastmaid rushed at our enemy or, rather, gathered the strength in her legs and propelled herself toward the blob, cutting down all the tentacles that impeded her path. In the blink of an eye, she’d gained fifty meters on the monstrosity.

My reflexes were not fast enough to follow the sword’s movements. All I managed to see was the aftermath: two crisscross slashes on the black cauldron. The gelatinous blob shrieked and began to melt, when—

“Did you get it?!”

—I cried out, then immediately regretted it. The gooey creature reshaped itself once more, blew up like a balloon, and rammed Lazalisa with an extra-thick tentacle. She flew like a pinball twenty meters up in the air, then came falling back down and made a perfect landing.

“Formidable, indeed,” she admitted, unscathed. She must have blocked the blow just in time. Damn, this woman was tough as nails. Stronger than Lanceil even—and perhaps on par with an elite adventurer.

“I will attempt one more strike, milady.”

“No, the risk is too great. I forbid it.”

“As you wish.” Lazalisa bowed to her master’s command.

After getting the beastmaid to return my blade, I consulted with Freyja. “My lady Champion, any ideas for our next move?”

Still trembling, the Thing appeared to be watching and waiting. Looked like we’d hit the bull’s-eye on its weak spot. Even so, a mere slash was clearly not enough to bring it down. Cold sweat drenched Lana’s brow, her face still as stone.

“Laualliuna, this time, follow *my* lead.”

“Fine, but I can’t imagine any other kind of magic will do much—”

“I intend to lay waste to it with physical magic.” *What the heck is physical magic?*

Freyja raised her staff. “Lazalisa, Souya, protect us with every fiber of your being. Under no circumstances may you stop, even if you should perish.”

“As you wish, milady.”

“Understood, Champion.”

Once again, the beastmaid and I stepped into the vanguard. Lazalisa readied her fists while I ordered Agaccion to go on defense and nocked my bow.

“O august forebears of my lineage, I, Freyja Deus Gastolfo, beseech thy providence. May the mighty earth answer to thy holy name of fertility, for I am she who gathers life.” Freyja began the enchantment, her voice quiet yet

strong. Suddenly, the ground behind us shot upward, and an enormous mass of dirt coalesced into a human figure. It towered above us, and I almost released my arrow in surprise.

Lana's voice sang, "O revered Ezeus, Father of the Ancient Wood. By your divine grace, may this dirt turn to flesh, these roots to bones, and fruit to eyes. May your hallowed blessing nurture the multitude of riches tied to this elm so that though it sees no rain, nor light, nor soil, nor good fortune, your miracle shall see it prosper. And yet, here in this moment, every grace has been prepared and prosperity promised. Now, stand!"

Coiling itself around a tree and its roots, the figure's once-bleary edges took definite shape. The newborn giant with soil for flesh, wood and bark for bones and skin, and fruit for eyes rose to its feet; it stood a full eighteen meters tall.

Crossing their staves, Lana and Freyja synchronized their voices and intoned, ""We disciples of Hoense, of destruction itself, guide all to the power of the gods as the Leaders of the Final Flame.""

"I hereby grant thee a name." Freyja laid her hand on the giant's leg. Her goddess had given birth to new life within the earthen statue, and now she baptized it, like some scene from a myth. "Carve it into thy very being, Wrath, King of the Meadow. I, your creator Freyja, command thee to take thy mighty fist and slay the Dark Lord!"

The giant.....began walking away from the pot monster in the opposite direction, toward the abandoned dungeon.

Ah, this guy's kind of smart. Whoops, he tripped. The colossal golem's right leg had twisted under its weight.

"Oh, sorry, that's my fault. I think the tree didn't get enough nutrients," Lana confessed. I appreciated the honesty.

"You can't be serious, Laualliuna!"

"Freyja, have you forgotten the trouble I have with physical magic?"

"You can't possibly expect me to remember that!"

Sensing its chance, the cauldron shot its feelers out toward the two arguing

images, but Agaccion and Lazalisa stopped them.

“Well, this isn’t good.” The tentacles wrapped around Lazalisa and the enchanted blade and threw them like Frisbees. Woman and sword bounced like skipping rocks across the meadow.

“Wrath! I order you to destroy that Thing at once!” Freyja commanded.

“BOOOOOOAAAH!” the giant roared in reply, which sounded like an / *caaaaaaan’t* to me. Surveying the golem once more, I saw its left leg had also crumpled. It would never manage to stand like that.

“Tch!” I unleashed an arrow, but the Thing intercepted and slapped it away like a mosquito. It then reached out one long tentacle and waved it back and forth at me like a disapproving finger. “You stupid Teflon jerk! How dare you!”

Grabbing all the arrows I had, I nocked as many as I could on my bow. “May the grace of the hidden name compel you!” I shouted and let them all fly. Six deadly cannon-like bolts burst out toward our foe, each finding its mark in the creature’s blobby belly but inflicting no damage. As if that weren’t enough—

“You’ve gotta be freakin’ kidding me.”

—the Thing’s tentacle shifted into a gooey bow and shot those same arrows right back at me.

“Ladies! Take cover behind the giant!”

I was blown off my feet, and the world spun a few times before I finally stopped. Dull pain spread through my left shoulder. My stab-proof poncho had kept the arrow from piercing my body, but it left my injured shoulder numb. I could no longer feel my left arm. By the time my eyes found the pot fiend again, it had created two more tentacled recurves and had all three loaded with quarrels. Its last shot had been no joke. Did it copy my archery skills or something? I’d used a heroic level of strength, though.

“Darling!” Lana cried out, having dragged Freyja behind the earthen giant. After breathing a sigh of relief, I suddenly thought, *Oh? Is this checkmate?* then watched with a strange tranquility as another deadly volley headed straight for me.

Too bad, guess this is the end of my adventure—

“You dumbass!”

—not.

Every single arrow fell, rebuffed by a longsword. “Tell me if you’re going into battle, shit-for-brains!”

A redheaded young boy had appeared. Androgynous and short in stature, he was lightly clad in leather gear and held a longsword too big for him in his hands. Ever since it had undergone repairs, the sword had begun to draw people’s attention. Originally, it only garnered note for its durability and length, but now every impact caused veins of light to glow along the scars left where the blade had been reforged. For some reason, Shuna’s skill had improved in tandem with the illumination. No one knew why.

“Shuna, you’ve got impeccable timing.” *Perfect, in fact.* A bit farther off in the distance, I could see Bel making her way over, too.

“I dropped by ready to shake you down for lunch but then heard something crazy goin’ on over here. I thought maybe some shit was goin’ down, and I was right. Dude, tell me! Call me *before* you go get your ass kicked!” he barked, livid.

“Yeah, sure, I will next time.”

“So what the hell is that?” Shuna pointed his blade at the cauldron.

“The Dark Lord, Gormlaith.”

“Uh.....pretty sure that’s a pot.”

“No, it’s the Dark Lord in its second stage!”

“The hell?” *Don’t worry about it, kid.*

Bel walked over as if on a leisurely stroll, placing herself between us and the Thing.

Shi— “Watch out! Behind you! Turn around!” Totally unfazed, the armored young girl brushed off my warning. Behind Bel, the pot monster trembled, then launched a million tentacles at her.

“Shield.” With just one word, my fear at seeing her skewered like a kebab

proved utterly groundless. I'd seen this kind of defensive magic a few times before. A dome of light draped down around the cauldron. Caught off guard, the blob swung its tentacles around wildly, thrashing madly, but the wall of light weathered it all. The dome looked highly impenetrable, especially for one activated in a split second. What kind of beast was in Bel?

"Husband to Laualliuna, who might this dashing young man be?" Freyja stared at Shuna, dumbstruck. She gawked lecherously, a faint blush warming her cheeks, but quickly averted her eyes once the boy noticed her gaze.

Umm. I think I just saw the moment when someone falls in love at first sight. But c'mon, we don't have time for that now. Try to pick a better time to fall for someone, would you?

"Freyja, you can't get your golem to stand."

Lana's voice snapped the prim young woman back to her senses. "Oh, no, La Neowneow, my magic is working perfectly. The roots you are controlling are at fault here. They're what caused Wrath's legs to collapse," the Champion retorted, choosing a life-and-death moment to revert to acting like a useless clown.

"I told you I'm not good at animating objects! You should've known from back at the academy!"

"Is your bosom the only thing that has grown since then? Have you failed to develop your skills as a mage at all?"

"If anything, my chest is smaller than it was. But I'm a much better mage now!"

"Oh, reaaally? It seems to me you've less to show in both regards."

No fighting, girls. Your neglected golem looks totally lost. Damn, too bad they're our only..... Wait, if I remember correctly, wasn't there...?

"Roots? I can handle that." An idea seemed to come to Shuna as he inspected the golem's flimsy legs. The same thought came to me at that exact moment.

"Lana, leave this guy to us. We just need to fix his legs, right?"

"Exactly. But, darling, you don't have the kind of power to—"

““Hell yeah, we do,”” Shuna and I cut her off in unison. Shuna was devoted to the God of Forestry, after all, a god who not only cultivated beautiful vegetables but could also probably encourage this tree to grow as well.

“Bel, how long will that shield last?” I asked.

“Who knows?” I’d have to do something about this punk’s shitty communication style later.

“Hold it as long as you can, please.”

“.....” No answer.

“Go for it, Shuna. I’ll follow your lead.” It probably wouldn’t go as well as the Hoense double-team, but it was worth a shot.

“It’s just a spell I used as a kid to heal trees in our garden, so don’t get too excited.”

“If it doesn’t work, we’ll think of something else. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Just relax and do your best.”

“I mean, I’ll do what I can.” After staking his sword in the ground, Shuna brought his fingertips and palms together. I joined my hands in prayer as well. “O Ukhazol, King of the Tree Spirits, I, Shuna of Azollid, beg thee for a miracle. Breathe life into this withered tree, revive those roots lost to rot, and small though we may be, grant these wishes to we who seek them so.....umm...”

“O Ukhazol, King of the Tree Spirits, I, Souya the Otherworlder, call upon our provisional contract to beseech thee for a miracle. Breathe life into this withered tree, revive those roots lost to rot, and... What’s next?” I’d repeated Shuna’s prayer, but it had trailed off.

“.....Uhhh, please hear our prayer. Make it big! Make it huge! I beg of you. Please, pretty please!”

Wait, that counts?!

Though, I guess magic in this dimension was all about asking gods and goddesses for their blessings, so maybe worst-case scenario, even this could work? I repeated the simple prayer. “Make it big! Make it huge! I beg of you! Please and thank you!”

Ignoring the cold glares the female mages shot our way, Shuna and I cheered the giant on. Just as I was thinking how much I felt like an exploitative boss—

“BOOOAAAAAH!”

—our prayers were answered, miraculously. Powered by Lord Ukhazol’s graces, the massive golem’s legs began to heal with new roots wrapping around them thicker and stronger. But it didn’t stop there. Vivacious energy surged through every part of the gigantic tree, which sprouted new leaves and bore juicy fruit.

Bold and confident, the King of the Meadow rose once more. He firmly planted his feet on the ground, flexed both powerful arms, and —“BOOOOAAA OOOOOOORRR!!”—bellowed menacingly at our Teflon foe.

“Can’t hold on, shield’s breaking.” The dome of light Bel created shattered.

“Neeeeoooouneeeoooouuu!” The cauldron monster shrieked back, swelling up to match the golem’s eighteen-meter stature. Now we had another giant on our hands, and this one wore a pot on its head.

“Wrath! The head! Go for the head! All the metallic parts are its weak spots! Bring it down in one go!” I tried to order it. But would it obey me?

“BOOOOOOAAAAH!!” came Wrath’s mighty reply. He continued to grow; in fact, he was expanding too fast. Wrath’s right arm alone had more than doubled in size.

“No way,” I breathed. The arborous giant’s right arm snapped off. He hadn’t been growing an arm—he’d been making a weapon.

“What in the world? What is this? Nyannyan?” Freyja clearly hadn’t caught on.

“I don’t know.” Neither had Lana. Though wooden, Wrath’s weapon had a circular guard extending out to a curved, thin, single-edged blade. Its design bore a striking resemblance to a Japanese katana. If we had Lord Ukhazol to thank for this, the list of his possible hometowns had just considerably shrunk.

“NEEEEEOOOOUUUUU!!” the Thing roared, trying to make its own weapon.

That was its downfall. Trying to copy your enemy's moves in would only slow you down in battle and prove fatal.

The wind billowed as our giant raised its mighty sword up high, ready for the kill, striking a stance in the *Shogen-ryu* swordsmanship style. There was still forty meters between him and his opponent. Not the ideal distance if you asked me, but Wrath didn't seem to mind; he brought his blade crashing down. (If you'll excuse the spoiler, the battle left behind a trail of destruction within the Kingdom of Remlia, and afterward, I had quite a lot of explaining to do to the king.)

I closed my eyes to shut out the overpowering gales it created. A tremendous thundering *boom* and raging winds followed. Small rocks whipped against my ears and cheeks. It felt like a bomb had gone off. Squinting, I tried to check my surroundings, but all I saw was a cloud of dust. Someone crashed into me; I caught them and shielded them with my body. I could barely breathe. Covering my mouth with my poncho, I tried my best to take deep breaths, then, still tightly holding whoever I had in my arms, got low to the ground and weathered the storm.



A little while later, the wind abated, and silence took over, though my ears still rang. Noticing light shining behind my closed eyes, I slowly cracked them open.

“Whoaaa.”

The destructive waves Wrath’s sword generated had cleaved the black giant and cut its pot cleanly in half. That gash continued to run through the meadow far off into the horizon, as if he’d cut the ground into two.

Right, we’re blaming all this on the Champion. There’s no way I can talk my way out of this!

“Ugh, there’s dirt in my mouth.” Shuna retched and spat while dusting the debris from his hair. Lana remained pristinely clean. Freyja, who she’d used as an umbrella to shield herself, was covered head to toe in dirt.

“Move.” Bel, the mystery person I’d been holding, brushed my arm away. The old Bel would’ve said something bittersweet and adorable. The difference was jarring.

“Looks like the battle is over.” Lazalisa, having returned, roughly dusted off her master—hard. I almost felt bad for the girl.

“And so falls the Dark Lord, Gormlaith, a truly formidable foe.”

“.....Indeed,” Lana replied with a smile at my moving words, her face ghastly pale.

“Well done, comrades. I’ll thank you in due time. But first,” Freyja began, then looked Wrath straight in the eyes, “many thanks, Wrath. Until I tell you to stop, walk away in any direction but toward the red flowers.”

“Boooaaah.” The giant set off across the meadow. Every few paces, he’d turn around as if to ask, *Keep going?*

“A little farther!” Freyja would call out in return. After about one hundred meters, she said, “You can stop there!”

“ROOOAAAH!” Wrath waved back at Freyja. *Hmm? Why do I have a terrible feeling about this?*

“Laualliuna, you have a little more strength left in you, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Very well.” *Wait, hold on.*

But before I could stop them, the two Leaders of the Final Flame started chanting, then unleashed a magical blast.

““Dragbane!”” they shouted, their voices a little hoarse. A ball of fire flew straight at Wrath, setting him aflame.

“BOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAH!” Wrath let out one long roar as the flames engulfed his body. Yet almost immediately, he accepted his fate and stopped wailing. Gallant and valiant, the picture-perfect martyr calmly buckled to his knees like a samurai dying by his own sword.

“WRAAAAAAAAAAAAAATH!” I cried. As if in reply, the flaming giant gave me a thumbs-up, then withered and died, leaving not even coals behind. “.....You didn’t have to burn him like that.” It was too cruel. Hoense mages were so mean. I’d planned on keeping him as a pet back at camp.

As if nothing in the world could be more natural, the Champion of Light said, “Whaaat? I would never trouble myself to look after a golem. It’d cost a fortune to maintain, plus you never know how long it’ll live, so it’s impossible to sell it off. And those that happen to get a little too clever cause all sorts of trouble, you know? As its creator, it was my duty to see it through to its final moments.”

“.....If you say so.” Talk about a terribly tragic end.



“We’ve finished over here. How is everything on your side?”

“Oooh, we can speak to each other through these? Coooool! Yep, yep, Gormlaith speaaaking! We’re all doing juuust peachy ☆,” came the Dark Lord’s singsong reply. If all you heard was her voice, you would think she was a truly adorable maiden. But I could easily imagine someone fainting on the spot if they met her in person. It might even be a bit traumatic.

“We managed to keep our secret safe and are having a celebratory feast

now.”

“Out of curiosity.....what’s on the menu?”

“Curry and fried pork cutlets. I’ll have Machina deliver some to you later.”

“There are still more varieties of curry?! How marvelous. How very deep your mysteries run, curry.”

“I just poured it over fried pork is all, but more on that later. Um, could I ask you something?”

“I’ll happily answer whatever I can.”

“Your Wicked Majesty, I heard you’ve been sealed away a few times in the past. Is that true?” If it were, then we risked someone noticing the breaks from precedent and seeing through our scheme.

“Ohhh, that. I only let them think they’d defeated me. Once I’d seen my adorable descendants were doing well, I simply played along.”

Uh, right. “Do you think the members of the Gastolfo line know about their blood relation with you?”

“They seemed to in the past, but I think the little ones these days have no idea. Only a few survived a war that threatened to end our line, so I imagine most of our family lore was lost then.”

“I see. In that case, I think we should be in the clear.” As long as I kept my mouth shut.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, though, where in the world did you find that creature?”

“My wife cooked it.”

“What?”

“My wife, she cooked it.”

“Oh.....I see.”

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, Lana was the one who’d concocted that Thing into existence. Now that we’d disposed of it, her cooking prohibition had lifted, but I’d make sure her next attempts happened only

under the strictest levels of supervision. Even so, I had a feeling this wouldn't be the last homemade monster. Would we be able to beat the next one?

"Your Darkness, Freyja is by no means the last Champion we'll see. I have no doubt a second and third will arrive at some point. When that happens—"

"Oh, I'm going to make myself scarce until everyone has forgotten I exist. Though discarded by all manfolk, our dungeon stretches wider and delves further into the ground than anyone could hope to cover in pursuit. Ancient wisdom even I have yet to uncover slumbers in its depths. Perhaps if I'm lucky enough, I may come upon an even better curry recipe one day."

That counts as wisdom?

"In any event, Souya, you have done a noble deed. Thanks to you, peace still reigns over this meadow. Don't worry about the cleft in the ground—I'll dispatch some of my people out to fix it soon, maybe even tonight. I will also send a reward for your efforts over with Machina. Do accept it."

"I will, thank you very much."

"Despite everything, you run a great risk in continuing to associate with a Dark Lord, so it's best if we go our separate ways. I, for one, will nevermore meet with you in person. Farewell, Souya."

"Huh?Farewell, Your Wickedness."

"Well then, oh yes. Please let Lazalisa know I said hello."

"Of course."

"Machina, how do I turn this contraption off?"

"The blue button!"

The call, along with my friendship with the Dark Lord, came to an end. She'd made an excellent point. My reputation was terrible enough as things stood. If word got out that I'd been rubbing elbows with a Dark Lord, I'd be exiled—no, executed. I wondered if the prudence that came with age or personal experience had made it easier for Gormlaith to look at these matters so objectively, but either way, I much preferred this over some weirdly sappy good-bye. Plus, it seemed like she would still hang out with Machina.

Hang on..... If the regicidal overlord knew Lazalisa enough to greet her, then they really did stir all this trouble just to take the credit afterward, didn't they? Ugh, give me a break.

"Souya, with whom were you speaking?" Something silky brushed through my legs. Looking down, I saw a golden-eyed, fluffy gray cat.

"A new friend who I will never again see called Gormlaith. Do you know her?"

"Never heard the name. More importantly, Éa is bent on making the curry too spicy to consume. Stop her, will you?"

"Éa! Only season your own portion!" I shouted, then hurried out of the tent, managing to catch my little sister right before she dumped a whole load of cayenne pepper into the pot.

Soon after, we sat down to have lunch. Joining us today were Bel, Shuna, the lady Champion and her maid, and the elven sisters. Same as always, I left Lady Mythlanica's serving for her in our tent. Lanceil had been summoned to the palace on account of all the commotion we'd caused earlier that morning. She was probably recounting our hard work (as we'd decided to call the disturbance) to the king right about now.

"Your actions today were truly admirable, Soy Sauce." *If you're gonna mess up my name, do it properly. Don't give me something so close to the real thing.*

"It's Lord Souya, milady," Lazalisa corrected.

"Oh, I know. I was just about to say that."

"If you say so."

Already seated at the table, Freyja cleared her throat. Her personal maid sat to her side, her features as placid as always. I couldn't get over how Lazalisa knew the Dark Lord personally but decided not to open that can of worms. Nothing good would come out of it. Neither of them had begun to eat yet, as their sense of etiquette required them to first exchange preliminary pleasantries with their host.

The curry of the day, by the way, was a dig at Shuna, the famed Swine Slayer and hater of all vegetables. Moderately spicy, the stew had steamed potatoes,

boiled beans, and plenty of vegetables. Lastly, it was topped with fried pork cutlets. I'd parboiled the cutlets before deep-frying them, so they were deliciously crunchy on the outside and pillow-soft on the inside. In fact, this was probably the best meal I'd made since arriving in the Other Dimension.

"By my honored name of Freyja Deus Gastolfo, I would like to once again extend to you all..... Someone listen to me!"

"Listen up, everybody!" I tried to get their attention, but everyone else at the table was engrossed in their lunch.

"You know, *munch, crunch*, I thought you'd lost your mind for a hot second there, Yaya, to pair this crunchiness with stew, but, *gulp*, once the curry seeps into the breading, it takes on a whole different flavor, and that guilty pleasure you get from intentionally tainting the purity of the pork is just, *munch, munch, munch!*"

"How the hell does this curry make the beans and potatoes taste so good?! It's crazy! What kinda magic spell did you put on it?!"

"Kindly refrain from speaking while you eat," Lana scolded her sister and Shuna as they wolfed down their food.

"Milady, let us partake as well," the reptilian maid suggested.

"Yes, but I mustn't yet. I haven't fulfilled my duty as Champion, so—"

Having evidently reached her breaking point, Lazalisa scooped up a spoonful of curry and took a bite. "Mmm! Why, this— While at first bitter, it's followed by a complex hearty and sweet combination, no, an amalgamation of the juicy pork and vegetables..... If you'll excuse me, I'd like to focus all my attention on this and so will leave my reflections there." Huffing a bit at the hot stew, the maid began to eat in earnest.

"I—I simply cannot fathom what you see in such an uncouth, unappetizing dish." Eyeing her spoon with disgust, Freyja tasted the curry. "And how could you think to ruin a perfectly good cutlet by drenching it in stew is beyond me." Then she bit into the fried pork. "....." Without another word, the Champion put her head down and dug in.

Finally, I started on my own bowl. There's no telling how long I'll ramble, so I'll

spare you my review.

Looking very pleased, my sister said, “Yaya, I think I have another incredible idea. What if we mixed curry and ramen? Wouldn’t they go absolutely perfect together?”

“I knew you were smart, but you must really be a genius to think of that on your own.”

“Oh, go on.” She beamed, smug self-satisfaction emanating out of every pore of her skin.

“Souya.” It looked like Shuna had come up with something, too. “Picture it: curry and pizza. Great combination, right?”

“I’ll give that a *not horrible*.”

“No fair! You’re just nicer to her ’cause she’s your sister!”

Ah, crap. I almost forgot.

Getting up, I grabbed another bowl of pork-cutlet curry and carried it over to a small table I’d set up away from camp. Bel was waiting for me there in her chair.

“You’re late.”

I’d arranged a separate dining table for this ray of sunshine because I had some questions that needed answering. Still holding on to her lunch, I began my interrogation.

“Look, whoever you are inside Bel. I’d like you to tell me your name.”

“I refuse.”

“That so? Well, if you insist.” I placed an oblong object on the table and tossed a few supplement tablets next to it. “This here is your run-of-the-mill to-go adventurer meal. It’s a rock-hard loaf of bread and butter mixed with random preservatives. If you keep stonewalling me, this is all you’re gonna get from here on out. Don’t worry, those tablets will give you all the nutrients you need.”

“Nooo! Sou, that’s so crue— Silence, child.” For a split second, Bel had come

back to us. “What of it?” asked the person possessing her, taking control again, Bel’s face completely unreadable. I fanned the scent of the curry in her direction. Once they caught whiff of it, that blank facade quickly twisted into one that screamed, *You’re dead*.

“Well, why don’t you try it and see?”

(The person inside) Bel unwrapped the premade lunch and took a bite of the yellow lump. “.....*Blegh*, I can’t! Sou, this is too much!” the real Bel cried, reappearing for the second time. Though she only held on for a second, the tears that had welled in her eyes remained even after the person possessing her reclaimed control.

Just one more push, and I had them. “You have my precious friend in your hands. I want to trust you. Please just tell me who you are. It doesn’t even have to be your real name. I’ll take a nickname.”

Suddenly, Bel had her arms around me. She smelled of butter and flour from the preserved loaf she’d bitten into. “Lillideas. But you may call me Lis.” Next thing I knew, the curry had disappeared from my hands, and Lis was once again seated at the table. Silently, she began to eat her lunch. “Hmph. Not terrible. It needs more spices. Do not forget next time.”

“Huh?” *Did she just say Lillideas? As in the Lillideas of Ellusion’s Church of St. Lillideas? You’ve gotta be kidding me.* “Don’t tell me you’re—”

“Quiet. I gave you a name. I will give you no more.”

“What’ll you have to drink?”

“Soybean tea.”

“Any garnish for the curry?”

“Pickled greens. I’ll accept root vegetables if necessary. These may also be spicy.”

“And for dessert?”

“The sweet white dessert this maiden had before.”

“Ice cream. You’ve got it.” *I guess it’ll be okay to handle her through her stomach for now. Or won’t it? Dear Goddess, what am I to do? I feel like my*

brain's gonna explode. SOS, O goddess of mine. Please help me.

“What are you doing all the way out here?” My prayers were answered. Lady Mythlanica, back in her feline form, hopped onto my shoulder. “Oh-hooo, what do we have here? I was wondering who the cat had dragged in, and look who it is,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. The weight perched on my shoulder increased from that of a cat to that of a woman. I tried to look at her but soon found myself in a headlock.

I've already seen you in that form, you know. No need to be so shy.

“Souya, have they given you their name?” she asked me.

“Um, yes. Apparently, her name is Lis, short for Lillideas.”

“Pfft! Out of all the names in existence, that's the one you chose to adopt? Shameless home-wrecker.”

“How da— Y-you're the l-last person! I'd want to hear that from! Filthy whore!”

Now, now, girls, no need to throw slut-shaming insults at each other.

“Do not delude yourself into thinking you can tempt my devotee away with that sorry plank you call a chest.”

“Urgh!”

As Lady Mythlanica leaned more of her body weight onto me, I felt a soft sensation press against my shoulder and back. My devotion had never been more sincere. *I'll worship you for the rest of my life.*

“Y-you disgust me, foul Mythlanica! I'm leaving!” Lis got up in a huff—then, realizing she had left some curry on her plate, stooped down to quickly shove it all in her mouth. Cheeks bulging like a chipmunk's, she stormed off.

As I watched her leave, I asked Lady Mythlanica, “So, um, is she really Lillideas from the Church of St. Lillideas?”

“Preposterous. It is a stolen name. Pay her no mind. She cannot do any harm yet. Make whatever use of her you will.”

“R-right.” *I'm not exactly sure what to do with that information. But I've*

gotten my goddess's seal of approval now. We'll see what I can do with her, I guess.

"So who is she really?"

"That is a secret." I'd only be asking for trouble if I stuck my nose in ladies' private business. Best stay far away from the subject.

Upon returning to camp, I heard some commotion. Lady Mythlanica, in her feline form once more, went back into her tent.

"Souya!" Shuna caught sight of me and waved me over. Quickly, I returned to my seat.

"What? What's up?"

"This girl says she's a Champion of Light!" I'd never seen Shuna's eyes twinkle so brightly. "Why didn't you tell me?!"

"Pretty sure I did."

"No, you didn't!" Looks like he'd been too engrossed in the curry to hear. I guess heroic champions were big among kids here, as well.

"Champion of Light? You mean for heims, right? What do I care? Means nothing to an elf," Éa scoffed.

"Shuna, such Champions are nothing but trouble," warned Lana. Both elven sisters' voices were laced with icy hostility.

"The princesses speak the truth, Master Shuna. Champions of Light do nothing but gobble their money away until they are reduced to living in horse stables. In comparison, Master Souya keeps a proper abode, prepares wonderful meals, and takes great care of his party. He's worlds more heroic." *Lazalisa, you're supposed to defend her, you know.*

"Gh, grrr!" The real Champion growled, her face contorted into a dark expression that a hero should never be caught wearing. Maybe she recognized she didn't have a leg to stand on, though, because she just kept on plowing through her curry. Actually, make that *my* curry.

With everyone helping themselves to extra servings, we quickly finished the rest of the curry, then relaxed with a cup of tea.

“*Haaah*,” Freyja sighed. “What truly horrendous tea. I’ve never seen such paltry leaves.”

“On this point alone, we are in complete agreement, milady.”

Lana shot murderous glares at Freyja and Lazalisa as they criticized my tea. To be honest, I’d been dealing with a tea problem for a while and was looking around for ways to resolve it. Seeing the perfect opportunity, I figured I might as well ask if they had any ideas.

“You know, I do some consulting for a merchant group in town and have been searching for a connoisseur who could lend them a discerning eye. Would you two by any chance have some expertise in the area?”

“Absolutely!” Lazalisa practically threw herself over the table toward me. “I happen to be rather well versed in the varieties of tea from the Left, Central, and, in fact, all the Great Land. Would you possibly consider introducing me to your merchant contacts, Lord Souya? How much can you pay?!” She was all in. Made sense, though. There wasn’t any money in slaying a Dark Lord whose only crime was keeping to herself.

“Lazalisa, stop this nonsense. A Champion of Light cannot very well have her attendee bartering her services as a tea sommelier. I will not allow it.”

“Milady, I hereby resign, effective immediately. From now on, I shall become Lord Souya’s consort. It has been the furthest thing from a pleasure serving you. Farewell.”

“““What the—?!””” Lana, Éa, and Freyja all cried out in unison.

Thank goodness Lanceil isn’t here. There would have been a bloodbath.

“Lazalisa, I have all the consorts I need.”

“Yeah, you got that silver-haired foxy lady with the huge boobs, don’t ya?” Shuna chimed in, ever so casually stabbing me in the back.

“I guarantee your efforts will be rewarded handsomely. That is, however, only under the stipulation you will solely work for the one trade group I designate and no one else.”

A merchant group from the Central Continent had rounded up and stolen all

the tea experts in the area. If I could ensure Lazalisa would work exclusively for us, I could afford to give her a rather warm welcome. Plus, she came with a Champion of Light and was an incredibly strong adventurer in her own right. She could defeat any hired mobsters the Central Continent's merchants threw at her.

"Of course, that sounds reasonable to me," Lazalisa readily agreed.

"Great, then the sooner you can get started, the better. We can go introduce you later today. I'll also cover your room, board, clothing, and everything else for the time being. You won't have to worry about a thing."

"I'm simply beside myself." Lazalisa looked as expressionless as ever, but I could tell she was happy. Freyja, on the other hand, clung to her maid's sleeve, tears welling in her eyes. Feeling kind of sorry for the sad puppy, I threw her a bone.

"It'll be great to market the tea as *Handpicked by a Champion of Light*, so, Lady Freyja, I'd love to have you on board, too."

"Unfortunately, milady has made it very clear it would not do for her to expend her precious time judging a tea's quality and its leaves," the maid pointed out, clearly troubled. It was worth a shot to throw the idea out there, but Lazalisa was right; it didn't fall under Freyja's job description.

"I shall call it *the Champion's Tea*," the crusader declared. "But be forewarned, my seal of approval does not come cheaply!!" *I'll take that as an I'm in. Those benefits started to sound pretty good, didn't they?*

Suddenly, my new mage business partner took my hands in hers. Lana's eyes staring at me terrified me to my core.

"Now that that's settled, let's return to this long overdue business of your reward. By my honorable name of Freyja Deus Gastolfo, I would like to once again extend my deepest gratitude for the assistance you and your party members have provided in this endeavor. Your pure, unadulterated hearts, which inspire you to vanquish all who seek to disturb our blessed peace, are more precious than any shining jewel. So long as light lives in hearts such as yours, this world shall persevere through all hardship and threat of destruction."

Her earnest gratitude drove a knife through my chest.

“Furthermore, whosoever risks his life to protect a Champion of Light has proven himself a true Champion as well.” *Hmm?* “By the revered Gastolfo name of my ancestors, I hereby christen thee the *newest Champion of Light* unto the world.” *Whaaa—?* “O, Souya of the Otherworld, I bid thee accept this honor.”

“Wait just a second, I—” Her grip was too strong. I couldn’t break free. Freyja’s hands began to glow warmly. This could not be good. It was so sudden; I didn’t have time to react.

“I now bestow upon thee this hallowed mark officially dubbing thee the one thousand four hundred thirty-second Champion of Light. May you protect and conduct thyself in accordance with the accolade of this title and bring glory to it through thy words and deeds. Now, newborn guardian, go forth and prove thyself!”

A searing pain burned my left hand. Freyja released her grip, revealing a warped pattern with the letter V scrawled across my palm. “What the hell is this?!”

“The Mark of a Champion. Should the world ever fall into peril, or innocent civilians ever cry out in prayer for salvation, or the Dark Lord ever rear its ugly head once more, this brand shall surely lead you to your destiny.”

“Souya! That’s sooo badass!” Shuna’s eyes shone exponentially brighter.

Sorry, but I’m not interested. Seriously, I’m good! “I don’t want it! Take it off!”

“No can do. You cannot erase the mark. You shall remain a Champion of Light until your dying day.”

“You’re the devil!” *What is this, a goddamn curse?!*

“Even if you lose your left arm somehow, this symbol will reappear somewhere else on your body, so just give in and do your best. You cannot escape this fate. You have all the makings of a true Champion! I believe in you!”

This is a goddamn curse!!

And so my adventure, my beautifully planned-out adventure, went off the rails once again.



[81ST DAY]

After that, I wound up meeting a whole new cast of characters and got involved in all kinds of crazy things full of twists and turns, huge strides forward, and lots of stumbling in the dark. Finally, after a few days, I managed to bring some semblance of stability back to my life. It felt like forever.

The last few days especially felt like they'd never end, mainly thanks to our resident Champ and the work it took to clean up the royal mess she'd made. The one good thing was, in just one night, the enormous gash left in the meadow after our battle healed as if nothing had happened. The problem, though, was the method behind its astonishing recovery.

Like moths to a flame, swarms of intellectually curious adventurers, scholars, amateur eccentrics, and Jumichlan mages flocked to the scene of what people now called the Remlian Meadow Miracle, tripping over one another to be the first at the site. Soon, the meadow turned into a hot new tourist spot complete with hordes of visitors who trampled over the fields, threatening the residents who lived underneath, hidden from sight.

Desperate for a diversion, I caused a distraction on the meadow on the opposite side of the kingdom and led the newcomers over like cows to the pasture. While they were preoccupied, I had Lana and Freyja sign official affidavits testifying to what had really happened. These documents wrote off the so-called miracle as nothing more than a naturally occurring phenomenon and squashed any further interest in the event. Freyja agreed to leave the Dark Lord out of this, as it'd only cause the citizens unnecessary anguish to learn such a sinister presence lurked in their own backyards. In total, I forged over thirty testimonials based on my version of events, leveraging the sheer volume of "evidence" to drown out the theories some of the mages had developed, which came very close to the truth. Shove enough lies down people's throats, and most will stop giving a shit about what the "real" truth is.

I feel like this is all I do every waking moment.

Speaking of, things worked out really well for Freyja and Lazalisa—too well.

Ever since the tea leaves handpicked by our in-house Champion hit the shelves, “the Champion’s Tea” immediately became the best-selling product in the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group’s history. Seizing what looked like a golden opportunity, I put Freyja to work selling our pasta to stores. We moved through the approval process seamlessly and repackaged our Ghost-Ship Pasta as Champion’s Pasta. It flew off the shelves just as quickly. We did leave some aside for ourselves, but the rest soon turned into money in our pockets.

That’s when the Zavah chairman and our former Champion of Light got cocky, plastering the Champion’s Stamp of Approval on anything they could get their hands on. They started with cups, plates, knives, spoons, forks, and other everyday items but eventually expanded to functionally useless things like tapestries and key chains (this one had Machina’s influence written all over it). By the end, they’d branded the stamp on chamber pots, brooms and mops, and even the items rotting away in the warehouse dead-stock graveyards. I thought it was a stupid idea, but somehow those items still found buyers.

I tried to warn our entrepreneurs that they were being too ambitious, but my pleas fell on deaf ears. The two built new warehouses and began to fill out a catalog of high-end furniture until—it suddenly all came crashing down. In the span of a single day, all Champion merchandise instantly disappeared from the Remlian markets. Spurious rumors spread to the farthest reaches of town, but none came close to the embarrassingly mundane truth. A disapproving letter of complaint from Freyja’s family reached King Remlia, who immediately commanded the trade group to voluntarily recall all the goods. When Freyja, who was terrified of her family’s wrath, and the chairman, who had a ton of unmarketable items in storage, had come crying to me over their dilemmas, I gave them a warm smile and a swift kick in the ass.

Then finally—finally—I was able to start planting our home garden.

“Wrath, first, you’re gonna need to pluck every single weed you see. Once that’s done, dig a little hole, sprinkle some seashells inside, and add some fallen-leaf compost on top, then mix it all together until it’s somewhat soft and airy. Then plant a seed or two and move about four of your fists over to plant another. We’ve got tons of space, so go crazy.”

“Boh!” the fifty-centimeter-tall tree golem grunted in reply, then got to work

carefully weeding the garden as I'd instructed. This was the Dark Lord's thank-you gift to me. She'd taken the remains of the giant I'd thought had been reduced to nothing but ash, revived him, and refashioned him into a miniature version. Tiny Wrath did whatever I commanded and had a good year of life left in him. For the moment, I'd put him on garden and security duty. Kind of ironic that it was the *demonic sovereign* who'd created a new life out of the destruction left by a *human*.

I'd also gone to Shuna for more details on Lord Ukhazol, asking, "Hey, Shuna, just out of curiosity, when Lord Ukhazol takes his hat off, does he—?"

"Yeah, he's totally bald. He used to shave it in his previous life, or at least, that's what he told me. I took a look once, but it was the weirdest hairstyle I'd ever seen."

That probably answered the mystery of why a wooden katana hung from Wrath's hip. I'd thought we could only get to the Other Dimension by portals, but was that true? Were there other ways here? Or maybe, did the portals randomly transport people and drop them into this world? If Lord Ukhazol didn't wear a topknot man-bun due to his personal style, this meant the modern world had at least some contact with the Other Dimension before 1946.

Maybe there was only a one-way road in? If that's true, then.....then what? Did the technology here somehow influence the advancement of our own back in the modern world? For example, maybe, it led to a technological breakthrough that could not otherwise exist..... But what, though?

That was as far as my plebeian mind could go. *No use wasting brainpower on something I can't grasp. Let's put this on the back burner. There's no better time to get to work and get your hands dirty.*

I hadn't done any gardening since elementary school, but it was kind of fun. Eating, cooking, gardening—every step of the chain was unique, but they all required trial and error to master. For example, Lana could cast a spell on our plants to make them grow faster, but the process removed all the nutrients from the soil and would quickly overcultivate the land. That said, we did rely on this method at first since I wanted to start by crossbreeding our plants,

hybridizing one strain with another over and over until we created the best version. Once we got to that point, I planned to let nature take its course so they could grow at their own pace. I figured it shouldn't be that hard with Lord Ukhazhol's green thumb blessing the process. Plus, Machina had the knowledge, and if we messed up the soil and needed to recalibrate it, Wrath could handle the labor without much trouble.

Yeah, this is definitely doable. Can't wait to see how it goes. I wanna start with cherry tomatoes, eggplants, and cucumbers, then try my hand at garlic, chili peppers, shiso, green onions, oh, and maybe even radishes. We could grow some parsley and herbs to go with pasta dishes. We might as well try edamame, too. It's not all gonna go as planned the first time around, but the possibilities are endless.

Wait, I feel like I'm forgetting something fundamental. Am I just imagining it? Yeah, must be.

"Hmm?"

I heard a horse clopping along, then looked to see a black stallion bearing an adventurer over the meadow. It was a familiar face. Raven-haired with scraggly stubble, the man had a patch over his left eye and was clad in well-worn adventurer's gear. In his late thirties to midforties, the gruff rider bore a striking resemblance to Toshiro Mifune, the famous Japanese actor. In my opinion, out of all the people I'd met in the Other Dimension, he took the Most Likely to Wear a Kimono and Katana Best Award.

What does he want? The Heuress girls and Lanceil are still sleeping. He better not wake them up.

"Good morning," I greeted him.

"Aye, morning. Souya, what have you been doing with yourself lately?" asked the one and only father of adventurers, Medîm.

"Lately? I've been busy cleaning up after other people's crap and hooking some friends up with a few gigs. Today I'm going to get our garden started."

"Right. I've seen adventurers like you who get their first taste of success fall into a similar trap all too often. I've got only one thing to say to you. Souya.....

get your ass back in that damn dungeon! End of story!”

Pops turned his horse around and galloped back the way he’d come. In case it wasn’t obvious, he looked absolutely livid. It’d been a while since I had someone older hound me so furiously. For a while, I let the wind blow me. Wrath kept on plugging along, busily prepping the garden. Now that the thing I’d forgotten had come rushing back to me, I lost all train of thought.

“Mr. Souya, may Yukikaze and I make a suggestion as well?”

“Uh, sure.”

With Yukikaze perched on her head, Machina rolled over the grass toward me.

“Please go explore the dungeon.”

“Explore the dungeon, you must.”

“.....Fine.”

Here I go again.

INTERLUDE

The tale that follows is a simple one. Once, a woman and a man exchanged a promise, which the man faithfully kept long after she was gone. That's all there was to it.

As if possessed by some evil curse, trapped in a nightmare and unable to awaken, the man fought endless battles with his sword. He'd had dreams once. Friends, too, and a proud dignity worth betting every last coin on. Fortune and glory had undoubtedly been his to claim. Yet the man threw it all away. As if in a feverish delirium, he obsessed over that one task, a fanatic worshipping at his twisted altar, a child locked in the only world he'd ever known.

I have no business speculating about the values that drove him. For all I know, it could have been the simplest of reasons. This was a story about a promise, one the world deemed foolish. It all began with a pact between a man and a woman, a vow steeped in hopeful longing for a future that would now never come to pass.

That's all there was to it, all it would ever be. And that's exactly why I—

CHAPTER 2

The Rabidly Revelrous Rabbit

[82ND DAY]

Adventurers explored the dungeon—that was their job. I’d lost sight of that recently, but that was my job, too. Nowhere in all the Great Land was that more patently obvious than in the Kingdom of Remlia, home to the enormous, preeminent Tower of Legions. Adventurers delved into its depths, then harvested and sold its resources for money and sustenance. Those coins then circulated through the markets, supporting the growth of those whose paths it crossed as well as the country itself. Put simply, that was the sworn duty of adventurers in this country.

Until I came around. Armed with the knowledge and artificial intelligence I’d brought with me from the modern-day world, I had enough to support myself without necessarily stepping foot in the dungeon. The past weeks, I’d been absorbed in my own personal obsessions, working on projects that were not related to the Tower of Legions. Fortunately for me, these endeavors had made me a considerable amount of money. That’s what made it even worse.

Obviously, an adventurer’s job wasn’t only to carry out dungeon expeditions. Some lent a hand to the local merchants, others worked as bodyguards, and there were always resources to be harvested and monsters to be vanquished aboveground as well. However, in the end, Remlian adventurers had to keep delving in that dungeon, garnering envy that lured the next one, then the next after that, and on and on. Each one of us was a foundational stone in the lighthouse that drew them all to the cavernous shores. That was our responsibility.

All this to say, I was turning out to be a terrible role model. A few other people had made their fortune through connections in the merchant world, sure, but inevitable circumstances had forced the vast majority of them into

early retirement. There had never been an initiate like me.

If I were to be honest though, I'd lost sight of why I'd needed to explore the dungeon to begin with. I knew I had come to the Other Dimension for money. The Firm had reached out to me suddenly with an offer I couldn't refuse and sent me here on a mission to retrieve some unknown resource located on the fifty-sixth level of the dungeon. To me, who'd barely been making it by from day to day, the Firm had promised an outrageous sum for the work. Looking back on it, though, I couldn't imagine what would've motivated me to take the bait.

At this point, I'd made some relatively trustworthy contacts and had the means to hire elite adventurers to travel to the designated floor for me. However, *I would have to personally reach that floor* before the resources I needed to harvest would be revealed and before a security lock installed on the AI bots would deactivate.

All of which to say, I needed to delve in that dungeon myself if I ever wanted to complete the job I'd come to do. I'd be fine with that if I were the only one at risk. My life didn't amount to much, but I'd bet my all on it. However, there was no way I would ever let another one of my friends die. I didn't think I'd be able to handle a next time. Whatever strings held this sad excuse of a human together would snap.

To tell you the truth, the dungeon scared the shit out of me. I never could've imagined it'd kill me this much to lose someone. To think someone like me, who didn't have a friend or companion to speak of back in the other world, would have to face the agony of parting with one in this dimension—classic irony.

Despite all that, once again, at this moment, my friends and I had traveled to the fourteenth floor of the Tower of Legions. What with the father of adventurers lighting a fire under my ass, my own AI bots jeering at me, and my counselor slapping me into shape, I fell into a light neurosis in which I could almost hear random strangers whom I passed on the streets screaming at me to *Get yer ass in the dungeon!* So I gave in and reluctantly dragged my feet the whole way there.

Thanks to the accurate intel we'd gathered on the foes that lurked inside, the reliable map we had to guide us, and my skilled party members, who could

easily match even the most adept adventurers on equal ground, we made it to the fourteenth floor so quickly it was almost anticlimactic.

Every fifth floor in the Tower of Legions had a portal. You simply touched it to register your progress, and it would immediately whisk you back to the first floor, where the Adventurers Guild was located. Once you'd saved your progress, you could restart your adventure from that portal however many times you pleased.

The only issue was, every floor before a portal level had a gatekeeper blocking the path forward. Naturally, the fourteenth floor was no exception. Incomparably powerful, these diverse, multifarious guards existed on a separate plane, defying all human comprehension with their infinitely variable skills, defenses, and strengths. They were an incarnation of all ancient wisdom, begotten from miracle or madness. The sole thing each and every one of them had in common: an insatiable hostility toward adventurers.

"Right, so." *What do we do now?* I wondered but swallowed the urge to voice my uncertainty.

My party and I had run into a wall just before encountering the gatekeeper guarding the fourteenth floor. We'd already encountered this same problem once, turning tail at the doors that now loomed in front of us before even catching a glimpse of our opponent. A dispatched Guild employee stood between these two crimson doors in the dimly lit corridor. This day, that person just so happened to be my counselor, Evetta. A pair of horns adorned her head of long, beautiful silver hair. Though she was slender and now sported a receptionist's suit, the retired adventurer had once struck terror into the hearts of all who crossed paths with the infamous Evetta the Pulverizer.

"Souya, nothing will ever change if you don't approach anyone," she chided me.

"Yes, ma'am."

The guild would only allow us to try our luck against the sentinel, the Ravidly Revelrous Rabbit, in groups of two parties or more. Currently, twelve other parties awaited their turns like us, joking and negotiating with the others in the corridor, trying to find a team they meshed well with. Evetta was right: We'd

never work out a partnership unless I was proactive. Given my experience helping the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group, I honestly thought I had a leg up on the others. But oh, how wrong I was. How very, very wrong.

When it came to recruiting members to an existing party, you had to consider all sorts of things, like a person's skills, mutual interests, and whether they were cut out for your group. When it came to working with another party, though, companionship trumped all else. You needed magnetism and affability. You didn't have the luxury of time to get to know each other. Mere moments after the first meeting, you'd be knee-deep in the horrors of combat. Only your feelings could guide you in this decision. Looks, reputation, and last but not least, race carried the heaviest influence in that department.

So if I had to explain where that put me—

"Excuse me, would you like to team up with us?"

"....." The first group I approached, its members all beastfolk, flat out ignored my best sales-pitch smile.

"Excuse me, how would you—?"

"Gross!" A party of female adventurers immediately shut me down.

"Sorry to bother you, but would you like to team up with us?" I asked a gentle-looking young heim.

"That's them over there?"

"Uh, yes." The lad glanced at my motley crew: two teenage heims, a swordsman, a young lady knight, two elves, an archer, and a mage.

"Ah, sorry. I don't work with elves."

"Oh, okay. My mistake." The guy bowed his head in apology, as if he'd done something wrong. Nothing you could do about interracial issues.

"Pardon me, would you like to work together with us?"

"That your party?" inquired the next candidate, an older adventurer whose gear, well-worn for an initiate, hinted at a previous life as perhaps a soldier or mercenary.

“Yes, that’s them.”

“Whoa, a group of ladies all to yourself?”

“Who you callin’ a lady?!”

“Shuna! Noooooo!” Needless to say, the negotiations failed.

“Pardon me, would you like to group with my party?”

“You’re that guy the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group’s got at their beck and call, aren’t you? The one who was in on it with the scammers who started selling all that fishy ‘Champion of Light’ crap, right?”

“I just do some consulting for them.”

“I hate that kinda shady business. Somethin’ about it feels cowardly. You’re an adventurer—make your money like one.”

“Uh, right.” Next. Gotta keep moving. “Excuse me, would you—?”

“Ack! It’s the Otherworlder.”

“Wait, isn’t he the one they say you shouldn’t mess with?”

“Never mind, sorry to interrupt.” The old rumor I’d started bit me in the butt. “Excuse me, would you consider joining up with my party?”

“Hmm, nah, I don’t like the cut of your jib or that wily grin on yer face. Same goes for those glasses.”

The elven mage behind me got to her feet with a *clatter*. “Are my ears playing tricks on me? Better eliminate all possible sources of that noise just in case.” She cracked her fists violently.

“Lana! Dooon’t!” We reached an impasse.

“Sorry, um, if you don’t mind, would you consider—?”

“Yeah, no. I was here the whole time, you know? I heard everything. Hard pass.” *Fair*.

“Pardon me, would you—?”

“Sorry!”

“Eeeeeek!”

“Get away from meeee!” My last option ran away screaming. Out of the twelve parties present, we’d gotten into physical altercations with two, were rejected by six, and sent four running.

Yep, this must be what they call crushing defeat.

“Umm, good job, Yaya. You did your best.”

“Éa’s exactly right, darling. It’s not your fault those insolent wretches don’t know basic manners.”

“Lala, I’m pretty sure using your fists isn’t exactly polite, either.”

“Did you say something?”

“Nope, not a word.”

At least the two of them were trying to cheer me up.

“Dude, you’re so frickin’ laaame.”

“Oh, shut up, Mr. I Go Berserk If Anyone Ever Calls Me a Girl.”

“Urgh! That’s not fair, I—”

“Elven guys take that as a compliment, you know! You should be thanking them, if anything!”

“But I’m not an elf,” Shuna protested meekly, shrinking under Éa’s rebuke. He never could stand up for himself against a strong-willed girl, a lingering malady developed from his childhood as his five older sisters’ favorite punching bag. As an only child, I would’ve killed to have switched places with him.

“Tell him, Bel.” Éa prodded our young lady knight sitting off to the side, totally zoned out.

“.....”

“Éa, her name is Lis for the time being,” I corrected, reminding my younger sister that, for various and sundry reasons, an entity—one whom multiple gods had assured me “ain’t evil” and that I was free to “make use of”—calling herself Lis had taken over Beltriche’s body.

“Okay, Lis,” Éa tried again. “Say something.”

“.....Something.” Cliché at best. My little sister threw me a *What the hell?* kind of look.

“Beats me,” I replied.

I knew she was strong, an expert in the Church of St. Lillideas style of magic, and a brutal swordswoman. But she was a nightmare to communicate with. Sometimes, she’d ask me a question out of the blue, then act as if she couldn’t care less if I responded. Other times, she’d just disappear in the heat of a battle. We’d all go crazy looking for her, only for her to come waltzing back, offering nothing more than she was “taking care of something” as her reason. She was eccentric, surly, inconsiderate, and worst of all, had a hearty appetite. (Oh, wait, that’s actually a good thing.)

Bel..... Bel, come back to us! We’re in desperate need of your charm and winning smile. To be totally honest, all our diplomatic hopes rested on your shoulders. When you get back, you better believe I’m gonna give you an earful for letting this random person possess you without even asking me.

Honestly, though, your precious Sou feels like his heart’s about to crumble.

“Souya,” Evetta called out.

“Oh, yes?”

While I was busy wallowing in misery, every other party waiting in line had partnered up, stirring up old memories of being the last one picked in gym class.

“Some things never do change, do they?” she remarked. “It’s heartwarming in a way.”

“Don’t rub it in!” *I haven’t forgotten our adventures around town where every single god and goddess refused to consecrate a covenant with me.*

Paying no mind to my protestations, the horned counselor began escorting the other parties to their places.

“What should we do, my love? Shall we go home?”

“Uh, I don’t think so,” I hemmed.

Lana’s suggestion did tempt me. It had taken a whole day to traverse the tenth through fourteenth floors. We’d now learned the route and enemies

along it by heart, so next time, we'd probably get through it in about fifteen hours, including time for breaks to rest and sleep. Still, it would be a pain in the ass to do it all again. An enormous drag. And given how my motivation was basically running on fumes, it'd likely be at least another five—no, more like ten?—days until I could drag my butt back to the dungeon. Worst case, I wouldn't have it in me to come back for a good three weeks or more. I had lost all drive to finish my original mission, and whatever urgency I'd felt had long since disappeared. What I really wanted was to go back to camp and mess around in the fields. I'd become obsessed with tending my own garden.

Plus.....the person who longed for glory more than any of us was no longer here. Shuna came in at a close second, though he'd wanted to gain honor not for himself but for his master, and he'd already accomplished that. As word of Shuna the Dragonshell Slasher spread around town, more and more people learned of his master, Legure the Graceful, as well. All he had left to do was stake the rest of his life on ensuring he brought her no shame. The elven girls never had much interest in adventuring. As for Lis, I couldn't say.

Yeah, there's no way I can go home like this. I'll one-hundred-percent lose all interest in ever coming back.

"Lana.....let's wait and see if another party comes along," I said at last.

"All right, darling."

But would waiting actually solve anything here?

"Oh, it's you," called a familiar voice. *Oh, I know you.*

Just then, a well-to-do young lady adventurer with blond ringlets and her reptilian beastmaid appeared, along with a knight of small stature. About one hundred thirty centimeters tall, the knight had armor covering every square inch of his body and wore a helmet featuring a bird-beak design over the nose, though it seemed a couple sizes too big for him. He looked almost like a toy figurine complete with a round shield and rapier. I knew the two ladies, but I'd never met this diminutive paladin before.

"If it isn't Laulau and her husband, Nutria. Oh, hello, Lord Shuna!" After getting my name and Lana's wrong as per usual, Freyja ran over to Shuna. I wasn't even human to her anymore; somehow, I'd turned into an invasive

rodent. “Fate must have brought us together again here of all places!”

“Uh, hello.” Freyja clasped both Shuna’s hands and shook them vigorously up and down.

Her face devoid of all emotion, Lana announced, “Darling, this *thing* is where I draw the line.”

“Yeah, I hear you. But...”

Though an incorrigible troublemaker, Freyja was also a powerful mage, one of the five who could raze the world to the ground if they joined forces. She was annoying, brought chaos, and bore the infinitely annoying title of Champion of Light, but if you could ignore her grating personality, she had the potential to be an extraordinary adventurer. As for her maid, Lazalisa, she was stupid powerful, plain and simple. I’d only scratched the surface in terms of her capabilities, but I wouldn’t be surprised if she could go head-to-head with an elite adventurer.

“How wonderful to see you again so soon, Lord Souya,” the reptilian maid greeted me. “I apologize for the trouble that incident caused you.”

“Whoa!”

Lazalisa disappeared from sight and somehow instantly reappeared behind me, her warm breath grazing my neck.

“Ohhh, yes, it really does sparkle so marvelously,” she cooed, panting as she rubbed her cheeks all along the blade of my enchanted sword she had so easily stolen from my quiver. If it weren’t for this weird fixation of hers, she would’ve been a perfectly normal person.

Speaking of odd, who was this new—?

“Hey, dude.”

“Huh?” The toy soldier gave me a wave. I recognized that voice.

Her hands still gripping Shuna’s, Freyja introduced him. “Nutria, this is our newest companion, a dwarf. Very rare for an adventurer, isn’t it? He simply would not take no for an answer, so the day before yesterday, I granted him permission to join my party.”

“True story,” he confirmed.

“Do you mind?” I pulled the self-identified dwarf aside, crouched down, and whispered, *“Gaslark, what are you doing here?”*

“Her Wickedness told me to give Freyja a hand since she’s, you know.”

I’d certainly never met a dwarf before, but I knew damn well under all that armor hid a goblin. *Back up, what kinda Champion of Light has a Dark Lord, relation or no, send one of her subordinates to protect her out of pity.....?*

“How did you get around the adventurer registration and portals and stuff?” I couldn’t imagine he’d registered and made it this far in only two days.

“I signed up ages ago. Looks like I was still in the system.” I guess goblins could register, too.

“Just curious, how far have you gotten?”

“About thirty floors. But I can’t tell ya anything useful about this next gatekeeper.” Holy moly, he’s my mentor in the making.

“Hey, isn’t that—?” Éa leaned onto my back.

“Éa! Shhh! Not a word!”

“Don’t even think about it, elf.”

“Whatever, I’ve pretty much guessed already anyway.”

The adventurers in line stole curious glances our way. They probably thought we were best friends with this weird party. As if she only just then noticed the existence of said adventurers, Freyja called out to Evetta.

“You there, Horns. What might these fine people be waiting for?”

“A chance to fight the gatekeeper. Should you like to try yourself, you will have to partner with at least one more party.”

“Hmmm.” Freyja looked at me. Lana faced me, deep disgust etched in every line on her face. “Nutria, if you absolutely insist, I would be happy to let you partner with me.”

“.....Yes, please.” Lana’s grimace tugged at my heartstrings. While the two mages worked in perfect unison when casting spells, Lana apparently took it as a great indignity to have to follow her former classmate. It must have been

unbearable for a proud elf, especially one with unparalleled confidence in her spellcraft.

Sorry, Lana. Bear with me just this once. Also, my goddamn name is Souya, not Nutria!

“Lord Souya, I cannot apologize deeply enough.”

“Yeah, sorry, dude.”

The two more intuitive members of Freyja’s party offered their condolences. Lana, on the other hand, had grabbed on to my poncho and, in what I took as silent protest, was flapping it up and down.

“Evetta, can you please put my party and Lady Freyja’s down as a team?”

“Understood,” my counselor agreed, then wrote our names in a form kept in her binder. “Then you’ll be the last group of the day. If you try to skip the line or otherwise throw the order into disarray, I will crush you.” *Damn, she’s scary.*

There was no knowing exactly how strong Evetta was, so I took my proper place in line.

However.

At least three parties had already passed through the doors, but none had returned. Was this sentinel that much of a pushover? Or were those bands exceptionally talented? The second group seemed obviously much weaker than us, which I guess could be sort of reassuring.

“Hey, huddle up real quick.”

“Tee-hee-hee, no need. I’ll enchant away all our problems with a flick of my wrist.”

“Milady, shut your mouth, please.”

“Ugh!” Astonished by the disdain in Lazalisa’s voice, Freyja stumbled and grabbed on to Shuna. He looked a bit uncomfortable, though maybe it was because he was just a shy growing boy.

“Shuna, I don’t mind if you mess around with her as long as you toss her away in the end. So I forbid you from having anything serious with that woman!

Choose another girl if you must!”

“What the hell are you saying? Scumbag,” the redhead coolly jeered, snapping me back to reality. *Sorry. I thought I saw a parasite latching on to you, and my parental instincts kicked in.*

“Lord Souya, after we *reunite* inside, I would like to take the vanguard with Gaslark. Would this be all right with you?” Lazalisa, frustrated at the lack of progress in our discussion, took the initiative to move it along.

I appreciated the suggestion, but— “Yeah, it would be great if you two can stand at the forefront, but would you mind if I have Shuna follow close behind you?”

“Of course not. However, uncoordinated teamwork will only lead to chaos. I’d like to ask Lord Shuna to take the lead if and only if both Gaslark and I fall. Would you agree to this promise?”

“Shuna, you okay with that?”

“Yeah, got it.”

Shuna and Lazalisa had dueled it out once before, and Lazalisa had knocked him out cold with a single punch. Shuna was morally opposed to using his sword against women, so you could technically pin his loss on that. Still, he must’ve realized she was stronger than him anyway, because he accepted her terms without a fight.

“And, Lis, I want you by my side protecting Lady Freyja and Lana.”

“.....” Aaand no answer. I pinched both her cheeks. *A good squeeze is what you get for ignoring me.*

“What do we say?”

“Shurrrup, stahp.”

“What do we say?” Lightly, I pulled her cheeks up to force a smile.

She swatted my hands away. “I can’t be bothered.”

“Keep it up, and for the next expedition, you’ll get nothing but hardtack and dried potatoes.”

“Wai…… Understood.” At least our line of defense was secure.

“Yaya, what about me?”

“Éa, I want you bringing up the rear. Be ready to tackle anything unexpected. You’re free to shoot at will if the situation calls for it.”

“Sure. I want to see what she can do,” Éa agreed, holding up a bow unlike any other in this dimension. A so-called compound bow, it had pulleys attached to each limb to help retract the heavy, crossed cables. The lightweight, carbon-fiber weapon’s mechanisms also made it a lot easier to keep the bowstring drawn. We’d made it to replace the previous traditional elven compound bow, which I’d had Agaccion destroy before the whole incident with the Dark Lord, and while it should have required quite a bit of adjusting, my little archer sister had already mastered it with ease. With it, her arrows carried more destructive power than ever before at a lower cost in terms of energy output. The only drawbacks were that it was harder to maintain and that the increased number of parts diminished its durability.

“Oh my, what an extraordinary bow you have there.” Lazalisa’s discerning eyes drank in the weapon.

“Heh-heh-heh ♪, isn’t it, though? My brother and Yukikaze made it for me. There’s only one in the whole world like it, and it’s mine!”

A few others in line turned to check the bow out, too. Ah, I guess another downside was it drew too much attention. Not many adventurers carried bows themselves, but everyone kept an eye out for unusual weapons. I had considered using some sort of cover to disguise it but abandoned the idea once Éa complained it made rapid, continuous fire impossible.

“Darling, what about me?”

“Uhhh, yeah. I’ll make you something eventually.” Looked like the bow could also make the elder elven sister jealous, too!

Still— “Lord Souya, have you noticed?”

“I have indeed.” I nodded in reply to Lazalisa’s question. Something was definitely off. Not a single party had come back from those doors. I’d watched them swing open several times already, but all I’d seen were long corridors

stretching out past their thresholds. What was going on? I refused to believe every party had managed to pass the test with flying colors. No gatekeeper could be that easy to defeat. Maybe there was a separate exit that took you back to the first floor even if you failed? Or maybe the Guild employees escorted you out? That would be weird in and of itself. Why would they go to that trouble?

Before I knew it, we were next. Should we back out this time and come back again with a more solid strategy?

“Nutria, you’re getting cold feet, aren’t you?”

“Huh? I, um.....yes.” Freyja was the last person I’d have expected to see through my poker face.

“Then rest assured, for you walk with yours truly, a veritable Champion of Light, to illuminate the way, not to mention Lalananna, who is certainly as equally talented. With both of us on your side, there’s no way we’ll lose.”

The two were undoubtedly exceptional mages, but you’d need more than that to survive in this dungeon. We’d learned that the hard way once.

“Lord Souya, in this matter alone, I agree with Lady Freyja. Even in the worst possible scenario, I shall carry you all and run to safety. I’ve been through more than my fair share of milady’s reckless scuffles and can assure you I have great confidence in my ability to flee.”

After that much support from the ladies in the group, I couldn’t give in to fear and still call myself a man. Adventurers constantly battled the unknown. I’d lost sight of that fact, but only those with the courage to stand in the face of uncertainty could claim that title.

“I appreciate that, Lazalisa.....but I do need you to give Agaccion back.”

“Must I?”

“You must.” The reptilian maid had hidden my sword under her skirt ever so surreptitiously. “Return,” I commanded the enchanted blade, which slipped out of her hand and back into my sheath. Honestly, I didn’t worry much about it getting stolen; it’d come back as soon as I called it.

“You may proceed, Souya; each party goes through a separate door. Follow these paths, and they will converge again shortly.”

Our turn had come. Evetta opened the doors for us; my party stepped through the right, and Freyja’s through the left. We made our way down the long corridors, unable to see what came ahead, walking at what felt like abreast to Freyja and her companions. In front, Shuna led our party, Lis after him, then me, Lana, and Éa.

“Yukikaze, activate your pulse detector and run a scan. Oh, Éa, get ready for your ears to ring.”

“Okaaay,” Éa chirped, then put on her earplugs. With their large ears, I’d thought all elves had enhanced auditory capabilities, but many like Lana couldn’t hear much more than a heim.

“Affirmative, pulse scan activating. Countdown to five, four, three, two, one.”

Hanging at my side, the AI bot disguised as a lantern began to emit a low sonar beam to explore the area with echolocation. Soon after, a map appeared on my glasses’ display screen; it showed that the tunnel led straight to a large space with several smaller rooms branching off.

This sonar mapping came in handy, but the rays it sent out unfortunately also attracted enemies. Plus, it heavily drained the mini kettle’s battery. If I relied on it too much, the kettle’s artificial aqueous cerebrum would enter sleep mode and cease all operational support functions like organism detection or party management. Finding that optimal moment to bust it out was never easy. It was just my luck that we’d lost the portable spare batteries, but you couldn’t expect everything to go as planned.

“No enemies detected within a thirty-meter radius.”

“Hmm?” That had to include the large opening up ahead. Screw it, I couldn’t afford to waste time and hesitate. I had to be ready to defeat whatever came our way, to just bite that bullet. Adventurers didn’t have the luxury of planning things out; we did everything we could in the moment. Swayed by a wave of fear, I’d forgotten this fundamental truth.

Farther down in the darkness, I spotted a door. It didn’t matter what awaited

us on the other side; we'd crush any obstacle just the same. We got to the entrance. Shuna laid his hand on it but turned to me before opening it. One last time, I surveyed each of my party members, making sure we were all ready. I nodded, and Shuna pushed the door open.

Before us rose a small mound of rusted armor piled on crumbling weapons. A white, red-eyed creature stood atop the crest. Another door next to us opened; Freyja's party had arrived.

““Huh?”” All of us stood there, stupefied. Everyone knew those creatures had wings in this dimension, but there were none on this one—it was just a normal rabbit. For what it was worth, Lazalisa and Gaslark went to stand on the front line as planned.

“Ummm.”

The situation had left even Freyja at a loss for words. Honestly, I had no idea what to do about this rodent, either. Following Éa's lead, I nocked an arrow, but man, I really didn't like the thought of shooting the little guy. *What should I do? I bet he just wandered in here accidentally; he couldn't possibly be hostile.*

“Milady, tonight, we dine on braised rabbit.”

Lazalisa, in tandem with Gaslark, took a step closer to the hare when—it vanished into thin air. The next second, both vanguards' heads went flying. It all happened so fast my brain couldn't keep up.

“Whaaa—?” I heard myself sputter idiotically. In that same instant, a terrifying shiver ran down my spine.

“Shuna!” was all I managed to scream. Before my order to retreat could reach him, the rabbit decapitated my redheaded friend. I saw his head soar through the air and felt desperation and virulent anger boil within me. Dodging both my arrow and Éa's, the creature then made for Freyja, who continued calmly chanting her spell until the very moment her body was relieved of its crown. Fresh blood soaked her scarlet dress, staining it an even darker shade of red. In the span of mere seconds, we'd lost four people forever.



The rabbit slipped past Lis's shield and rushed toward my sister. A silent wail escaped my throat. I commanded my enchanted sword into action, but it was all too late. I saw blood erupt like a geyser but could not force myself to look directly at the carnage. My brain would implode.

Agaccion and Lis, wielding her sword, charged at the rabbit, but all too quickly, the enchanted blade was crushed to pieces, and Lis's head joined the rest on the floor. Yukikaze said something. I caught none of it. Something far more pressing had to come first.

Sacrificing my body, I drew my woodsman's hatchet and stood between the murderous hare and my wife. There was no try—just do or do not. Fully aware it was futile, I hacked at the beast in my last Hail Mary. But it was all in vain. The ax didn't even scratch the thing.

Behind me, I heard something *plop* to the floor. Then Lana's head rolled through my legs. Her sad, lifeless eyes met mine.

"Ah." The flood of emotions within me burst forth. I knew it was too late. *But I swear you're going down, you bastard.*

Glaring straight at those red eyes, I began to chant my spell to destroy all—but then something clamped over my mouth and slammed me down to the ground. A pungent smell hit my nose; the room spun. I glimpsed silvery hair and a pair of horns; Evetta had me pinned to the floor with a cloth over my mouth. Shuna, Éa, Lazalisa, and Gaslark were all in similar positions, but it took three people to subdue Freyja's frantic delirium. Only Lis and Lana remained standing, unaffected.

I looked each person in the face and saw their heads—all very much still attached to their necks. That's when I realized the ones constraining us were Guild employees. *Why are they here? What the heck is going on?*

"This is the last group for today. Let's move," a young, winged boy ordered the staff, with the rabbit of nightmares pinned under his arm.

Meekly, we followed the Guild employees, who supported us and carried those who couldn't walk into a dank, mossy stone room where several chairs had been prepared. We could hear shrieks and furious screams from men and

women in the next room, most likely a party that had gone in ahead of us.

“Anyone sustain mental or physical injuries?” The young boy, also known as the Guildmaster of the Adventurers Guild, looked around at each of us. I felt nauseated. It must’ve shown, because Evetta rubbed my back soothingly. Freyja was vomiting her guts out into the leather pouch her counselor had given her.

“Ugh,” I heaved but somehow managed to hold it down.

“First, I want you all to take a good, hard look at the ghastly state of your leaders,” the Guildmaster instructed, and everyone turned their attention to the extremely unflattering situation Freyja and I found ourselves in. Shuna and Éa seemed equally as distraught; Lazalisa’s face was emotionless, but her body trembled slightly. Gaslark’s helmet hid his face. Only Lana and Lis appeared completely unperturbed.

“The sight of your deaths has reduced them to this. As for you, leaders, the faces gazing at you now are how your party members will look if you two should die.” *Huh? What does that mean?* “Cute, isn’t she? This rabbit. She’s one of a kind, a rare, wingless species, and is at least five hundred years old. She raised hell for us back in the old days, causing countless casualties from friendly fire, though now we keep her at the Guild and put her to work.”

“Guildmaster, are you saying she’s the gatekeeper for the fourteenth floor?” Did we fail the test? Would we have to start all over from the tenth level again?

“Yes, but then again, technically no. The real test here were the bonds between you guys,” he replied. “Souya, what did you see?”

Memories of that devastation flashed through my mind, images destined to continue haunting my dreams. “I saw everyone here except for me die.”

“And you, Freyja?”

“I saw the same thi— *Bleeeeeeeegh.*” Freyja hurled once more.

“Though this species possesses no traditional battle prowess to speak of, it compensates for this deficiency with the ability to create Fatal Illusions. These hallucinations show the target visions of the people they hold dear, those they strive to protect, perishing before their very eyes. The reason we require everyone to attempt this trial in parties of two or more is to distinguish how

you perceive the deaths in each group, though apparently this did not affect either of you two. You've proven your mettle as adventurers. However, as leaders, you have failed spectacularly," the winged boy declared, though he wasn't telling me anything new. I'd known from the beginning that I had no business leading anybody.

"My next message, I address to the rest of you: Your leaders do not value their own lives. This kind of person is always the first to die. I applaud their noble sense of responsibility, but do not forget: If a leader dies, they condemn the rest of their party to that same fate. Complete annihilation will shortly follow. And you two unshaken souls, you understand, don't you?" He turned to Lis and Lana. ".....Exactly." A dark smile crept over the Guildmaster's face. Lis, I could understand; she was not the real Bel. But then why Lana.....?

"I've built up a resistance to that type of technique," Lana explained when she caught my gaze.

Wagging his finger, the Guildmaster again commanded our attention. "I will say this only once more: The sentinel guarding this floor is the thread that ties you all together. Furthermore, the senseless death you witnessed today is but a taste of the loss you will surely encounter should you continue your adventures."

My mind recalled unforgettable memories of Arvin's death, unearthing the feelings of loss and absolute fury from that time.

"This is what it means to walk the path of an adventurer. Reflect carefully on what I have told you and discuss it thoroughly among yourselves. Now, look upon the faces of your comrades once again and give serious consideration as to whether you can safely trust them with your lives. That question is the trial you must pass to proceed to the next floor."

With that, the head of the Adventurers Guild nodded, dismissing us. Our counselors accompanied us out of the room and down the stairs, leaving the fourteenth floor. We registered ourselves at the portal located immediately upon arrival on level fifteen and successfully returned to the first floor.

Bonds, huh?

In the wrong circumstances, that could be the most difficult thing to

overcome. Some parties probably called it quits then and there. Entrusting your life to someone else was nowhere near as simple as it sounded, as some great songs liked to make it seem. This was where parties built on shared interests or formed on falsehoods met the end of the road. If you wanted to keep moving forward, every member of a party would have to drop all pretense and come clean.

.....*Guess it's time.*



My wounds stung slightly as green, herbal bathwater seeped into them. Soaking in a tub of lukewarm water in the second floor–dungeon public baths, I tried to organize my thoughts. I mulled over my next steps, our future explorations, but the same phrase played over and over again in my mind: *Life is not all about adventuring.*

I had other ways of supporting myself that did not require exploring the dungeon. If this country didn't permit that, I could always take my wife and my sister and go somewhere else. I couldn't say for sure whether we'd be able to survive, but for them, I would make the impossible happen. That at least, I was absolutely certain. Through my merfolk and merchant connections, I could arrange passage for us on a ship to another continent where we'd live happily ever after in peace and quiet. It was definitely an option.

However, assuming we did decide to keep delving further into the dungeon in Remlia, I had to confirm something no matter what, a question I'd never been able to ask out of consideration for her feelings. After this heinous experience, though, I'd finally made up my mind. I had to know. If she refused, worst-case scenario, I'd...

"Worst case, I'd what? Ugh, I'm such a dumbass." I'd cross that bridge after I heard what she had to say.

"Yaya, do you mind?"

"Hmm?"

I heard my sister's voice, the *swish* as the curtain slid open, and the pattering

of feet—her naked body slipped into the tub.

“Heh-heh.”

“Wait, hang o—” While spacious for private use, the tub felt crowded with two people. Éa’s hands grazed my more sensitive regions. She’d sat on my lap many times, but I’d never felt this level of skin-to-skin contact with her. She looked adorable with her hair tied up and out of her face for once. *Wait, that’s not what I mean. Well, it is, but this isn’t the time for that.*

“Éa, what the hell are you—?” *Ah, shit.* The words caught in my throat midsentence. She was trembling. “Did the test get to you?”

“Yeah, a little.”

I’d failed again because I was thinking about no one else but myself this time. Unsure what to do with herself, Éa fidgeted awkwardly.

“May I?” I asked, then gingerly placed my hand on her head and guided her to rest over my heart. “They say listening to a heartbeat calms you down.” I’d done this before, reassured someone this way in the past, but I couldn’t remember who for the life of me.

“Yaya, your heart beats so fast.” *Yeah, well, I am tangled up with my naked elven sister, you know. If anything, my poor heart’s going into overdrive trying to keep blood from flowing down there.*

“You think? Personally, I—”

“Hush. I can’t hear.”

I shut up. We stretched out, practically lying down, our legs intertwined. After a moment’s hesitation, I wrapped my arms around her quaking shoulders and rested my chin on her head. She felt warmer than the hot water.

My mental state at that moment could be summed up in a single word: *enlightened*. No dirty thoughts could be found anywhere in my infinitely pure heart. In other words, this was in no way, shape, or form illegal. Sure, I was locked in a naked embrace with my sister, but internally, I was right up there with Buddha. Nothing inappropriate to see here. Plus, this was my wife’s sister, okay?! Nothing wrong with that. If anything, the fact that she was my sister-in-

law made it totally fine.

.....It's fine!

Yeah, who am I kidding? Buddha himself would probably drop-kick me to hell. Forget the other gods—they'd probably get their canes out.

So on went my horny—I mean, anguished—thoughts as I counted the lines on the ceiling. As a famous philosopher once said, “A single moment with your hand upon a stove can feel like an entire hour, but an hour lying naked with a beautiful elf flies by in a minute.” The next thing I knew, our bath had turned cold. Pulling on a string hanging next to the tub, I had fresh, hot water pour in through the pipe near my feet. Excess bathwater flowed over the lip of the tub and drained through grates along the floor into the sewers.

“Hey, Yaya, look.” Shifting her position, Éa steadied herself on my shoulder with one hand on the edge of the tub to show me her abdomen. Strands of hair from her loose ponytail cascaded over her chest. Immediately, I turned away, then squinted sideways at her. “My scar’s almost completely faded.”

“Ohhh, is that where it was? That’s great, real great.” She meant the scar from her bullet wound. Her post-op care had worked wonders, and now only a faint line remained.

“Hee-hee,” she giggled, then hugged me, slinking both arms around my neck and setting her chin on my shoulder, once again closing the space between us. I felt two firm tips press against my chest. There was no way I could stay calm like this. Afraid my body would speak for me if I didn’t start talking, I said, “Hey, Éa, were you scared when you first explored the dungeon?”

“Hmm, not really. I used to hunt for a living before I moved to the Heuress Forest, mostly wild boar. They live east of here in the Beastfolk Woods, and they’re superstrong, always hungry, ferocious, and huuuge. I’m pretty sure they’re like an ancestor to dungeon boars. People died on hunts all the time, but...” She trailed off. “...Today was the first time I ever saw someone put their life on the line to save me and then die—even if it was just an illusion.” Slight tremors shook her body once more.

Then she continued speaking. “I feel like I’ve done nothing but rely on other people to save me since I became an adventurer. It’s kind of humiliating. We all

used to go out together on the hunt, but I'd never had anyone protect me like that."

"Really? Yeah, sometimes it works out that way. But you know, you've saved me before—and everyone else in the party, too, for that matter. Who knows how many monsters would've caught us off guard and killed us if you hadn't sensed they were coming?"

"That's true. Yeah, you're right. I guess when you're an adventurer, you share those jobs and keep going until too many people die and the party can't work anymore."

".....Yeah." That was our work in a nutshell. You risked your life, fought, then fell into eternal darkness. It wasn't a career anybody sane would pursue. You had to convince yourself that your dreams and sense of adventure depended on it. For someone who had no dreams, it was pure hell.

"You know, I watched that rabbit kill everyone one by one, but when I saw you die, I just collapsed. Nothing, *nothing* mattered anymore," she whispered grimly. ".....I don't know what kind of adventures we'll have from here on out, but you can't ever die, Yaya. If you do.....you know what'll happen, right?" She stared deep into my soul with her piercing crystal-blue eyes. Our foreheads touched. I could feel her breath on mine and the warmth of her lips without touching them.

"As you wish."

"Nope, not good enough."

"I'm not gonna die. I mean, I might eventually from old age or if I get sick or something, but I'll do my best to live as long as a heim can."

"Well, I suppose that will have to do." She kissed my cheek. "By the way, Yaya." Puzzled, my elven sister took *me* into her hands. "What's this?"



Once bathed and refreshed, our party gathered at the government-run pub. Lana, Shuna, and Lis had already begun eating by the time Éa and I arrived. Though only a little past midday, patrons, including parties we'd seen in the

dungeon, filled the bar's tables. Various side dishes and several empty bottles of ale littered the round table where my friends sat.

"Shuna, what's with these?" I asked after taking my seat, gesturing toward the drained bottles. He shifted his gaze to Lana, who at that very moment had her lips pressed directly against yet another one, gulping down its contents like water at three times her normal pace. Even for someone often called the spirit of liquor incarnate, that speed of drinking was unsustainable.

Éa helped herself to whatever was at the table. I followed suit, biting into the thick slices of bacon that'd grown on me and some sour beans. Nothing tasted bad on an empty stomach.

In a jarring break from the norm, nobody said a word as they ate or drank, which they were doing quicker than usual. I saw the same thing happening at other tables, or rather, tables full of parties that had just gone through that same harrowing experience. Behind me, I could hear a woman sobbing and a man soothing her. Someone broke down, bawling hysterically.

And just like that, my appetite disappeared. Another round of ill-timed dishes arrived at the table. Pale with nausea, I internally repeated my "waste not, want not" mantra and forced myself to eat every last bite of the not-that-fluffy fluffy bread and extra-large omelet I'd ordered. The taste didn't even register. I drained my tea.

"So." Lana and Lis sat there stone-faced, and my sister seemed her usual self, but Shuna looked a little ashen, his pain a living proof of my ineptitude as a leader. Times like these, I wished with all my heart we could turn to older members like Zenobia or Arvin. I missed them both like crazy. "Lis, is Bel listening?"

"....." I glared at her unresponsiveness. "Yes."

"As your leader, I need to ask you all something." They focused their gazes on me. "If we continue our expeditions, do you have the resolve to protect every one of your fellow party members? Would you throw down your own life to do it? Could you abandon someone to certain death to protect the others? Could you sacrifice one of us to save as many of your party members as possible?"

The group fell silent. Shuna spoke up first, as expected. "You're damn right I

am. I swear it on my master's blade."

Next, Éa. "Of course."

Following up, Bel promised in her own words: "You can count on me, Sou. I'll make sure Lis does, too."

"I also—," Lana began, but I cut her off.

"Lana, I need to ask you something else."

"Huh?" Lana looked puzzled; the question must've thrown her off.

"I imagine it must be difficult for you to talk about this, but our experience today made me realize it's time to bite the bullet. No matter what happens, I promise I will do everything in my power to protect you and guarantee the rest of the party feels exactly the same. So..."

That perverted prince's words ran through my mind: *"You're a wretch who burned her own people to death. How much lower could you sink?"*

"I'd like you to tell us about the night you burned down your home forest, killing your people along with it."

The color in Lana's eyes flickered. For a second, it was as if I was looking at a completely different person. I explained the situation to Bel and Shuna, who were both clearly bewildered and disturbed.

"A year ago, a war broke out between Remlian heims and the elves of the Heuress Forest. It's the reason why Lana and Éa became adventurers in the first place. Neither side was completely in the wrong or in the right."

If you summarized what both parties had to say, the impetus for the war came down to differences in how they measured land. However, that simple explanation quickly became an entangled mess with claims of misrepresentations in the original documents of how the elves planned to grab the money and run, of how the heims plotted to seize the land by force, and other takes on the case.

Everyone wants to think they are right and that their actions are justified and live with that belief. Because it's far too miserable to live with the acknowledgment that folly or madness drove your decisions.

The Kingdom of Remlia had converted the previously forested areas Lana had razed to the ground for agricultural use. Well, technically speaking, serfs from Remlia's allied nation Ellusion did all the farming. Not all the foodstuffs produced here stayed in the kingdom; much of it was shipped to the Central Continent's papal state.

This part stood out to me. Personally, I wanted to believe my wife had been used as a political pawn. If that's what she said happened, I'd take that conviction to my grave, no matter what anyone else claimed.

"During that war, Lana burned part of the Heuress Forest down, along with her own people who remained trapped inside. That's why other elves carry a grudge against her. I chose at my own discretion to hide this from you. I'm sorry."

I should've informed them at the very beginning when we decided to form a party. But what was I supposed to say? *Hey, guys, I'd like you to meet my wife, an elf who murdered her people and burned her home to the ground?* Even as a joke, it wouldn't be funny.

Plus, all I knew was hearsay. Every story had filtered through the prejudices and motives of the person telling it before it reached me. I could possibly get some answers if I interrogated *those directly involved in the war*, but I'd have to be ready to flee the kingdom before I tried.

"Lana, I know this must be hard. But if we keep going without addressing this now, I guarantee you it'll drive a wedge between us and deal our party a fatal blow. When the going gets tough, people will unconsciously hesitate to reach out a hand or race to save you."

Lana stood up and tried to leave, but I grabbed her hand.

"I want to hear what happened from you. Tell me what you believe to be true, your reasons, anything you have to say in your defense. I don't care how it comes out. Nobody here would ever turn their backs on you."

"Unhand me. A mere adventurer has no business delving into this. Stay in your place, or your curiosity will put you in grave danger."

"I promise I will fully believe and accept anything you say, no matter how

absurd it may sound. I'll make sure everyone else does, too."

".....!" The agony on her face broke my heart.

"Whatever you tell us now is far more trustworthy than any account I can research or share."

This was full-on blackmail, extortion aimed at her and at myself for turning a blind eye for so long. Time would never heal this gaping wound. We needed to take drastic measures if we ever wanted to continue our adventures, keep exploring the dungeon—remain a family.

Lana clearly wavered—then slapped my hand away and hurried out of the bar.

"Lala!" Éa ran after her sister.

".....Sorry," I apologized to the two remaining members, Shuna and Bel. Both clearly had no idea what to do.

I'd screwed up big-time. Lifting the same hand Lana had rejected, I slapped myself hard across the cheek.



[83RD DAY]

After parting with Shuna and Bel, I called Machina and received her updated report. Lana and Éa had returned to camp, gotten into a heated argument, then gone to sleep in separate tents. Next, I got in touch with Lanceil back at camp and arranged to meet up in town late that night on the second floor of the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group's headquarters. While waiting for the hours to pass, I helped out around the shop.

I scanned through volumes upon volumes of account books, but no matter how many times I compared their figures with Machina's own tallies, I still found discrepancies between the data Remlia reported to Ellusion regarding the amount of food consumed in the kingdom and the reality of the situation. Still, all was in order according to the marquis stationed here, and as long as both countries were satisfied, the merchants tacitly understood it behooved them to

stay out of it. Not even a divine cat would have enough lives to survive sticking their neck into a sensitive political issue like this.

It didn't stop with food production, though. A quick peek into Remlia's defenses and trade was all I needed to predict what the country's future held. Although an alliance existed between Ellusion, the largest heim-run country on the Central Continent, and Remlia, a small kingdom on the Right Continent, the two nations did not have equal standing in the accord. Cloaked behind the guise of military assistance and food production, Ellusion was fully extorting this country. Items stolen as part of that shakedown included precious technologies, weapons, and resources drawn from the dungeon. According to the dark rumors that milled about, it also included valuable human talent, people who were basically kidnapped and shipped off to the Central Continent.

We couldn't discount the possibility that Ellusion had somehow instigated the malady that had recently afflicted King Remlia, either. Unchecked, that illness could have led to his untimely demise and his moronic son inheriting the throne. Once that dolt of a prince took power, no one would be surprised to see a revolution break out—a rebellion that would be an allied nation's responsibility to quell. Then when that kindly nation stationed its troops in the heart of Remlia, the kingdom's days would be numbered.

"Adventurers are nothing if not free" was the mantra behind every Remlian flag, but what form that freedom would take if war broke out was anyone's guess. One thing I could say for certain: Unless the country raised a new flag, whether it stood for justice or revenge, the citizens would never unite. Absolutely no one would rise to the moment.

Nevertheless, this murky state of affairs was still considered peaceful for the Other Dimension. No blood was currently being shed. Remlia still had plenty of time on its side and had already started taking precautions. Meanwhile, across the ocean in Ellusion, the sun rose and fell over a country so far down the road to hell that its paranoid leaders sold out their own family members at the slightest suspicion, hung their citizens, and pitted themselves against one another for the scraps of authority left unclaimed by the vacant papal throne. Resentment seethed in every corner, fueled by all this chaos and coupled with the plague of tainted bloodlines and beasts.

The Left Continent was even further away from anything resembling peace. My research revealed that among the various monarchies there, one had put the Black Elves in charge of its armed forces, while the other firmly backed Ellusion. Their divide split the continent perfectly in half and let war ravage the land.

The one thing I learned from this whole mess: It would be pointless for me to lose any sleep over the troubles of this world. I was nothing but a regular Japanese guy, an Otherworlder, a lone adventurer. It just so happened I also had the ability to take on those repugnant beasts, but other than that, I was a normal human. That one power didn't necessarily guarantee I had what it took to defeat any other enemy. If possible, I'd never use Wild Hunt again, except perhaps if another knight of St. Lillideas stood in my way. I could only pray that would never happen again.

I'd fought fiercely back then, wanting so badly to defend my friend's honor, and in the end, I came out with a new ability—one incapable of protecting anyone. Sparked and fueled by a fatal curse, that ability allowed me to slay heroes. But it would also bring about certain death to anyone around me. This power could save no one. Only after those I should have protected were gone, after I alone remained on the battlefield, could I ever wield this most impotent power. Truly, the works of the gods were steeped in irony.

I heard a knock on the door. "Come in," I replied, and a silver-haired beastmaid poked her head in the room. The woman, a knight by profession, was a cold beauty—as long as she kept quiet. Dignified and commanding, she always kept her features in check for shame of displaying any emotions.

The day she moved in with us, she had made one promise.

"I vow to never join your party as an adventurer. That position belongs to your wife, and I would never deign to challenge or diminish that honor. Of this, there can be no mistake. My place is here, protecting your household. In essence, I shall be your guard dog, a duty to which I will devote myself entirely. I shall also help with your cleaning, laundry, cooking, and c.....carnal needs and will not rest until I have mastered each task. Please put me to whatever use that would most assist you."

And to that promise, she'd stayed true, supporting us so earnestly I felt guilty letting her do it all. She had gotten off to a pretty rough start but had since worked her way up to passing grades in each category, the quick learner's hardworking spirit paying off almost immediately.

"Ready to head out, Lanceil?"

"Yes, sire."

Gathering up my belongings, I left the merchant's shop. Lanceil took half the load off my hands. The two of us walked through the night city, a faint glow illuminating the streets as the town descended into chaos with the setting of the sun. Adventurers became drunk on wine and women, their heads and bodies burning in the heat of the moment. The scents of sex and death permeated the vivacious nighttime air. At first, I'd walked these streets disgusted at the debauchery; now that I understood the devils that drove people to this revelry, I had a harder time dismissing their choices.

Work as an adventurer meant constantly risking your life. When you made it through alive, you wanted nothing more than to share that joy with your comrades, raving about your good fortune, raising toasts in honor of your fallen friends, ridiculing the cowardice of those adventurers who turned tail, and rhapsodizing over boundless dreams. You'd find no one as gloomy and grim as me in their midst.

A brawl in the streets forced us to stop. A beastmaid and a muscular male heim were in an all-out fistfight. Judging by gender alone did not make for accurate predictions in this world. As if to prove my point, the beastmaid slugged the guy with such force it sent him spinning through the air. Onlookers erupted into cheers, and the victor gave her admirers a generous show. Coins went flying. Just a normal, everyday scene here.

"Lanceil, are you into this kind of thing?"

"Hmm?" The silver-haired beastmaid turned to me, startled.

"I mean, it's written all over your face." Her cheeks had flushed with excitement as she watched the duel.

"No, I—" She touched her cheek. "I do apologize, it must have stirred

something in me. Clearly, I have yet to completely master my emotions. I shall have to redouble my efforts.”

The crowd broke up, clearing the way, and the two of us resumed our walk.

“Have you always lived in Remlia?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s the only nation I have known since birth.”

“Ever thought about visiting another continent?”

“Another continent.....?” I wanted to hear her thoughts ahead of time, just in case the shit ever hit the fan. I already knew what she would say, but it was only fair to ask. “I cannot swim. The ocean and ships terrify me. To my core.”

“Pfft!”

“Souya! This is no laughing matter!”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at that adorable answer. “All right, then I’ll teach you how. If Ghatt doesn’t mind, we can practice in the river by camp.”

“Wha—? Souya, you know how to swim?!” She was downright flabbergasted.

“I mean, yeah. Nothing special, though.”

“Were you a fisherman back in your home country? Or is your ability by grace of an aquatic god?”

“No, I’ve never worked such jobs. I learned how at school when I was little.” In swimming class, mostly.

“What a wonderful education you must have had.”

“Who can say?” Not me. Maybe all the time I’d spent in this dimension had gotten to me, but I was starting to lose my sense of judgment when it came to the modern world.

“Well, I would absolutely love to learn how to swim. Please, please do teach me!”

“You got it.”

She drew close—very, very close. Her chest pushed up against my arm.

“But yes. I would be lying if I told you I’d never dreamed of seeing what lies

beyond Remlia's borders. When I was a child, my mother used to tell me stories about brave, dauntless royals, and I once dreamed I galloped across a snow-covered field after a dragon. Nevertheless, I cannot very well leave my country. Not now."

"Yeah, I get that." *Guess it's hard for this daddy's girl to leave his side.*

I...didn't know what to feel. My mind refused to settle. What was the best move here? Could the dreams Lanceil had even be an option? Before I could form an answer, Lanceil slid her arm through mine, and my racing thoughts crashed to a halt. I said nothing; it would be tactless to peel her off here. Honestly, if I did speak up, I'd want to thank her.

Just as it was with Éa, time spent feeling this beastmaid's warmth flew by in an instant. We'd been strolling along at a leisurely pace, but already, the castle appeared before us. Lanceil led me through to the back entrance. We greeted the guards as we passed, walked down a few halls, then arrived at the kitchen door.

I knocked, then waited to hear a reply. "Pardon me for intruding on you at such a late hour, King Remlia."

"It is no intrusion. I had been meaning to speak to you myself."

We entered the room, and I bowed to the king. Lanceil followed suit but stayed behind and stood at attention near the door. After receiving the king's permission, I took a seat across from him at the island counter. "King Remlia, allow me to present some Champion's Tea, which, though recently has been recalled, is selling for exorbitant sums on the black market. I hope it is to your liking," I said, then placed a bag of the luxury-brand tea on the worktop. Always better to butter the other person up first.

"Ah, yes, news of that Gastolfo lass's entrepreneurship reached me not long ago. I'd also heard she was having difficulty enlisting partners, but she teamed up with you, did she?"

"Only as part of a temporary arrangement. We have not combined our parties, but I have set her up with some outside work."

"Trying though she may be, her skill as a mage cannot be denied. She would

make a fine addition to your party.”

“My wife would beg to differ, Your Majesty.”

“The two studied at Hoense together, as I recall. Do they not get on well?”

“Not at all. Or I should say, Lana one-sidedly detests Lady Freyja.” And yet, Freyja thought the world of Lana. Life as such an incredibly powerful mage must have been a lonely existence, so meeting a peer of equal level would endear you to them. Lana, too, for all her protestations, might not actually hate Freyja in her heart of hearts.

“A pity. But we have other matters to discuss. Souya, they tell me you reached the fifteenth floor.”

“Indeed. It’s the reason I requested this audience.”

“And it touches on the very issue I mean to broach with you.” I let the king go first. “It concerns Medîm,” he revealed, bringing up a name I hadn’t expected to hear. Now that he mentioned it, though, I didn’t see Pops around at the moment. “Do you know how deep he has ventured in the dungeon?”

“Yes, he told me he’d reached the twentieth floor.”

“And do you not find it odd that the man hailed as the ‘father of adventurers’ has delved no further than the twentieth level?”

Definitely odd, for sure. But according to the man himself: “Pops said adventurers who hid their embarrassment at receiving his help gave him the title, that he himself was nothing exceptional.”

“If that man is not remarkable, then every adventurer in Remlia, myself included, is nothing but a worm digging through the dirt,” the regent spat. “He was merely being modest; he’s always like that. Cursed with a perfectionist disposition, he has long nursed a wound left by a single instance of failure. It has tormented him all these many years, the demon lurking on the nineteenth floor.” For a moment, he fell silent. “.....It’s already been thirty-three years.”

King Remlia spoke with a heavy heart. “Souya, the story I am about to tell concerns you as well now that you have taken a Heuress elf as your wife. As I believe I’ve told you once or twice, Laualliuna’s father, Mellum Raua Heuress,

and I explored the dungeon together. He; his younger sister, Alma; Lanceil's mother, Várceina; and Medîm—such was my first-ever party. Medîm, you see, was a mercenary the whims of the gods drifted over to the Right Continent, and though a remarkable swordsman and expert at keeping himself alive, he was at the time an arrogant, self-assured twat. Nowhere did that prove truer than when it came to Mellum. Those two were constantly at each other's throats, unsheathing their blades at the slightest provocation. I assure you their mutual hatred would have ended in murder had Alma and Várceina not stepped in. They caused me quite a bit of trouble as well."

Pops went through a cocky phase like Shuna? I can't even picture it.

"In those days, the Adventurers Guild had far less assistance to offer than it does now, making dungeon explorations a severe, grueling endeavor. Though, perhaps because we faced such daunting crucibles, all animus and envy hardened into unwavering trust in one another. That was what it meant to be an adventurer then. You risked your life, entrusted your survival to your party members, and, once you'd all proven yourselves up to the task, swallowed your pride, and respected the strength your fellow members commanded.

"Our party was the first out of our peers to show real promise, and with that came outside pressures. Our unusually diverse team, a rare mix of an elf, a beastmaid, and two heims, did not go unnoticed. For better or worse, the attention we drew pushed us to form strong bonds, indelible even—or so I'd thought *until Alma disappeared*. We lost her on the nineteenth floor as we traversed it, vanishing without warning.

"We searched for her. Oh, how we searched, as if *our* very lives depended on it. But in the end, she was never seen again. And that sealed the demise of my first party. Mellum abandoned the adventuring life, returning to his forest, and I found new companions with whom I continued my explorations, but Medîm never ceased looking for Alma. To this day, he has not stopped."

"To this day"?

"I believe he began looking after initiates to save others from a similar fate. Souya, it is not for me to fathom the kind of life you will make for yourself in this line of work. However, no matter what you choose, do not go down the

path of obsession only to become prisoner to that which you seek, like Medîm. In life, we must at times have the courage to carry on after great loss, to take up the mantle and carry forward with us the hopes and dreams of those who have perished. It is too terrible a fate for an adventurer to be captured by such demons, frozen in time and place. That truth is what plagues the man we call the father of adventurers, and this is my advice to you as the king of the adventurers.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I sincerely appreciate your concern.” It was tough to hear, especially as someone who was seriously considering hanging up his adventurer’s gear for good.

Still, a vanished elf—and a Heuress descendant at that. I’ve got a terrible feeling about this. And, as luck would have it, a sneaking suspicion I might have an idea as to what’s going on.

“Ah, forgive me. The older I get, the longer I blather on, though I don’t think I’m quite as long-winded as you whenever it comes to the subject of food.”

“Right, my apologies.” *He didn’t even try to soften that punch to the gut.*

“So, Souya, my lad. You wished to see me for something?”

“Yes.” I took a deep breath. Unless I choose my words carefully, I could trespass into the dark underbelly of the kingdom. I had accepted that risk, but there was no telling what I might find.

“Today I asked my wife—in front of our party—about the incident where she reduced the Heuress Forest to ashes.”

“Ahhh.” A shadow darkened the king’s face.

“I did it looking ahead to the future, wanting to get anything that might cause discord between us out into the open.”

“And did the princess answer you?”

“She fled.”

“Yes, I imagined as much.” The sovereign looked deeply troubled, like a man who knew exactly what demons haunted Lana. But would he tell me, too?

“Souya, I must first ask, do you come to me now as an adventurer? Or as the

husband to your elven wife?”

“.....” It was a tricky question. “As an adventurer.” Which is exactly why I responded immediately. No amount of consideration would produce a clear answer, so better to save time by making a split-second decision—a rather adventurer-esque move, if I do say so myself.

“If so, I cannot give you the answer you seek. Tenderfoot adventurers have no business meddling in those affairs.”

“Then what level of accomplishment must I achieve before you’ll agree to tell me?”

“At the very least, you should reach the thirtieth.....no, twentieth floor for your party. And you must satisfy one condition.”

“Condition?”

“You must make it to the twentieth level without losing either of the Heuress daughters. Do this, and I will tell you everything.” Without losing Lana or Éa? That shouldn’t even be a question.

Ohhh, I get it. The king must be projecting the loss of his friend Alma onto the girls. Perhaps seeing them both break through the nineteenth floor unharmed will give him some solace. Not a bad deal.

“Understood. I promise to bring them both safely to the twentieth floor.”

“I expect you just might, adventurer.”

In the end, I had no choice but to delve into the dungeon before I could decide whether I’d never delve into the dungeon again. How goddamn ironic.



Éa was busy building a fire when we got back to camp, scantily clad in a button-up shirt that sometimes rose up to reveal glimpses of her black spandex shorts.

“Welcome home, Yaya, Lanceil.”

“Good to be back, Sis.”

“It’s wonderful to be back, dearest Sister.”

“Wait, why are you calling me that, too, Lanceil?”

“Well, now that I am Souya’s consort, I am also your elder sister.”

“Huh? Is that how it works?”

“Wait, seriously?”

Éa and I both asked, taken aback.

“It is never too late to begin. You may call me Big Sis……. No, that will never suit me. *Dear Sister* will do. Come, try it.”

“Ew, no.”

“I am sorry to hear it. Well then, if my services are no longer required, I shall repose for the evening. Can I offer you anything, my lord?”

“No, thank you. Sorry to make you take me to the castle on such short notice.”

“It was my pleasure. I should thank you for all your hard work today.” Lanceil bowed and slipped into her tent.

“Welcome hooome, Mr. Souya!”

“Thanks, we’re all set for today. You should turn in for the night, too,” I ordered Machina, who had rolled over to greet me.

“Activating the radar sensor for approaching objects and entering standby mode. Good work out there today. Night night.” “Hotaru no Hikari,” the song stores put on over the PA systems at closing time, played through her speakers, and the AI bot switched to standby.

I grabbed my toothbrush from its spot by the washbasin filled with potable water, then did a final sweep of the campsite to make sure all was in order while I brushed my teeth. In the kitchen garden, I saw our little golem half buried in the soil, asleep. A fluffy mound of slumbering rabbits huddled together at the edge of our tents. Wrath relentlessly tossed out all those that intruded in the garden, but they’d grown fond of what they took to be a game and always went back to nuzzle up against him.

Once I finished washing up and smothered the fire, a wave of exhaustion hit me like a truck. I'd reached my limit. Battery dead. Clutching to my consciousness, afraid I'd collapse on the spot if I let go, I made for my tent—then remembered Lana would be inside. My heart sank.

I can't go in there now. How could I even face her?

"Yaya."

"Hmm?"

My younger sister took me by the hand, leading the way. "Come sleep in my tent with me tonight, okay?"

"S-sure." I was too spent to think. Éa's face blurred into the darkness. Following her like a docile lamb, I ducked into her tent. A citrus scent permeated the space, which was dimly lit by an emiluminite lantern. Made for four people, the tent had room to spare, but—

"Ah, I thought we'd been going through these kinda quickly." By Éa's personal belonging was a huge pile of instant foodstuffs.

"Whatever's yours is mine."

"Yeah, right," I let it slide, too tired to think of a comeback. I removed my gear and set it in a corner. "Yukikaze, go on standby. Good work."

"To you, a good night."

I took the mini kettle off from around my waist, bunched up my poncho, and —

"Here, you can use this. Whatever's mine is yours."

—took a spare set of clothes from my sister. The T-shirt and spandex shorts smelled of her. *Shit, I'm half asleep and dead tired. This is gonna drive me crazy.*

"C'mon, don't just stand there like a wishy-washy willow," Éa chided, then pulled off my dirty clothes and forced me into the clean ones. "You're hopeless without me, you know."

"Tell me about it." The shirt was inside out, but I couldn't care less.

"All right, time to sleep."

We both lay our heads down on the single pillow. *Close. She's so close.* But I didn't even have the energy to worry about dirty thoughts. I threw a large comforter over us both, then turned off the lantern. Silent darkness descended upon us. I felt the warmth of her body through the sheets.

As if it was natural, my elven sister hugged me tight, a habit she had when trying to sleep. Was she anxious about something? Or did she just like to cuddle?

"Hey," she whispered.

"Hmm?"

"You're not gonna ask me? About the war."

Éa was a victim, not an active participant. She hadn't even been close enough to see what had happened. Plus—

"I didn't want to bring up those painful memories. That gunshot almost killed you."

"That's true. You're so kind to think of me like that." No, I just sucked at getting into deep conversations with people. She crinkled her eyes up happily when I gently placed my hand over her cheek. "Sorry, Yaya. Even if you did ask, I can't tell you anything helpful. I passed out, and by the time I came to, the forest was already burning, and there was a bullet in my stomach. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. This isn't your burden to bear."

"Okay." She snuggled closer, her cheek resting on my chest. I slid my arm under her neck to cushion her ear so it wouldn't hurt. "Hee-hee," she giggled softly. "This is kinda nice."

She seemed content. If this was all it took to make her happy, I'd do it again any day, any time. She felt wonderful, warm against me. A luxurious reward for a hard day's work.

Sleep. If I just close my eyes, I'll fall right to sleep.

"Éa, are you awake? I worried you might not be able to sleep on your own, so I thought we could—"

As long as no one bothers me, that is.

“Oh my,” I heard Lanceil murmur. A shadow stole into the tent together with a brief slice of moonlight. Her voice now very close, she said, “Souya, it is most improper for you to share a bed with anyone other than your wife or your consort. That way lies infidelity.”

“Shh, Lanceil. You’re gonna wake her up.” Éa looked perfectly angelic, nestled fast asleep in the crook of my arm.

“Very well, then I shall join you.” Lanceil lifted the covers and tucked herself in, then big-spooned me once again. She stroked my hair. For some reason, she loved doing that. Too tired to fight back, I let her touch away.

“Wait, Lanceil, are you—?”

“Yes?” Something pressing against my back felt different.

Was she—? “Are you naked?”

“I did wear a towel on my way here, of course. I am a lady, after all.”

“So you *are* naked?”

“I always remove my clothes before bed. Is that an issue?”

You think I can fall asleep like this? I thought, but then I was out like a light in about five seconds. Pretty sure my brain short-circuited trying to process that outrageous discovery.

CHAPTER 3

The Imprisoned Adventurer

When I awoke the next morning, Lana was gone. The mini kettle, Yukikaze, was gone. Lady Mythlanica had disappeared as well. When I asked Machina about it, she said my wife had left in the early hours to run an errand and that she'd taken Yukikaze, just in case, at Machina's urging. For some reason, Lady Mythlanica had also tagged along.

Massive, salted rice balls had been prepared for breakfast, courtesy of Lana. Ghatt had brought over some small shrimp and fish left over from his market sales, which I made into an *ajillo* and paired with pork-broth soup, some pickled vegetables, and bacon sautéed with curry powder. Our spread all set, I sat down to eat once again with what society here took to be a very unusual group: a merman, an elf, a beastmaid, and an Otherworlder.

After we finished, I asked Ghatt how things looked at the harbor; he said another ship from the Central Continent had sailed in earlier that morning. While Éa and Lanceil chattered on about everything and nothing, Ghatt dived back into the ocean, and I went to check on our garden. Sprouts had appeared all around, and vines had begun creeping up their posts. One by one, our tiny tree golem carefully inspected each dew-drenched leaf and stem in turn. Together, we watered our crops, then walked a bit away from camp and scattered some food for the flying rabbits. They hadn't started nibbling our greens yet, but they might once our crops started to bear fruit, which would be bad.

Wait, this herd grew again. Last time, there had only been seven, but now there were ten of them. *Ah, whatever. They're cute.*

Morning chores done, I ducked into my tent and got changed. Same as always, I wore my camo fatigues, threw my trusty poncho on over them, and slid Agaccion into its sheath, which I then tied around my waist. Since I only

planned for a light outing, I decided to leave behind my lycan bow and quiver. Lastly, I put on the glasses I'd finally gotten used to and was ready to leave.

"I'm heading into town to get ready for our next expedition," I told Éa and Lanceil. "Do you two want to come with?"

"Thank you, but I'm going to do some laundry and inspect our equipment for damage, then have Machina give me another cooking lesson," Lanceil declined.

"Oh, then I'll join you. I wanna learn a new curry recipe," Éa announced.

"Will you be joining us for lunch, sire?"

"Yeah, I should be back by then."

"In that case, Éa and I shall put our skills to the test and have a feast waiting for you. Have a safe trip."

"See you later, Mr. Souyaaa!"

"Byeeee!"

The three waved me off as I left. I gotta say, it felt nice.



When I arrived in town, I headed first to the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group's headquarters to see if they knew where I could find the two entrepreneurial ladies, then made my way over to the *stables*, which served as a cheap inn reserved for adventurers. Any registered adventurer could use the stables for free. Since most didn't own horses, though, they served as bare-bones public housing provided by the Hotels and Inns Association and were supported by the government. Inn owners donated space out of the goodness of their hearts, welcoming new adventurers with the unspoken understanding that these initiates would come back and stay at their hotel once they could afford it. For its part, the government was able to keep broke adventurers from sleeping on the streets and threatening the tourist appeal or safety of the city.

In case you're curious, the price for a horse varied as much as it did in the modern world. Colts and older horses went for around fifty gold coins, while young, healthy steeds garnered around ninety, and the ones that were

incredibly fast cost around two hundred gold. Purebred stallions whose lineages traced back to famous legends or heroes easily ran in the one to two thousand range.

I scanned the initiate adventurers in the barn until I found the pair I was after in the last of a long row of stalls. Piles and piles of belongings filled the space. The first thought that came to mind: Someone did a midnight disappearing act with some get-rich-quick scheme's payout.

"Oh, why if it isn't Lord Souya," Lazalisa said in greeting once she spotted me; I gave her a "good morning" back. Though the reptilian beastmaid was ready for the day in her maid's uniform, her employer lay splayed out, asleep on the hay in an expensive-looking set of pajamas, her expression an unflattering shade of stupid.

"Milady, time to wake. Master Souya has come to visit."

"Whaaa—? Huuuh?" the Lady Champion mumbled. Her hair extremely disheveled, Freyja looked far more vulnerable and exposed than any young woman should allow others to see.

"Lord Souya, a moment, if you will."

"Sure."

The tall beastmaid vigorously yanked Freyja's pajamas off and began making her presentable. I turned around and let my gaze wander from one adventurer to the next. Most looked like complete initiates, their gear old and crumbling, and their young eyes sparkling with dreams and confidence. I hadn't started much later than them, so why did I feel like such an outsider? You'd never guess I did the exact same job.

It would've been nice to have the same aspirations and hopeful outlook toward adventuring, but then again, I guess the God of Adventurers wouldn't have sent me packing if I did.

"Thank you for your patience, Lord Souya," Lazalisa announced.

When I turned around, I saw the prim and proper lady in her usual scarlet dress and curly blond ringlets standing before me. *Damn, Lazalisa, you're a miracle worker. You sure you don't want to try making a living out of this?*

“Why, hello there, Soysouya. What can I do for you on this fine morning?” Ah, so close! Good enough for today.

Before I approached the main topic, I wanted to clarify one thing. “Maybe I should start by asking what brought you here? I know you had a few ups and downs, but you should’ve had enough money left to cover room and board for a while.”

“Oh, that. We spent it all.” Oof. This Champion couldn’t even control her own finances.

“Allow me to offer an explanation, Lord Souya. After acquiring that considerable sum of money all at once, we unfortunately let ourselves get carried away. I myself purchased several rare collectible weapons, while milady bought an entire wardrobe of new clothing. The next thing we knew, our funds had been exhausted.”

So that’s where all the stuff in the stall came from. This didn’t sound reassuring, considering I might one day have to entrust them with Shuna and Bel. I bet their last party leader had an extremely hard time dealing with them. *I feel your pain.*

“Let’s save the talk about your spending habits for another time. I came to speak with you today about an expedition.”

“Well, goodness gracious. Have you perhaps, unable to forget our extraordinary contributions the last time we linked arms, come to ask for our assistance? Heh-heh-heh, let me warn you now, we do not come cheaply.” *Yeah, I’ll bet. Somebody’s gotta pay for your retail therapy.*

“Milady, might I remind you, your contributions last time did not exceed regurgitating your bowels and languishing in nausea,” Lazalisa kindly pointed out.

“Ugh!” the mage groaned in embarrassment. “Just you wait, there shall be no such mortifying displays next time, and soon all will see the true powers that I —”

“Trust me, I know what you can really do,” I reassured her. She’d proven her mettle in the battle against Lana’s failed side dish, brandishing sorcery no

ordinary mage could muster. One vestige of those powerful spells was still hard at work in my kitchen garden. “Tomorrow my party and I are heading into the dungeon to try to push through five levels in one go, and I would be grateful if you two could join us. I can offer you twenty gold pieces in remuneration, ten up front. Everything else we need for this expedition, I’ll prepare on my end.”

“Yes, gladly. We’ll be happy to accompany you,” she agreed without a moment’s hesitation.

“Milady, are you quite sure you do not wish to take advantage of this prime opportunity for extortion?”

“Quite sure, Lazalisa. I’ll do whatever I must for breakfast money!”

Look, I get that most adventurers live hand to mouth, but you two need to figure out how to budget, fast. It’s a shame—you’re so capable otherwise.

“That’s right, where is Gaslark?” The goblin in dwarf’s clothing was nowhere to be found.

“He apparently has a residence nearby and returned there yesterday,” Freyja explained. “.....Perhaps we could arrange to live there with him.”

“No, milady. I’m afraid that would be too brazen, even for you.”

A Champion of Light living in a Dark Lord’s hideout? Sounds like a sitcom waiting to happen.

“Thanks, I’ll reach out to him myself. Here, your advance.” I handed Lazalisa ten coins from my pouch. “I’ll pay you the remaining ten once we finish the mission. For tonight, please find a hotel room and rest up. Treat yourself to something delicious to energize you for tomorrow. Just don’t go binging on alcohol and snacks.”

“Well then, don’t mind if I do.”

“Rest assured, Lady Freyja is not only the picture of health, but she can also sleep under any condition imaginable.”

“Okay, so tomorrow we’ll meet at the Guild at the toll of the morning bell.”

“Wonderful, we’ll see you there.”

First deal of the day in the bag. Now, on to the next.



After leaving the inn, I took the main road to an alley that led me behind the constable's post to a certain establishment. Standing in front of the entrance, I wrapped around my wrist the chain that would grant me access to the Goddesses of Slumber and Fertility Parlor, an elegant, tasteful brothel. I gathered up my courage, then pushed the steel doors open. A quiet, relaxed atmosphere unlike what I'd experienced last time met me inside; even the aroma of burning incense seemed fainter. This shop did most of its business after dark, so only a few clients awaited their turns. Young, seemingly inexperienced female and male employees milled about.

"Welcome. Ohhh, good morning, sir."

"Oh, hello," I greeted the middle-aged beastman who'd been hurled through the walls and into my room last time.

"You must be here for Tutu. And what impeccable timing you have. She has been desperate and wanting customers lately. It's good you stopped by." *No, not good. Not good at all.*

"Actually, today I just—"

"Souya!" Something crashed into me and bound me to the spot. "When are you gonna stop stringing meow along?! Just how long do you think I've been waiting since you prrrromised you'd come?!" the feline beastmaid complained after throwing herself at me. Petite and lithe, she had wavy long blond hair, pointed ears, and a voluminous tail I'd recognize anywhere. Like all the employees, she wore a collar around her neck and revealing lingerie. I'd thought I could avoid running into her if I came by in the morning, but here we were.

"Sorry, Tutu, I'm not here today for—"

"Stop making excuses already! I don't know how much more rejection my dignity can take!"

"Now then, sir, if you'll follow me upstairs," the beastman said, and I almost

gave in. Shit, if I let them drag me along, I seriously doubt my self-control will hold out. How can I think of laying my hands on another woman if I haven't even gotten to that stage with my wife yet?!

“Not so fast.” Tutu’s voice took on a cold tone. She started sniffing intensely around my neck. “Souya, I smell the scent of another beastmaid on you. Who is she?”

“Argh!” Tutu’s nails dug into the nape of my neck. *I see. So other beastmaids are off-limits, huh? Good to know. Hopefully, that’ll come in handy next time. If I live to see a next time, that is.*

“Oh, just someone who recently moved in and has been helping me around camp.”

“I said, WHO. IS. SHE. MRAH?!” she demanded. Her claws clenched my bum in their viselike grip. *Ow! Quit it with the nails. All right, fine. Not like I’m trying to hide anything.*

“A beastmaid named Lanceil.”

“What? Lanceil? As in *the* Lanceil? King Remlia’s illegitimate daughter, the silver-haired foxmaid?”

“Yeah, exactly.” *I guess she’s famous? Makes sense—legitimate or not, she is the king’s daughter, after all.*

“My, my.” The manager nodded for some reason.

Tutu stumbled backward and collapsed into a despondent heap, catching herself with both hands against the floor. “I’ll never compare to the woman flying on every flag,” she wailed, but then a second later, she jumped back to her feet and threw her arms around my waist, flinging herself at me. Much like the majority of beastmaids, Tutu had a lot of love to go around or, rather, took a very proactive approach in sharing it. It wasn’t even midday, and she was already getting frisky.

“Please! I’ll do whatever you want; just don’t throw me awaaaay!”

“I’m not! Don’t give people the wrong idea!”

“Oh, I know, I’ll make it a party! I know the purrfect girls who are free right

meow!”

“What’s with all the noise?” asked a middle-aged man who appeared from a back room. Raven-haired, black-eyed, and with rough stubble, the man looked sleepy, his left eye perpetually closed shut. He wore a loose kimono-like robe and, in one hand, carried his sheathed longsword.

“Sorry, Pops. I wanted to see you about something,” I said to the man also known as the father of adventurers.

“Right. Come on back.”

“Souya! What about meow?!”

“I’m real sorry, Tutu,” I apologized. “I really am. I’ll make it up to you soon, I promise.”

“I’ll take that promise to the next life, you heeear?!”

Somehow managing to peel Tutu off me, I followed Pops to the back of the shop and into a large, one-window room that seemed to serve as some sort of storage space. In a corner was a neat pile of weapons and pieces of armor, along with a few other adventuring essentials. Sparsely furnished, it had only a bed on one end and a long table bookended by two sofa chairs. It felt as if only items related to dungeon explorations were allowed to take up space here.

Pops plopped down onto one of the sofa chairs and lit a rolled-up cigarette. The smoke had accents of a peculiar, sweet, leafy scent, as if fragrant or medicinal herbs had been mixed in with the tobacco. “So you were saying?”

I joined the gruff adventurer across the table and sat in the chair. It was very comfortable—must’ve cost a fortune.

“Yesterday, my party and I made it to the fifteenth floor, and tomorrow we embark on a mission to reach the twentieth. We’re going to try to push through in one go.”

“So you mean to test your fate on the Deranged Stratum, do you?”

“The Deranged Stratum?” The term didn’t sound at all familiar.



“That’s how adventurers of old referred to that general area. I took you for a more cautious sort, though. Something happen?”

“I tried asking Lana about her role in the war, but she ignored—er, rather, refused to answer the question. So I went to King Remlia about it, and he told me he’d reveal the truth if I made it to the twentieth floor with my whole party intact.”

“Ahhh, right, right.” Pops nodded. “.....And how did Princess Laualliuna look to you before that vile rabbit?”

“Perfectly calm. She told me she’s immune to that sort of thing.”

“That hare wields a mighty power no person—or any greater being, even—can ignore. What I mean to say is—”

“I know. No need to spell it out.” Lana always stifled her emotions and spoke much quicker than usual when she lied. Even I knew that much.

“Either way, a party can’t maintain itself for long if one of its members keeps secrets from the others. You made the right call.”

Afraid the conversation might go down the wrong rabbit hole, I moved on to the main topic. “I wanted to ask you about the monster you’ve been hunting.”

This mysterious foe had one of the most talented adventurers alive spend over thirty years chasing after it. That wouldn’t have bothered me if it was an enemy we could easily slip past. To be blunt, I didn’t give two shits about what happened to other people—I didn’t have the mental energy to waste on that. They could live and die however the hell they wanted for all I cared.

“So you’ve heard, have you? Well, I meant to tell you what I know in any case, seeing as you’re taking elves down there with you. But don’t get your hopes up, kid. I’ve spent more than thirty years chasing down that bastard, and I’ve got nothing to show for it.”

“What?” *The father of adventurers has been after this thing for over thirty years, and even he’s still in the dark?*

“First thing, it’s invisible, inaudible, and imperceptible. It silently snatches adventurers, leaving no footprints or traces behind. All it needs is a split second,

a fraction of a beat, to spirit them away like some god—or demon. None of the adventurers kidnapped like that have ever been found. As far as I know, we’ve lost twenty-eight adventurers to it—a mere twenty-eight people in thirty years. Dungeon boars alone claim more than three hundred lives a year, and chochos, arguably the weakest monsters, kill close to a hundred. That’s why I’m the only one after it and why the Guild hasn’t intervened, either. When compared with the myriad of other dangers in the dungeon, this thing causes far too few casualties to require action.”

That made sense. The Adventurers Guild had their hands full; it was only logical for them to tackle the threats that endangered the most victims first.

Pops continued, “After one person goes missing, it usually takes about another year for the next to disappear. That said, we’ve never recovered any of the victims’ bodies, so we don’t know whether this means it preserves its prey long-term or goes into an extended hibernation after a meal. Most of these adventurers had exceptional skill with magic, though that doesn’t necessarily mean they have to be a mage to have great latent magic potential. Elves are, as a race, particularly adept at spellcraft. It’s safe to say virtually any elf is at elevated risk.”

I’d gotten a gut feeling to ask Freyja to come along. Good thing I’d listened to it.

“We do know without a shadow of a doubt that it lives somewhere on the nineteenth floor. I once blocked the stairs leading above and below that level to search for it.”

“Are there no other ways to get from floor to floor?”

“No. No secret passages lead into or out of that floor as far as I’ve been able to tell. Only, there is one section of the wall that stands out. It gives me an odd feeling. But never mind that; it’s hardly worth mentioning.”

“What about it?” This sounded interesting. The smallest details could sometimes lead to breakthroughs.

“Well, no harm in telling you, I suppose. Thing is, I found this section with odd markings. I had all sorts of people come to analyze them, but no one managed to decipher the text or its old, incomprehensible maplike diagram. More likely

than not, it's probably some graffiti left by an ancient predecessor. I tried excavating the stone wall with no luck; just like the rest of the dungeon, it returned to normal almost immediately. In the end, it had no connection to the snatcher."

Countless civilizations had flourished and fallen over the ages in the Other Dimension. For one reason or another, relics of these lost societies could be found preserved in the dungeon. Still, the Tower of Legions had a long and storied history. Those markings could've also been the handiwork of a bored adventurer or perhaps remnants of a magical technique now lost. Aside from that, I couldn't even guess.

"Once, years ago, we had another adventurer like you with abysmally low rylvius and magic levels. He was an eccentric collector, a noble who dreamed of following in Thurseauve's footsteps, though in battle, he was pure deadweight. But this guy, he said he saw the ghoul. According to him, the snatcher has two long, thin curved claws and a glowering, skull-like face. It doesn't have a lower body, and its upper body is all bones with loose, sagging skin draped over it like a cape. He only caught the slightest glimpse, but evidently, the thing disappeared into the darkness on the nineteenth floor. People at the time wrote it off as a bogus horror story concocted for attention, but....." Pops tapped his cigarette on a tray, dropping the ashes.

"I have a theory. That creature on the Deranged Stratum uses some kind of illusion that fools the average adventurer. That's why this pampered noble couldn't see it; he didn't have what most of us do. But it's been near impossible to test the theory, since hardly anyone who meets that criterion has ever made it that far. Except now I've got a perfect candidate staring me in the face, one who also coincidentally has an elven mage in his party. And it just so happens it's been almost exactly a year since the last disappearance. If this isn't a stroke of luck, I don't know what is. Maybe it's a sign I should 'give up already.'"

"So what are you saying?" Maybe that stroke of luck would fall on me. Or maybe all the bad luck I'd had since I landed in this dimension was finally turning around.

"I'm going to lend you a hand. You said tomorrow, right? What time?"

“First thing, at the toll of the morning bell.”

“Aye, understood. That said, the so-called father of adventurers can’t exactly be seen privately escorting a party of initiates. I’ll meet you on the fifteenth floor.”

“Thanks a lot, Pops.”

“You can thank me once we make it through that dreadful level safely. I’ve told you before, and I’ll say it again, but I’m nothing special. Just a fool who abandoned his living friends to chase after the dead.”

Over three long decades, this adventurer had painstakingly hunted the same foe. But I had it on the highest authority that his tremendous skill hid behind that humility. I’d only caught glimpses of what he could do, but this haunted man was undoubtedly more powerful than any other adventurer I’d met in this entire dimension. Though strong, if push came to shove, he was also the *only dispensable person* I knew.

Arvin, did you ever think I’d use your killer to make it through the dungeon? The goddamn irony. Shit.



[84TH DAY]

After my chat with Pops the day before, I’d bought our supplies for the expedition, handed them to the Zavah merchants for safekeeping, then dropped in to invite Lis and Shuna, and headed back to camp. For whatever reason, Lady Gladwein decided to tag along, so I treated them all to lunch. The herculean goddess seemed pleasantly pleased with the curry, merrily savoring the spicy stew infused with Éa’s original blend of spices. Strangely enough, Lady Mythlanica and Lady Gladwein appeared to know each other. They only exchanged words two or three times, but I could sense familiarity in their tones.

Untold mysteries enshrouded Lady Mythlanica, even for me, her devotee. Although an ancient currency bore her name, suspiciously few people recognized it, almost as if their perception of her had shifted out of place in their minds. Had she ever had devotees like me in the past? If so, where were

they now? The curiosity killed me, but the topic felt somehow taboo to discuss.

Everyone has secrets in their past they don't want others dredging up. I could only imagine how that must apply to the divine, how many of their secrets could endanger your life.

This might not have had much to do with anything else, but once I got back, Lanceil accosted me, saying, "Souya, I smell another woman on you. Who is she?"

"Huh? What do you—?"

"I said, WHO. IS. SHE?!" Her smile terrified me to my core. I feared for my life. What was I supposed to do about this? I had a lot of explaining to do to Tutu, too. But before I got to any of that, I had to think about talking or, rather, making up with Lana.

The previous day, we hadn't said a word to each other. My elven wife ate all her meals in silence, asked for no seconds, and offered no reviews. She didn't even have a sip of alcohol. In part, I had my own cowardice to blame. But in my defense, I wanted my actions to speak for themselves first. *Yeah, I know, it's selfish as hell.*

We did sleep in the same tent for what it was worth, though Éa and Lady Mythlanica barged in as usual, joined also for some reason by Lanceil. In the end, we were squished together like a can of sardines. Surprisingly, though, I slept like a baby.

The next time I opened my eyes, the day of our mission had dawned. After a quick breakfast, we headed to town and got our things from the trade group, then picked Shuna and Lis up at their dorms. We then made for the Adventurers Guild and met Freyja, Lazalisa, and Gaslark on the first floor of the dungeon. Lana remained silently composed the entire time, her expression never once bordering on displeasure; she even went as far as completely ignoring Freyja's "good morning."

Being so early in the morning, we were the only party at the Guild. Evetta hadn't started her shift yet, so I submitted our planned dungeon excursion forms to another counselor. After that, we ducked into the portals, and our two parties stepped out onto the fifteenth floor. One that consisted of me, Lana, Éa,

Shuna, and Lis (Bel), and the other having Freyja, Lazalisa, and Gaslark.

And our final addition— “Listen up, everyone. We have a special helper today.”

“The name’s Medîm. Well met, lads and lasses.”

With Pops rounding out the group, we stood at nine members strong—a huge party by adventurers’ standards. We’d only brought rations for three days, but even that added up to a ton of food. I usually asked everyone to carry their own portions, but this time, I only gave them emergency provisions and had Lazalisa bear the rest. Her backpack and travel bag both bulged at the seams.

“Lord Souya, how do you two know each other?” she asked, her face impassive, after surveying Pops.

“Lazalisa, are you acquainted with this gentleman?” Freyja didn’t seem to know him at all.

“Yes, milady, he is the illustrious Medîm, hailed as the father of adventurers. His great deeds have been recorded in the biographical *Lives of Brave Warriors* of the Central Continent.”

“My, that is indeed noteworthy. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Master Medîm. I am Freyja Deus Gastolfo. Allow me to thank you in advance for your kind instruction today.”

“Ga-Gastolfo?” Unusually frazzled, Pops dragged me by the arm away from the group. The middle-aged man and I began whispering like schoolgirls. “Souya! You didn’t tell me a Gastolfo was coming!”

“No, I didn’t. I can’t say much for her personality, but she is an amazing mage. Her maid is also pretty damn talented.”

“Don’t you dare bring up the parlor or Eltalia.” Eltalia, as I recalled, was the Goddesses of Slumber and Fertility Parlor’s proprietress. I’d only met her once, but she and Pops had a little somethin’ somethin’ going on.

“Okay, but why?” If I didn’t ask now, things could get troublesome later.

“Lady Lowomen and Lady Gastolfo are sister goddesses, and their hatred for the other cannot be understated. Also, Eltalia used to be called Marcia Merua

Gastolfo, but she disapproved of her family's practices and cut ties with them. To think, all this time I've spent avoiding the Gastolfos, and now I run into one here of all places."

"What does it matter? It's just a coincidence. And what the hell am I supposed to do with that information?" I said, ending the patently boring gossip. I shook off his arm and got back to introducing Pops to the group. "Pops, you've met Lady Freyja, a title-bearing Champion of Light. This is her attendant, Lazalisa, and their party member Gaslark."

"Master Gaslark? Hmm? And you are...?" Pops narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"Gaslark is a dwarf."

"A dwarf? Come off it; he's—" Any more, and his cover would be blown. I guess it wasn't that easy to fool someone who'd seen the real thing.

"A dwarf, Pops. By the way, how has the shop been faring these past few—?"

"Ah yes, a dwarf."

"Exactly, a dwarf."

"Real dwarf right there."

Remind me to apologize if I ever do meet a real dwarf. "So in my party, we've got Lana, Éa, Shuna—"

"I can't wait to explore with you!!" Shuna exploded, practically jumping out of his pants with excitement. I had let everyone know the day before that Pops would be joining us. Shuna bounced with about three times as much energy as usual.

"And lastly, Be—Lis."

"Hmm, you've changed since the last time I saw you. You, lad, are doing fine. As for you, little lass, can't say I approve of *that*."

"....." Lis averted his gaze. Pops didn't seem to have anything special to say to the elven sisters.

"Right, I've got a feel for you all. So, Souya, what's your strategy?"

I explained my general plan to Pops and the rest of the group. "Éa and I will

be on search and recon. If we get into battle, I want Pops and Shuna up front, followed by Lis, Lana, and Freyja. Lis, watch out for those two.”

“.....Understood.” *Well, that’s unusual. Didn’t think Lis would answer so quickly.*

“Lazalisa, you’re on lookout for attacks from the rear. Gaslark, you keep an eye out for any risks from the sides. We can change things up depending on how quickly our loads lighten or where we all stand in terms of stamina, but let’s try this formation out for now. And here, Freyja, Lana, Pops, you too. Take these.” I handed them all throat microphones.

“What is this, a collar?” Lana muttered dryly.

“Is it, now? I imagine I’ll look rather dashing in it.”

“You’d look better with some humility, milady.”

Ignoring her reptilian maid, Freyja put the mic around her neck. Only after she saw Freyja do so did Lana begrudgingly put hers on. Looking very dubious about the whole thing, Pops followed suit. I jogged a bit away from the group and tested the communication system through the receiver on my glasses.

“Testing, testing. If you can hear me, say something.”

“Aye, I hear you.”

“Goodness, how clever. All clear with me.”

“Lana?”

“Yes.”

Mics, checked. Now, the only thing left was— “So, Pops, would you, um...?”

“Aye.” He slipped me a couple maps, one for every floor from the fifteenth to twentieth. I grinned. What a treat we were getting this time. I’d be terrified if other adventurers ever found out.

“If you’ll excuse me a sec,” I said. Turning my back to the man, I spread the papers out on the ground, then had Yukikaze scan them into digital files. These maps were so detailed it was almost scary. Each came complete with the shortest and optimal routes, intel on the species of monsters you’d encounter,

and even the best way to fight them. It felt like they weren't so much for personal use but to show someone else.

"Scan complete. Map displaying," Yukikaze announced, then pulled it up on my glasses. "Which route would you like to use?"

"The shortest."

"Understood." She highlighted the quickest route.

Every five levels ran about twenty kilometers in length, which meant about five kilometers per level if we took the fastest routes. Looking at the Tower of Legions from outside, you'd expect the floors to grow narrower the further you explored. However, mysteriously, they only got bigger, each map with each level growing more expansive. Truly mysterious.

"Thanks, Pops. Let me return these."

"What?" Pops blurted out in surprise when I handed the documents back.

"I won't be needing them anymore. I've saved all the data," I explained.

"So quickly? That doesn't sit right."

Showing him how my equipment worked was risky, but he had also taken one by sharing the maps. He wasn't going to blab about this to anyone.

"Éa, here."

"Hmm? Ooh, what's this?"

I gave my sister a backup pair of glasses. "Those will connect you to the others and show you the map of each floor. The green dots are our party members, and red dots are enemies."



“Huh. How does it look?” She put them on and struck a smug pose.

“Good, very nice.” I gave her a thumbs-up. Éa in glasses—not bad. Not bad at all. They made her look twice as intelligent and twice as adorable. Feeling someone’s gaze on me, I turned around to see Lana—who quickly looked away with a huff. I bet they’d be great on her, too, though it could end up being a chaotic mash-up of accessories.

“Last thing, Shuna. We’ve got a pro swordsman here. You could learn a lot from watching Pops. Don’t miss a second of it.”

“You better believe I won’t!” His enthusiasm threatened to crush me. I had the hardest time dealing with this kind of energy.

I surveyed the group one last time, saw everything checked out, and said, “Let’s go.”

On to the Deranged Stratum. Only the gods knew what we’d find there. As the saying goes, “Will we see a demon or a snake?” Or something else entirely?



Nothing about the dungeon on these floors felt different. Same as always, stagnant air filled the dim corridors, their stony walls and floors providing just enough space for three people to walk beside one another. The monsters, though, proved undeniably more formidable. Yet I’d never before—and probably would never again—had an easier time trekking through the levels. You know how in like RPGs, you can sometimes get a limited run with superstrong characters in your team? Well, that was exactly what we had.

Pops was badass. Every monster we came across from the fifteenth through seventeenth floors, he slew with a single strike. Powered by a deep reservoir of pure brute strength, he moved as quick as the wind and commanded all manner of tricks of the trade refined to perfection over many years. His longsword sliced through enemies like butter, ending their lives with one smooth thrust. But he had more than incredible swordsmanship working for him; he could knock monsters much taller than him out *One-Punch Man* style, and he had the detailed knowledge of where exactly on a monster to strike for maximum

damage—background without which none of these attacks would work. He also had impeccable self-control; his stamina and ryvius barely depleted at all.

“All this time I’ve spent fighting these monsters hasn’t been a complete waste,” or so he put it.

We would’ve already stopped twice to rest had this been a normal expedition, but the father of adventurers showed no signs of slowing down, and his overwhelming contribution meant the others in my party hadn’t tired much, either. Lis, Gaslark, Lazalisa, and Lana had essentially done nothing but walk.

Freyja’s magic played a huge role, too, taking out at the very least half the monsters that encroached on us before they could even get to Pops. She wielded her flames with incredible precision, unleashing unspeakably powerful blazes in the tightest spaces, putting into practice the dungeon-specific spellcraft techniques she’d developed. As if that weren’t enough, Freyja’s magical reserves bordered on elven levels but replenished at heim rates. Clearly, it was not for show that she held that Champion’s title. I could almost hear the resentment boiling underneath Lana’s placid veneer.

The only one currently drained and exhausted was me. This time around, I was in charge of scouting, then baiting and dividing enemy forces. Whenever we spotted a monster in our way, Éa and I would mark it and share whatever intel we could gather. We did not attack without careful consideration. None of the monsters here would fall to one or two arrows, and wounded beasts posed far more danger. Those that communicated with their brethren would soon call for backup. Once huge numbers packed the narrow dungeon corridors, they’d overwhelm and crush you, no matter how talented of an adventurer you were. More than anything, we on search and recon could never allow this to happen. We had to cautiously analyze our enemies to figure out their strengths and weaknesses—though this time, that part of the job had already been done for us.

Baiting and leading solitary monsters didn’t take much. The physical and mental drain came from separating those that traveled in groups. One particularly taxing combo plagued us through the sixteenth and seventeenth floors: a monstrous symbiosis of a murder of chochos and a frog-headed biped. The egg-shaped, winged chochos bore markings that simulated a human face.

Though quick in flight and armed with razor-sharp talons, they were one of the easiest creatures to slay—if you met them one-on-one. On these two floors, however, they traveled in groups, bunched together like grapes, around nine per cluster. Even pushovers could cause real trouble if they joined forces.

And by “travel,” I mean those frog-headed bipeds, slender monsters who stood about a meter tall, carried them around like a lantern. Their unnaturally long fingers looked frail, but in truth, they must have housed truly monstrous strength judging by the fact that they could carry a murder of those chochos single-handedly. While they moved their limbs sluggishly, the frog-heads’ tongues shot out at terrifying speeds, snatching adventurers’ armor—or their heads—if they weren’t careful. They then added these new trophies to the bunches they carried.

Frog-heads moved in regular circuits as a rule. Following the routes marked on Pops’s maps, Éa and I would wait for one to pass then attack it from both sides, my sister shooting an arrow through the hand carrying all the chochos, and I lodging bolts in the frog-head’s legs. The bunch of chochos would fall to the floor and scatter momentarily, then regroup and beeline for Éa. All chochos living on the sixteenth floor or lower tended to attack in groups. Once she’d caught their attention, Éa would guide the raging avian beasts to our party while I kept the froggy fiend’s eyes fixed on me, a job that quickly ate away at my nerves and stamina.

The frog-heads could extend their tongues out a full fifteen meters or more and as quick as a cannonball. I had to constantly take cover or risk losing my gear to that sticky trap. At first, I considered blocking with Agaccion, but it would only complicate things if my enchanted blade got stolen. It would undoubtedly return at my call, though unexpected damage to the sword could lead to unforeseen hang-ups. Piercing the frog-heads’ brain and heart also posed a challenge, as the former were annoyingly small, and the latter was thoroughly protected behind thick ribs.

I approached each encounter with caution, careful to not let my desire to end the battle quickly influence my movements. I’d hide from the whiplike tongue behind a corner, wait to hear footsteps, then show myself for the briefest moment, baiting it to follow me farther down the tunnel. These frog-heads

didn't walk while attacking; without fail, they would always aim first, then shoot. That said, even one hit from their tongues could easily delete me from the world; it would be like throwing yourself in front of a cannon. Avoiding them drained my mental energy, the anxiety eating away at my stamina.

My party sent word they'd cleaned up the latest round of chochos sent their way. Time to bring them a new froggy friend. Pulling up the route and guided directions on my glasses, I started zigzagging through the corridor, baiting the tongue to follow while sprinting and dodging its attacks.

Every once in a while, I'd run into another monster during this part. This was beyond dangerous.

A winged snake peeled off one of the corridor walls. These species tracked their prey through thermal energy, so once they spotted you, there was no hiding or running away. Their poisonous fangs left you paralyzed.

Ever aware of the two-legged frog following me, I killed the flying snake with two arrows. These winged serpents had two heads, one on each end of their bodies, and I made sure to hit a bull's-eye on both. I did weigh whether to simply pin the snake to the wall, but the frog beasts had a natural aversion to them and would stop following me. I had no choice but to take them all down. Éa caught up to me, and together, we safely led our long-tongued foe to the party to meet its doom.

If our group hid close to a corner, then Pops would finish it off. If they stood straight down the corridor, Freyja would do the honors. Every time, a single blow by blade or spell would end the deadly game of tag for good.

ALWAYS split symbiotic monsters up before engaging in battle, read the message written in huge letters on Pops's maps. Even so, I considered at first having Lana or Freyja take care of them both in one fell swoop of magic. But one half of the monster pairing would inevitably cover for the other, and the remaining half would lash out unpredictably.

If the chochos made it through the first attack, they would scatter and lunge at anyone they could. A full-on brawl would break out. As a rule, monsters tended to target the loudest player in a group. That's why shield-wielding vanguards would set off some sort of device or let out a war cry; by keeping

those targets focused on them, they could protect their party members further back in formation. However, chochos severed from their frog carriers completely ignored those rules. The frog-heads posed a greater danger if their chocho grapes got smushed first; they'd nab weapons or items your party carried and run away, amazingly quick all of a sudden.

Basically, we absolutely had to divide and conquer these symbiotic pairs. Once separated, the rest was easy. My sister and I took turns baiting either the frog-heads or the chochos, though she had a much easier time with either job. Back during her hunting days, Éa used to go at it for two whole days without rest or sleep, continuously lodging arrows into the wild boars' thick hide so that it bled and eventually weakened. The boars in the Beastfolk Woods belonged to a species exponentially larger than their dungeon-boar descendants. A shallow magic spell wouldn't even break its skin, and only truly heroic strength could slay one with a sword or spear, so the hunters had no choice but to rely on this traditional, cruel strategy. Éa had survived countless of these expeditions; she was a real hunter—something I fundamentally was not.

“Yukikaze, give me one of those shots.” I'd pretty much hit my breaking point, my ryvius empty from physical exhaustion.

“Squad Member Souya, they are reserved for times of extreme emergency or injury. It is exceedingly dangerous to use them flippantly.”

“Just this once. We're on a roll. I don't want to stop.”

“Presenting a suggestion to Lord Medîm.”

“Ah! You!”

Yukikaze took it upon herself to communicate with the rest of the party. “Apologizing for the sudden interruption. I am Yukikaze, the Repaired Wide Area Combat Program Advanced Isolla Model assisting you. Requesting you refer to me as ‘Yukikaze.’ An announcement for all: Squad Member Souya is knackered. Requesting a mission break.”

“Hey!” Don't ignore my orders and do whatever you want!

These AI bots already had humanlike traits, but recently, they'd begun crossing the line, conducting covert repairs and upgrades on themselves. I had a

bad feeling about where this would eventually lead. If we had been back in the modern world, I'd have immediately sent them packing to their manufacturers' customer-support center.

"Yaya, you okay? You look super pale," Éa asked with worry when she caught up to me.

"I'm fine. I can keep going."

"Hey, Souya. There's a watering hole nearby. We'll stop there for a break," Pops announced over the transmitter.

".....Okay," I begrudgingly agreed, chagrined at what seemed to be a measure taken for my sake. Arrows leading to the spot in question appeared on my glasses.

"These are real helpful, aren't they, Yaya?" my sister noted, fumbling with her glasses. "But they're almost too helpful. I feel like my other senses are gonna get duller." That made sense. But without this extra support, I'd be useless as an adventurer.

The two of us carefully made our way through the dungeon to meet up with our party.

"Good work, my love."

"No, I, uh....." I stammered in reply to my wife, awkward as a fish flopping about on water. Her gaze fell. A weird tension hung between us.

"Let's move. Souya, Princess Éa, get behind Shuna."

"Okaaay."

"Understood."

Following the expert adventurer's orders, our group resumed its trek. Freyja rambled about something to Lana, trying to strike up a conversation, but was flat out ignored.

"For you, dude."

"Oh, thanks."

Gaslark handed me some sort of fruit. Without thinking, I popped it in my

mouth.

Sour! It's super freakin' sour!

The thing tasted about a hundred times more acidic than a lemon. Too much for me to handle, I guzzled the rest of the water in my bottle to wash it down.

"Ooh, I want one," Éa chimed in.

"Sure thing."

"Eeek! So sour!" my sister squealed. It'd hit her the same way.

Wait, I feel a little less exhausted. Is this a lump of citric acid? Like a pickled plum?

"Got any more?" asked Éa.

"Nah, man." Guess she liked it. I'd have to ask Gaslark to teach me how to make them later.

The watering hole marked on the map veered away slightly from the shortest route through the floor. By that point, we'd spent four hours traversing the dungeon and, in those mere four hours, covered two and a half levels. If we kept it up at this rate, we could take a few more breaks and finish by evening. A day-trip dungeon exploration—a venture only the most exceptional adventurers armed with detailed maps could do. Everything was going so smoothly, I started to get nervous about our next expedition—if there ever was one, that is.

"Hmm, odd to see them here," Pops wondered aloud, then signaled for everyone to stop.

Moss covered the stone walls and floors around us in the damp tunnel. Farther down, the path opened up into a brightly lit chamber with a fountain and an ancient garden. Clear water wound in shallow rivets across the thickly carpeted ground, which was dense with vegetation. Sconces lit by emiluminite crystals hung from the walls, and gnarled vines snaked over upturned chairs and tables. This almost-rococo scene felt markedly out of sync with everything else around it, as if it existed in another civilization or *space entirely*. The source of the water posed another mystery, an exercise in futility to ponder at all.

“Damn, that’s not good,” I muttered, too.

A frog-head sat right next to the fountain. Dungeon monsters generally detested all kinds of light, but both of this one’s eyes had been gouged out. The bigger problem lay in the murder of chochos hanging from its hand. Though I still didn’t fully understand the ecology of these avian beasts, I did know they settled down easily enough in dark rooms but would waste away, violent and haggard, if exposed to light. Most likely, this correlation was what drove them to attack adventurers carrying light sources. Every one of the chochos dangling from the frog-head’s fingers had atrophied into vicious madness, snapping their fangs loudly.

“What should we do, Pops?” All I could suggest was to avoid them.

“They’ll mob other adventurers if we let them linger. We’re taking them down.” *Just like an experienced adventurer to have that sense of responsibility.*

“Right, how exactly?”

“If they eat me, use that momentary distraction to flee to the next level. Don’t look back.” So basically, he was going to go it alone. *All right, let’s see what you’ve got, what it means to be an adventurer a cut above the rest.*

Pops stepped out in front, alone. His longsword in its scabbard, he took his round shield in hand as if holding a Frisbee. Most frog-heads detected enemies by sight, but since this one couldn’t see, it had probably highly developed auditory senses to use instead. Pops threw a random rock to test the theory out. It bounced off the fountain; immediately, the frog-head’s tongue shot out to catch it, several times faster than the ones we’d seen up to that point. I didn’t manage to see anything but the afterimage of the motion.

And yet, Pops was even faster. He flung his shield at the monster. My eyes didn’t even catch its afterimage. I heard the sound of metal slicing into flesh and saw an almost arterial spray of blood. The shield had cleaved through half of the frog’s mouth and lodged itself into the rest of it, sealing its jaw shut. Furious chochos scattered from the frog-head’s hands, then flew at their perch’s killer in a rage.

“Here’s a lesson for you to take home: Find chochos grouped up like this, and there will always be one who acts as the ‘brains’ of the flock,” the

knowledgeable fighter explained. He then withdrew a knife and, with a flash of silver, plunged it into one of the chochos, and the rest crashed down to the floor as one. “Take that one out, and the rest will be temporarily paralyzed.”

The hardened adventurer pulled out his longsword and began swinging it back and forth like he was casually hacking through tall grasses, easily slicing through all the emaciated avian monsters. The frog-head whipped its long arm at our fearless guide, who severed it in two with a single slash of his sword. Pops then calmly walked up to the bleeding beast and buried his blade deep in the creature’s head, ending its life in one strike just as he had with all the others we’d encountered so far.

The man retrieved his shield and knife, then announced, “It’s over.”

It looked so incredibly simple, but I knew I’d never be able to replicate it. My brain had taken several shortcuts when processing the phenomena it could not comprehend, driving home the fact that the father of adventurers was on a completely different level.

“Souya, dispose of the bodies. Get our meal ready, too. I’ll go set traps around the perimeter.”

“Oh, uh, sure.” After calling my party over and giving them the okay to rest, I asked my sister to take care of meal prep. Then I got to dragging and dumping all the beastly corpses into the corridor, doused the whole lot with oil, and set it ablaze. It actually smelled pretty tasty. I got the feeling the frog meat would make a nice—

“Don’t even think about it. Those frog-heads are poisonous, and the chochos are just skin and bones—there’s no meat to be had on ’em,” Pops warned upon returning from patrol.

“Where on their body is the venom stored?”

“In a pouch by their eyes.”

“It’s to ward off predators, right?” Otherwise, the poisonous glands would probably concentrate around its mouth or limbs.

“That’s right. I’ve never seen one use that poison to attack anyone.”

“In that case, shouldn’t its arms and legs be edible?”

“You.....” He fumbled for words. “Sure, they’re still monsters, but you’d eat something that walked around on two legs?” the gruff adventurer asked incredulously. People had a cultural aversion to eating bipedal animals or monsters in this dimension. It was why even though chickens existed here, they didn’t often eat poultry. Though, I’d also heard it’s because they looked too similar to some deities among the Legion Gods. I’d been taken aback by how they viewed chicken eggs as somehow bizarre.

“What’ll it be, Souya? You having those frog legs for lunch?”

“Another day.” We didn’t have time to waste during this expedition, and I needed to rest up.

When we rejoined the others back in the chamber, we found them all seated on a large vinyl sheet spread out on the ground. Lined up in front of the picnic tarp were nine gray packs, all bulging and blowing out steam.

“What in the devil are those?” our fearless leader asked, having the same dubious consternation the others displayed. Éa, who’d obviously eaten the mystery packs before, boasted an expression dripping with pride.

These were defense—armed forces combat rations; you only had to add water to activate a chemical reaction that would then heat the packaged meals. We had precious few of these special emergency reserves—perfect for expeditions like this where time was of the essence.

Pops and I took our seats with the others. A wave of exhaustion hit me as soon as I sat down. The weird edge I’d been on with Pops had tired me out more than usual.

Beep, beep, the alarm rang. Éa turned off the timer on the wristwatch I’d lent her, then, looking extremely pleased with herself, addressed the group. “Heh-heh-heh, I’ll bet you don’t know, but these are amazing. All you do is add water, and you can have a nice warm meal. Less than a hundred remain in the whole world, so you better be grateful.” Whatever was mine was my sister’s, apparently. “Just watch what I do and follow after me.”

The slender elf opened the pouch, dumped out the water, then gingerly

removed its contents, her fingers dancing from the heat. In case you were wondering, each had two portions of rice, Hamburg-steak curry, and pork fried with ginger.

“Peel the lid off the rice, open the package, and pour this stew over it, then use a spoon to eat. That’s all!” she declared, then immediately dug into her own. The others followed suit.

“Wow, this really is nice and warm. The pork is so wonderfully tender,” raved Freyja. “.....Could we not re-create this somehow with magic?”

“Milady, we absolutely must. We’d make a fortune.”

The Champion of Light and her maid ate their meals, their faces darkly conspiratorial. Gaslark turned his back to the group to have his.

“I’d be good with this every time.”

“.....”

“.....”

Shuna happily munched away, while Lana and Lis ate their meals in silence.

“Hmmm, this *is* really good, but it would be better with a little more *oomph* and spice.” Éa reviewed the curry.

“You’re basically an elite curry expert now, aren’t you?” I noted. My sister had an incredible capacity to pick up anything that piqued her curiosity. I, for one, would be grateful if her culinary studies broadened our dietary repertoire.

“I *know*. But it’s a hard life, you know? Lanceil’s the only one who can take any heat, so I have to add the extra spice to my own bowl every time, even though it’s so much better when you can let it mix in with the whole batch,” my spice-loving sister complained. “Oh, that’s right, I was playing around making a new hot spice the other day and wound up re-creating the seven-spice mix you use. I never would’ve expected *pain relief fruit* would play the key role.”

“Damn, you’re amazing.” Pain relief fruit? Oh, poppy seeds?

“I’m gonna try my hand at making the broth for udon next. Those little granular things you brought are super handy, but I bet you get way more flavor if you make the broth from scratch. I asked Ghatt to pick some seaweed for me,

so it'll probably be waiting for us at camp when we get back. Oh, and once I finish that, I'm gonna move on to balsamic oils and little fermented fish dishes."

"What are you, a master chef?!" It wasn't long ago that the extent of her cooking skills was pouring boiling water into instant ramen. Talk about amazing growth.

"Souya."

"Yes, Pops? Do you like it?" I'd been so engrossed in my conversation with Éa that I'd forgotten about him.

"Looked like you weren't going to need it, so I took one of your rice packs off your hands." The eye-patched man had blown through his portions, finishing both of his and pouring the rest of his curry over one of mine.

Afraid complaining would cost me the other, I gave it up and loaded my remaining rice with the ginger fried pork. The sweet and spicy glazed pork and cabbage paired perfectly with the bed of rice, providing my tired body just the calorie kick it needed. No matter how down or exhausted I was, white rice would always raise my spirits.

"Medîm, want to try some of this on your curry? It's really good," offered Éa, grinning mischievously as she took out her special spice mix.

"Aye, my thanks." Unconcerned, Pops held out his curry. Shuna, who'd already fallen victim to this ploy once before, looked disgusted. Éa sprinkled some of the red flakes from her small jar over the stew, and Pops gobbled up a few bites. "Mm? Oh. Well." His expression remained cool and collected, but streams of sweat ran down his brow.

Truth is, Éa, I've got some of your special spice on me, too—it's a perfect blinding pepper spray.

"What do you think? Good, right?" the elf chef asked, beaming, not a hint of ill intent to be seen.

"Mm, not bad." Pops shoveled the rest of the curry in his mouth, then gulped down all the water left in his bottle. His face had turned a bright shade of lobster red. That spice was too strong for heim consumption. Though, to be fair, it had made Lana cry out in pain, and she was an elf, too.

After lunch, Lazalisa made some tea for us. Its lovely aroma calmed my soul, regardless of its taste.

“Lana, Lady Freyja, please have some,” I said, handing them a bag of hardtack along with a squeeze bottle full of apricot jam. “It’s helped Lana replenish her magic before, so I imagine it’ll help you as well, Lady Freyja.”

“My, we have dessert as well? What a lovely tea party this is turning out to be.”

“Thank you. But I haven’t expended any magical energy yet, so—”

“I’ll take it,” Lis declared, then swooped in to snatch the biscuits Lana refused.

“Wait, Lis, you’ve got, like, unlimited magical reserves!”

“Hisss!” She bared her fangs, threatening me. *I don’t really get it, but you’re basically equal to goddesses, right? You sure you can go around hissing at people?*

“Souya, where’s mine?”

“Any for me in there?”

I ignored the young boy and the middle-aged man. “Lazalisa, how does it look?”

Freyja munched away at the dried sweets like some kind of elegant hamster. Lazalisa took her employer’s ryvius in hand to check her magic.

“Milady, these desserts are remarkable. Your mana is shooting back up.”

“Excellent decision to serve such rare delicacies, Sooberier.”

So maybe magic is somehow related to mental energy?

“Right, little chicks.” Waving his hand, Pops called for our attention. “We’re taking two bell tolls to rest,” he announced, then pulled out an hourglass. The bells rang every sixty minutes, which meant we’d have about a two-hour break. “Everyone, check your equipment for damage and your own ryviuses. Then pair up with at least one more person to inspect yourselves for injuries. I’ll keep watch. The rest of you, get some sleep. Once we get back to it, we’re heading to the twentieth floor without breaks. Prepare yourselves as best you can.”

We all got to work following Pops's instructions. I checked my own gear, then surveyed everyone's ryviuses. All good. Éa and I looked at each other for injuries and found none. Lana paired up with Freyja to do the same. That done, we all got comfortable in our own ways and rested. Using my backpack as a pillow, I decided to catch some shut-eye.

"Hee-hee," my younger sister giggled as she wrapped herself close around me. She'd been extra touchy these last few days, and while I only saw her as a sister, it was starting to feel rude to Lana. But as soon as we finished our business here, I'd have King Remlia tell me the truth about the war, and we could put this all behind us. I just had to hold on a little longer. We'd made it this far without any trouble. I prayed to my goddess the rest would go just as smoothly, then wondered if that was an ironic request to make of the Goddess of Malevolence.

A dream?

Yeah, I think so.

At least, it felt like one.

I was in a forest I knew, but I became someone else. My stomach roiled with gut-wrenching pain and sorrow. The smell of blood and gunpowder filled my nostrils; nearby, someone wailed.

Through the trees, I caught glimpses of a terrifying creature—a massive, deformed, ravenous beast. It had its gaze locked on an elf and a black cat, both familiar faces. The two exchanged whispers, prayers, and vows.

Then there stood an elf and a raven-haired woman. Like two full moons, the elf's eyes turned bright gold. The colossal beast howled at the lunar orbs in the sky. Burning red balls of fire rained on the forest as if they were tears from the heavenly beings.

When I opened my eyes, another chestnut pair stared into mine. "Are you all right, darling? You were screaming." It'd been two whole days since we'd spent time this close together; having Lana this near set my heart racing.

"Sorry, Lana. It was just a nightmare."

My stomach still ached as if I'd been shot, but the phantom pain vanished as soon as I forced myself to realize it wasn't real. Evidently, I'd been the last to wake. Everyone else had packed up their things, ready to go. I drank a sip of water. Lana had not left my side. She looked at me, worry in her eyes.

"Sorry, this is totally unrelated, but didn't you have golden eyes?"

Thousands of times, I must have looked into those chestnut eyes, but they had been golden when I first met her. Actually, I got the feeling they looked that way at other times, too. If anything, it was weird to see them brown, no?

What's going on? Is something messing with my memory?

"No, my eyes have always been chestnut brown since birth. Do you prefer blue eyes like all the others, too?"

"No, that's not what I mean." I don't choose who I like based on their eye color.

"Lala, your eyes do change color sometimes, though. You too, Yaya. Is that some kinda spell? Can you put it on me, too? It's supercool."

"Huh? You've never mentioned that. My eyes change color?" The news clearly startled her.

"Good, Souya, you're up. Let's move." But Pops cut in before the question ever got an answer.

We'll have to talk about that after we get home, too. Once this expedition ends..... No, don't go there. I don't want to jinx anything.

The short nap had fully restored my ryvius. I only had about as much as a puppy to begin with, so even a light sleep maxed it out. After some stretches, I got back into mission mode.

"Souya, I've got a suggestion," Pops offered.

We rearranged ourselves in a special formation to tackle the crucible that was the nineteenth floor. Pops, Shuna, and I took the front line, followed by Freyja, Lana, Éa, and Lis in the middle. Lazalisa and Gaslark brought up the rear, with the exception that the goblin in dwarf gear would take on a partisan role, moving freely up to the front or center at his discretion. We put the four

highest-risk members in the center of the formation. The snatcher never took more than one victim. That's why we wouldn't let it break us up; we'd keep these four together and protect them as a group. Someone suggested we tie ourselves together, but the string would only get in our way and would be pointless if it was somehow cut. We would need to stay in this close-knit formation from here on until we reached the twentieth floor.

Almost immediately after resuming our trek, we ran into a monster.

"Eyes."

Following our battle-hardened guide's instruction, I shot an arrow through the thing's peeper. It had two legs, kind of like an ostrich without plumage, and a face as flat as a frog's, features that made it look like some kind of processed chicken. An arrow lodged in its eye, and the unnatural chicken lost its balance and collapsed, flailing about violently. Even a bolt straight through the head wouldn't kill enemies that easily this far in the dungeon.

"Shuna, you take the left. I'll go in from the right."

"Yes, sir!"

Pops and Shuna raced toward the thing. A couple flashes of steel later, and the monster's head and torso plopped to the ground.

"Souya, dispose of the corpse."

"On it." Dragging the body over to one side of the corridor, I doused it with oil and lit it on fire. This one, I was almost positive I could eat just like that.

"Next." We kept moving. "Legs."

On cue, I sent an arrow to pierce the legs of our next foe, a monster with a dizzying array of eyes. The thing looked like a huge, ungodly chunk of flesh with multitudinous eyes and innumerable, razor-sharp tentacles, all propped up on two thin legs. I fainted so it wouldn't slap my arrow away and released the bolt. Naturally, the monster lost its balance and fell over, restricting the movement of those tentacles, on which its body collapsed.

"Shuna, duck behind me and stay hidden."

"Yes, sir!"

The wizened man crouched down low, his shield out before him; Shuna was behind, making himself just as small. The two slowly but surely crept toward the monster. Numerous tentacles slammed into the shield; Pops angled it with expert precision, deflecting the attacks.

“On my call, jump out to the left.”

“Yes, sir!” I was glad to see Shuna so pumped. Assisting the father of adventurers in battle would be a great experience for him.

“Now!” Pops pinned a bundle of the tentacles against the ground under his shield while Shuna leaped at the enemy and thrust his sword in its body. Without skipping a beat, the battle-hardened adventurer rushed at the monster, treading on its tentacles to get close. Under the onslaught of their two blades, the creature perished.

“Corpse.”

“On it.” Splash of oil, light a fire. We kept moving on to the next battle.

“Arms.” I shot as ordered. Once our enemy lost its balance, the two vanguards finished it off. I disposed of the body, and we continued on.

“You see the pattern now, don’t you? After those three.”

“Oh yeah.”

“?” Shuna tilted his head like a confused puppy as he pondered Pops’s question.

I voiced my takeaway. “Don’t aim for the monster’s most developed organ. Go for its weakest part, right?”

“Exactly. They habitually use the more distinguished, evolved parts of their bodies to attack and defend. So we center our aim somewhere else. If you’re lucky, you can destabilize your enemy with a single arrow or knife. Once it’s down, collect yourself and strike its fatal point. This strategy should get you through most of the less intelligent creatures.”

“How do you decide where else to shoot first?” Sometimes, monsters didn’t even have arms or legs to aim for.

“Experience, little chick. Trial and error.” Great, so the most difficult option.

“Shuna, you’re quite the swordsman already. I imagine there are none in Remlia of your age who can match your skill.”

“Thank you very much!” The young boy’s eyes shone so brilliantly I hardly recognized him. *Would it hurt for you to look at me like that sometimes?*

“So no need to panic. Your sword betrays you, though that much is to be expected of one so young. Remember to take a deep breath before you go in for the attack every once in a while.”

“Yes, sir, I will, sir!”

Our party stopped in its tracks.

“And where should we aim for on that thing in our way, Pops?”

“Hmm?”

Down the corridor, a giant reptile known as a rock-eating turtle chomped away at the wall. We’d fought with an oversize, mutated version of this beast before. Compared with that, the one before us looked tiny—so small—but even so took up about 70 percent of the passageway.

“Think for yourself. Don’t expect all the answers to be given to you.”

“.....Understood.” I stepped in front of the group on my own. Based on my encounters so far, this kind of monster was—

“Be careful, my love.” I gave Lana a wave in response.

Creeping up next to the giant turtle, I started hacking away at the wall with my woodsman’s ax. It was rock-hard but gave way easily after the ax’s blade made it through one of the layers. Fluorescent specks of unrefined emiluminite peppered the crumbled stone. I made about six fist-size clumps of the stuff, figuring they’d be easier for the big guy to eat than gnawing away at the wall, then made a trail with them, placing one every few steps. The massive turtle ate them one by one, with each bite moving farther away until the path had cleared.

“All clear.” I led the others past the hungry turtle safely. “How did I do?”

Not all dungeon monsters were necessarily hostile or violent. Those who remained calm if you looked them in the eye wouldn’t aggressively attack—at

least, in my experience. Though, that theory may be proven wrong going forward with new monsters, but I'd only know for sure after gaining experience and through trial and error like Pops had mentioned.

"Not bad, I'd say." *Hey, why are you so harsh on me?* "I'll hand it to you for getting us through the obstacle without injury, but those turtle shells go for quite a bit. One that big'd probably run about twenty gold."

"Saltine! We must turn back!" The shopaholic Champion of Light jumped at the news before anyone else could respond.

"Cease your whining, milady. The sight of it is too embarrassing, even for you. You seem like a petulant child."

"Yeah, not a good look, dude."

"Freyja, you will bring the Gastolfo name to tears."

The three's harsh criticism almost made Freyja cry. "But my money, my money..."

"Yes, yes, we know, milady. Time to move on." The reptilian maid pushed her employer forward so as not to break formation.

"It's no walk in the park to take them down, you know. And it takes time. Forget it."

"My sheeell... My gold..." Evidently, not even Pops could distract Freyja from her loss.

Normally, adventures boiled down to a repeating cycle of trekking, scouting, fighting, dissecting, and resting. Since we aimed to finish this mission quickly, we'd removed the *dissecting* part entirely, ignoring all the resources we came across. I'd explained that at the briefing this morning when we met up. *Have you forgotten already, Lady Champion?*

The map on my glasses showed the exit staircase from this floor at thirty meters ahead of us. There were no enemies around the stairs, either; I let out a brief sigh of relief. We arrived at the next level without much else to write home about.

To make a long story short, the eighteenth floor was the easiest to cross. The

array of monsters we encountered remained the same as the previous floor, and Pops gave commands and took the lead at the head of our group. We left everything to him. Seriously, adventuring in the dungeon had never been close to this easy. I didn't have to think about anything, and I knew we were all in good hands. It became painfully clear how ill-fit I was to lead anybody.

Everyone was in even better condition than before we stepped foot in the dungeon that morning. Elated at all our successful battles, in the groove, and relaxed to have an exceptional adventurer leading us, we felt no more tired than after a nice walk. Plus, our magical reserves were basically full. Nobody had sustained injury. Every one of us in our peak condition, we took those fateful steps to the nineteenth floor. It looked exactly the same as every other floor before. And yet, something—

“?”

Shuna had apparently sensed the uncomfortable shift, too. The very air around us felt different; it hung thick with tension. Everyone else seemed to attribute the charged atmosphere to the floor itself, but I saw past that. It was Pops; the aura surrounding him had darkened. I took a sidelong glance at him and saw a demon, one cursed to spend thirty endless years searching for his friend in this shadowy prison, hunting an enemy he couldn't see—all alone. The average person could not even imagine the fortitude that took; it was beyond human.

“Now, then.” The haunted man turned around to face us all once more. “Let me introduce you to the gatekeeper of this floor.” He lifted his thumb and pointed at himself. “Me.”

““Huh?”” Our party reacted as one.

“I don't mean you need to take me down, but you do need to take me with you to the twentieth floor. This will be your last trial as initiate adventurers. Overcome it, and the Adventurers Guild of Remlia will recognize you as full-fledged adventurers and delegate quests they could not have entrusted to amateurs. Both the rewards and risks you encounter will not hold a candle to what you've seen so far.”

So all this time, we've been provisional adventurers?

“One more thing: Although not many people have gone missing on this floor, all of them were elves or those with great magic ability. You four are at greatest risk,” he said, looking at Lana, Éa, Lis, and Freyja. We had two Hoense School Leaders of the Final Flame, an elven archer, and a Divine Medium priestess—and one of them might soon fall victim.

If possible, I really hope it's not Lana— No, stop. What a shitty thing to think.

“An evil lurks on this floor, one we believe to be behind all the disappearances. I’ve already told Souya this, but I’ve been after that son of a bitch for over thirty years.” Pops trailed off into silence. “.....And I’ve got nothing to show for it. The twenty-nine parties who lost their loved ones here all searched with everything they had, scouring every inch of this floor. But no one was ever found. That’s why I’m going to keep searching until the day I die.

“So if one of you does go missing, the rest of you don’t go looking for them—I’ll do that for you. I’m just a man who’s failed to find the one friend he’s sought for this long, but at the very least, I can continue the search in your stead. And I will find you—I swear it. So don’t you dare stop here. Do not let this Deranged Stratum hold you prisoner. Once you touch that twentieth floor, you’ll officially become higher-ranking adventurers than I. Adventuring is all about results. No one below you has any right to demand anything of you. As of tomorrow, you’ll all stand above me. Keep that in mind and don’t waste your time on me.”

The adventurer, his face hardened by years of toil, continued, “I am just a wretched madman, an imprisoned adventurer—a failed one, at that. Take a good hard look at me and promise yourselves you’ll never end up like this. That’s my—” Pops’s voice caught in his throat. “No, never mind. Let’s move, little chicks. Time for your last lesson.”

Was I the only one who heard the words he never spoke?

CHAPTER 4

Rhora the Deranged

Our party forged on in that same tight-knit formation, not running into monsters for a good while. I remained alert and strained every one of my senses, and I had Yukikaze keep her sensors activated, too. Her aqueous cerebrum had about enough power left to get us through this floor, an update that I shared with Pops, unnecessarily perhaps. Secretly, I also placed tracers on all four of our high-risk targets. If our defenses failed and one of them was taken, I'd be able to track them down.

Just then, a white figure suddenly appeared down the corridor amid the pitch-black darkness. As it crossed the threshold, the light from our lanterns revealed its true form, one so perverse that it sent a sinister chill slithering down my spine. Shaped like a person, the ghoul had skin as pale as one of a drowned corpse. Not a single lock or strand of body hair covered its sexless, emaciated, gaunt body. Unnaturally long nails, sharp and mean, extended from its fingertips. Most disturbingly, it had no mouth nor nose, only a huge eyeball where its face should've been. Piercingly blue and full of emotion, the eye looked too human for comfort. Out of all the varied species of monsters I'd encountered so far, none had ever stirred a physiological aversion in me like this one.

Pops put up his hand and signaled us to stop. That man had fast reflexes. Instantly, he closed the ten meters between him and the monstrosity, then lopped its head off with his longsword and brought the severed creature back to us.

"We call these things saplings. Watch its corpse, and you'll see why."

The headless figure twisted and shriveled in on itself into something resembling a young tree, then began to disintegrate and disappear into dust. A similar process began on the scalp Pops held in his hands, but so far, it still

retained its former shape. Though almost too withered to recognize, *long, pointed ears* remained on either side of the sapling's head.

“Look—these are elf ears, much like the ones belonging to the elven adventurers who have gone missing here in the past years. I take no pleasure in the thought, but it's very likely those abducted adventurers serve as the foundation of these vile creatures.”

““ ””

The idea left us all speechless. Finally, I understood how this floor came to be called the Deranged Stratum. Parties in their search for lost friends had presumably fought these saplings—monsters bearing the very same identifying features as their fallen comrades.

What a nightmare from hell. I don't even want to imagine what that's like.

“Aside from this Eye sapling, we've also got Ears, a faceless variation with incredible hearing. The worst, though, are the Mouths. Their entire face is one big cavity. These can chant magic, reproductions of the spells once incanted by kidnapped adventurers.”

A monster that can use magic? Damn, that's not good. One relatively weak but wide-ranging spell would be enough to blow through the little ryvius I have and send me to my grave.

“Alone, they're not much. Any adventurer worth their salt could take them down with one blow. But they've got a very dangerous ability. If an Eye watches you for too long or an Ear picks up a loud noise, they'll call every other sapling on the floor to them.”

Some monsters on the other levels worked in the same way, but they'd only call four or five reinforcements at most. Shit would get real if every single one of these came at us at once.

“Do you have an idea of how many there are in total?” I asked, cold sweat beading on my brow.

“Normally between fifty and seventy. But they go through transitional growth, and right about now, they should number over a hundred. As if that weren't enough, you can slay every last one of them, and they'll spring right

back up. In other words, we don't have an exact number."

"That's terrible."

"Not necessarily. As long as you stay hidden and quietly kill any you find immediately, you won't have a problem. No problem at all." He made it sound so simple. Or maybe knowing how to handle them alone made it "easy"?

Pops crushed the crumbling head, then looked up at us again. "Souya, Éa, I want you to take out those Eyes. Don't worry about killing them—just make sure you hit them somewhere in the face. Don't rush. Steady your aim and shoot. I'll finish them off. If I fail, Shuna, you take over."

""""Understood,""" the three of us replied in unison.

"If we encounter an Ear, we freeze. Don't even breathe. I'll take care of them. Mouths, we all attack at once—they take priority. Cut them down as quickly as possible, and no matter what, never let them *finish their spell*."

"One question, Pops," I interjected.

"Aye?"

"What if we run into multiple of more than one type?"

"I'll handle it. The rest of you, back me up. Just try not to get in my way." So basically, leave it all to him.

I didn't find out until much later, but Pops was not the only gatekeeper to guard this floor. He joined parties with elves or powerful mages, but elite adventurers took turns guiding the rest of the groups. In other words, this level provided a chance for skilled veterans to show initiates how it's done. It gave newbies a guideline of the powerful strength they should aim for, an inspiration to garner envy and motivate the newer generations to one day reach those same pinnacles of expertise. We'd seen more than our fair share even before reaching this floor—or so I thought until the father of adventurers showed off his extra tremendous feats of skill.

The words *fast* and *nimble* couldn't even clearly explain how quickly he moved. Though better than average, his swordsmanship was not particularly out of the ordinary. Even so, it baffled me that a single man could achieve such

awesome power with nothing more than a sword and shield. I'd hardly spent any time with swords, but even I could recognize the absolute mastery he commanded. Only with his blade and shield, this man could fight against anything and reach the highest of heights.

It fired even me up, which was surprising given my rather dismal outlook on life. But Pops had the strength every man dreamed of. Shuna, clearly just as enthralled, hungrily watched the adventurer, spellbound. His expertise became a source of inspiration for us, elevating our technique.

"Four enemies approaching," Yukikaze alerted. Then we saw them at a four-way intersection: two Mouths flanked on either side by an Eye. Éa and I exchanged glances, silently deciding I'd take the Eye on the right and leave the left one for her. Our arrows sailed through their marks.

A lovely, enchanting voice began to flow from one of the Mouths. "O Flames, dance with your primal power and turn—"

But Pops and Shuna lunged at it, their swords crossing and severing the Mouth in two. Gaslark finished off both Eyes we'd blinded with two thrusts of his rapier. The needlelike blade of his beautifully ornamented, slender sword was completely covered with engraved words. This goblin contained immeasurable power, too.

I kept reminding myself to not let my guard down, but I felt oddly calm. Still, one thing was on my mind: Lazalisa had broken our formation, moving up to the center line to be close to Freyja.

"Lazalisa, is something wrong?" I reached out.

"Not exactly, but I have an uneasy feeling, as if something had its gaze trained on us," she replied, nervously inspecting our surroundings.

"It's impossible to walk like this, Lazalisa," Freyja complained. She had a point; the addition of a fifth person in the middle group hindered their movement. The bulging packs the beastmaid carried only exacerbated the issue.

"Lis, could you set up a defensive shield on command around the four in the center?"

"I could."

“Great. That sound good to you, Pops?”

“Quiet,” he hissed. I’d asked the man for instruction, only to get told to shut up. He motioned for us all to crouch down low. Three minutes of total silence passed.

“One enemy approaching.”

Another two minutes later, a faceless Ear appeared. The battle-hardened adventurer’s instincts had put Yukikaze’s sensors to shame.

Though it had no eyes with which to see, the Ear looked all around. The long elf ears sprouting from its head moved as if they belonged to a completely different creature, shifting and turning every which way to pick up any sounds in the area. Less stable on its legs than the other saplings, the Ear twisted its upper body to slowly shuffle along. Its uncoordinated movements somehow made it even creepier.

Stooped halfway down to the ground, Pops noiselessly sneaked up on the Ear and withdrew his knife. He thrust it straight into the creature’s heart, then went around behind and hacked its head off. It’d taken no more than a second for the man to nullify the threat, after which he signaled, *Not yet*.

Once again, we waited in silence.

“Four enemies approaching.”

All of us took shallow breaths so as to not move a muscle. We heard what sounded like an angry gnashing of teeth, then saw more Ears appear—four, exactly as Yukikaze had warned.

Éa drew back her bowstring, every *creak* sounding incredibly loud in the uneasy silence. She’d moved closer to the front line for space to pull back her bow and now had an arrow aimed at one of the Ears. It felt risky to me, but Pops gave her a *Do it* look. I joined in, moving my hand over Agaccion to slowly unsheathe the blade. My elven sister and I attacked as one, our arrow and blade pinning two Ears to the stone walls, while Pops and Shuna slew the remaining two.

“Good.” Our leader gave us the all clear, and we breathed a sigh of relief. This battle was testing every last nerve I had. The thought that a single mistake

could cause an avalanche of these ghouls to rush at us had shaken me to my core. However, as long as we quickly, quietly slew them without getting noticed, it didn't matter how many came at us. No problem whatsoever, if we didn't mess up, that is.

Exploring the dungeon meant constantly treading the treacherous land of unknowns. I could pretty much guarantee we'd have to cross crucibles that would make this challenge look uninteresting at best. We had a cheat sheet, making this an easy fight; basically, *if you can't even pull this off, turn round and go home*. All we had to do was play by the book in our last test as initiate adventurers.

After disposing of the cadavers, we set off once more, still out of formation.

"Lazalisa, please go back to your station."

"I'm sorry, Master Souya. I cannot comply with your request," she rebuffed, ignoring my order and instead staying in the center with one hand on Freyja's shoulder. Éa also lingered out of position, walking at my side on the front line, where she'd move up to shoot.

"Do as you're told, Lazalisa. I will not allow this impertinence while our party remains in action."

"I deeply apologize, milady, but I cannot heed that command. The tip of my tail tingles; something is not right with this floor. I sense all manner of hostility aimed at us from both near and far." The beastmaid's lizard tail quivered, pushing up her skirt and bumping into Lis's shield. The armored maiden looked very, very displeased.

I'd pegged Lazalisa for a reasonable type, not one who'd stir up a fuss while we crept around our enemy's lair. *Bad call on my part.*

Breaking formation was never good. Packing the center with five people would make it difficult for any of them to move in case of an emergency. Three times, I warned Lazalisa to get back in line, but she refused to comply. I couldn't force her to move, and I wasn't about to get into an argument with her here, so we continued as we were.

Thirteen times, we battled the saplings, somehow managing to successfully

fight and defeat them despite our bungled formation. Anxiety still gnawed away at me, but all that mattered was to reach the stairs safely in order to leave the dungeon. So I decided to drop it.

For about fifty meters we walked without encountering anything. The absolute lack of any enemies felt unsettling. Checking my map, I saw we'd made it about two-thirds of the way to the stairs.

.....*Huh? That's weird.*

We were taking the long way—was that the safer route? We'd done a whole circuit of the floor. Was I just imagining things? Or did Pops have a good reason, some involved strategy for doing this? What was going on? Wait, what if—?

The man in question braced himself for battle. *Quiet*, he signaled. We'd stopped at an L-shaped corner of the corridor.

"Three enemies approaching."

Though very faint, I heard the same gnashing from before. Pops pressed his back up against the wall; the rest of us followed suit and waited. Keeping myself hidden around the corner, I took a peek at our enemies.

There were two Ears and one Mouth and Eye—*four* enemies. For some reason, they had lined up in some kind of formation themselves, one of the Ears in front followed by the Mouth and Eye to its left and right. The second Ear brought up the rear. Yukikaze had missed one. Were her sensors damaged? Or maybe the dungeon had interfered somehow? But I had no time to figure it out. With the saplings gaining on us quicker than I'd imagined, I turned all my attention to the issue at hand. I couldn't even confirm what I saw.

"I'll take the Ears. Éa, go for the Eye. Shuna, Mouth. Master Gaslark, I'd ask you to take care of the rest."

"You got it, dude."

I kept my attention fixed on the back row. Yukikaze's sensors hadn't picked up anything, but I wouldn't be surprised if an extra monster popped up. That was just the kind of place this deranged floor was.

"Let's move."

We all burst out from behind the corner. An arrow nocked, I kept an eye out for the rear and watched the battle unfold with the other. Using his longsword, Pops chopped one Ear's head off, while Shuna thrust his through the Mouth's throat, and Éa sent her arrow straight through the other Eye. Then Gaslark moved in to finish, stabbing the Eye and the Mouth in the heart with his rapier. It dealt small yet fatal wounds.

"Huh?"

Something inexplicably strange happened. They all relaxed as if the battle were over. Shuna sheathed his longsword, Éa lowered her bow, and Gaslark fell back to his place in the rear line. Pops returned his longsword to its scabbard.

For a second, I stood there, dumbstruck. Then a violent explosion of something bordering on rage erupted within me. *There was still one more Ear.*

That's it.

"Grant me the grace of the Hidden Name," I prayed, preparing to shoot, and poured magic into my arm as I drew back my bow. Actually, scratch that—the arrow could not absorb my magic. The spirit of the hero inhabiting my gauntlet had already filled the bolt with an exhilaration bordering on joy.

"I found you."

The phrase that came to mind and the raging emotions within me brought my blood to a boil. My lycan bow groaned under the strain.

I will not miss.

Never will I miss again.

With this strike, I will end it all. At long last, I shall sever this ill-fated bond, slay this kill that has evaded me through the ages.

After hundreds of years, I finally came face-to-face with my mortal enemy. Its featureless face had peeled off to reveal a shrunken, skull-like visage. Darkness blacker than a moonless night filled its eye sockets. It stripped off the skin of its arms to reveal two curved bladelike claws; its lower body disappeared as if in a haze, while a cape-like coat draped over its emaciated, skeletal torso.

"This nefarious abomination you have become cannot fool me! Rhora!" I

cried. Souya's companions and my blood daughters froze at the sound.

A pathetic excuse for a shriek escaped Rhora as she caught sight of me. Once again, she turned to run. Once again, she attempted to flee, the same way she had fled our motherland, and the same way she had baited me with the giant spider to escape. This filth no longer retained any sense of reason or sentience. Only its obsessive determination to survive had prolonged its life deep in this cursed dungeon. For years, it drained the raw blood of monsters, of humans, of me!

Die.

Die!

I shall vanquish you here and now! You shall only know unending pain until the sanity returns to your eyes! I shall force you to remember! To face what you have done! What evil your actions spurred!! Curse you, Rhora the Dragon Eater! Your treachery has ravaged my mother's glory, you who brought infernal shame upon the family name!!

"Yaya, what's wrong?!"

"Move, maiden!!" The young elf stood before me, barring my arrow. A foolish act. Too foolish to bear—her idiocy left me no choice but to shoot them both at once. Nothing could thwart my obsessive pursuit, not even my own descendant. No one could—



Despite the furious rage roiling inside, I took back control of my body and diverted my arrow, though the bolt that shot forth from my bow was closer to a light beam surging with magic force. It glided off Rhora, then completely wrecked the wall it struck.

As the explosion reverberated through the darkness, Rhora raised her cruel claws and unfurled her cape to abduct Éa. Nobody except for me had seen her. They hadn't even reacted to her presence. I sprinted, leaped, then slammed my bow down on her talons.

I thought I saw Rhora smile. She slashed at both my shoulders, slicing through my knife-proof poncho as if it were tissue paper. Blood spurted violently from my wounds. But I'd managed to cover Éa. Rhora left gashes in my back as parting gifts. It felt more hot than painful. I gasped for air. The taste of iron filled my mouth.

"Yaya!"

".....It's here," Pops whispered.

I did it. I saved her—my sister was safe in my arms.

"Souya! Where the hell did you get those wounds?!" Shuna shouted in surprise, shocking the others as well. It must have looked like I started gushing blood out of nowhere to them. I'd forgotten one vital fact—that we were hunting a foe inescapably tied to Lümidia. Overpowered by her rage and obsession, I had come this close to shooting my own sister.

"Lis, if you would."

"Fine."

My full body weight still rested on Éa. The gashes must have been deep; her face heavy with worry, my elven sister stroked my hair.

"O light, gather to me and heal, I pray, I implore by my—name."

"Urgh!" While not as severe as what I'd experienced under Lana's care, searing heat and pain spread throughout my body. It felt like someone was manipulating the flesh around my wounds. And yet—

“All healed.”

—the pain instantly lifted. Leaning on my sister’s shoulder, I stood up, my poncho and camo fatigues obviously still in tatters.

“Lis, was it? What classification of magic do you use?” Freyja asked. “I’ve never seen something heal so quickly. It’s positively inhuman.”

“Heh, nothing a mere mortal could understand.”

“*Come again?*” Lis and Freyja turned against each other, ready to fight.

An uneasy anxiety and strange emptiness hit me at once. Pops stood eerily silent.

.....Huh?

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding,” I spat, then turned to look at each of my party members: Éa, Shuna, Lis, Freyja, Lazalisa, Gaslark, Pops. “Lana?”

She was gone.

““What?”” Everyone but Pops stared at one another in disbelief. I didn’t blame them. Lana, who’d been with us just a second ago, had vanished in the blink of an eye. If I hadn’t forced myself to consider the possibility ahead of time, I probably would’ve floundered, not knowing what to do next. I shook Éa off and stood on my own two feet.

“Yukikaze, you’re following the tracer, right?”

“Yes. I apologize, Squad Member Souya. My system malfunctioned and failed to detect irregularities in Mistress Lana’s movements.”

Lana’s location appeared on my glasses. She was moving—fast. There was already a full hundred meters between us.

“Souya, wait.” Our fearless guide stopped me before I could run off. “*You saw it, didn’t you?*”

“Yes.”

“Go. But leave any item infused with magic here—including your ryvius.”

“What? Medîm, what are you saying?” Éa protested.

“My gut tells me that thing can somehow detect magic,” Pops explained. “Listen to me, Souya. You are to find it and tell me where it is. By now, you should be painfully aware that it is not an enemy you can defeat. Do not engage; just tell me where to go. Put those Otherworldly skills and your Wise Eyes to use and spot that damned ghost that’s eluded so many adventurers for thirty long years.”

“No, no, wait, Medîm! Yaya will be defenseless without his sword!”

“Don’t worry. We’re going to draw every last one of those bastards to us.”

Far off in the distance, I could hear something shuffling toward us—all the saplings answering the call of Lümidia’s blast. Pops pulled out another odd tool; it looked like a mini rocket launcher with a trigger.

“I’ve got illegal gunpowder loaded in here. Once I pull this trigger, it’ll unleash an explosive blast that will call all the saplings in the dungeon home for dinner. This will put every one of us at great risk. Sorry, but prepare yourselves. I’ll make amends however you’d like—if we survive this.”

I hadn’t waited for Pops to finish to start readying to leave. Pulling out the needle the Dark Lord gave me, I unlocked and removed Heuress’s Gauntlet. Leaving it behind meant I’d lose the connection to Lümidia, too, but I didn’t give a shit about whatever yearslong feud she had with Rhora. From around my neck, I removed my ryvius vials and the coral necklace Ghett had given me, then unslung my quiver and placed it on the ground next to my lycan bow. Taking Agaccion in hand, I thrust it into the ground.

“Agaccion, protect my party—not me,” I commanded the enchanted blade. Its powers were more useful for them here.

Lana’s position kept moving. She’d now covered about six hundred meters.

“Yaya, take mine.”

“No. You’re definitely gonna wanna have that,” I said, prodding her with the compound bow she’d offered. She’d need it in a melee to take down those Mouths. “Plus, I’ll make less noise the less I have on me. Don’t worry, Éa. I’ll save Lana—I promise.”

“I know, but! But..... Sorry, never mind.” She swallowed whatever she’d been

about to say. She was a good sister—too good for me.

“We can handle things here, Souya.”

“Thanks, Shuna.” No lengthy good-byes for us. Friendships between men are all about action, not words.

“Get ready,” Pops warned. “Open your mouths and cover your ears.”

He pulled the trigger. The resulting explosion echoed loudly through the dungeon. I’d plugged my ears, but even then, the blast was so intense it hit me like a knockout punch and made my head spin. The brief, silent pause that followed was soon broken by racing footsteps and hair-raising shrieks coming from down the tunnel. A wave of ghastly white wraiths rushed at us.

“By the Gastolfo name, I hereby command thee,” Freyja began to chant as she shoved her staff in the ground. “Heed my call and honor my blood. Bring me a miracle short of thy divine works, O Leteugan of the Frosty Winds, Li Bau the Death Shade. Do as I bid and steal these lives away.”

She brought her palms together, then opened them to reveal a sphere of white mist. “Behold this breath, the harbinger of death. O life-draining soul, bespatter and scatter. Hoense Romea Las Neomia.” Freyja blew on the sphere; it swirled together with her breath, sending a white, devastating gas to lap up every corner of the corridor. Instantly, thirty saplings froze to the core. “Lazalisa, destroy them.”

“Yes, milady.” The loyal beastmaid leaned forward. Using her extra extended tail as a third leg, she propelled herself forward to tackle the frozen saplings, shattering them into a million pieces.

The path opened up.

Smiling warmly like a true goddess, Freyja said to me, “Go, Souya. I have every faith you will rescue my dear friend. No less would I expect from the man I named a Champion of Light.”

I gave her a small nod, then bolted. A second wave of the humanoid saplings rushed down another corridor toward my party, and I heard my friends begin the fierce battle behind me. I did not look back. My friends were strong—much stronger than me. But only I could see that monster. Only I could bring it down.

Save Lana. That singular goal in mind, I dived into the darkness.

I ran.

And ran.

And ran.

I just needed my legs to carry me to her. My heart could explode from exhaustion for all I cared. Following the route my AI bot displayed on my glasses, I raced down corridor after corridor with nothing but the flickering lantern light to guide me. My body burned, and my muscles screamed in pain, but both sensations felt detached. As long it meant I could save my wife, I'd surrender everything I had.

O, my goddess, Lady Mythlanica.

I offer you my life.

I beg of you, hear my prayer.

Give me the strength to save her.

I'll sacrifice anything—anything.

I begged, I prayed, I ran, then withdrew my woodsman's ax. Up ahead stood an Eye with a crushed leg that'd kept it from joining the others. Ducking under its raised claws, I dug my hatchet into its throat. Powered by sheer momentum, it cut through the sapling's flesh; I hardly felt anything until it drove into the thing's bones. I jerked the blade out, then savagely severed the wraith's head. I felt nothing. There was no time to waste on emotion. Without breaking my stride, I pushed on.

I turned into a killing machine, obliterating any obstacle in my way as I followed Yukikaze's guidance, turning around who-knows-how-many corners and racing immeasurable distances. My legs held up. My enemies, I managed to slay. Though I still only had the strength of an average man, my days in this dimension had hardened my body for these tasks.

"Approaching thirty-five-strong enemy band. Avert immediately!"

"Tch!" Clicking my tongue in frustration, I kept an eye on the red enemy markers on my glasses while I found a corner of the tunnel to hide. The saplings

raced past me like a horde of zombies. My heart would not slow. Sweat began to seep from every pore on my body. Far off in the distance, I could hear the clangor of my party in battle.

“Enemies fifty meters away. Safe now to proceed as is.”

Lana’s marker had stopped moving. Only two hundred meters stood between us now. Using the last of my strength, I sprinted—

—or tried to, but— “Yukikaze, what is this?”

—I immediately had to stop. The corridor came to a dead end. I’d reached an impasse.

“The navigation route followed the exact path Mistress Lana took. The enemy must have passed through here.”

I threw myself at the wall and started hacking at it with my ax. But it was harder than rock; I couldn’t even make a dent. Panicking, I slammed the wall in a desperate search for a secret passage or switch.

Nothing. I couldn’t find a single thing.

“Shit!”

Giving myself over to my rage, I punched the stone barrier. The skin on my fist was scraped off, covering my hand in blood.

A plan. I’ve got to think of a plan. There must be something I can do.

“.....Yukikaze, activate your pulse scanner and analyze the wall’s structure.”

“The scan will alert monsters to our presence. It is exceedingly dangerous.”

“Just do it!”

“Understood,” she relented. “.....Operation canceled due to the Restricted Zone. I cannot activate the pulse scanner.”

“What the—?” Was she broken? I had no idea what kind of garbage she was spouting. “Then at least run an optical analysis on it. There’s got to be a secret passage somewhere. Hurry! Try anything!”

“Understood.”

I lost my balance, steadying myself with a hand against the wall. Dizzy and furious, I felt nauseated with panic. Clammy, cold sweat clung to my body. As my hand slid across the wall, it ran over something unusual. I rubbed my poncho against it like a rag. There, beneath layers of dust and grime, appeared a pattern, a pentagram. No, wait, that wasn't it.

"Cos.....cosmos?" Or so read the large letters inscribed beneath the circle containing the unfamiliar markings. Though faded from its exposure through the years, incomplete, and crumbling, the writing was undeniably—*English*.

"Data corresponding to the depicted representation found," Yukikaze announced. "It is a structural diagram of the cosmos as developed by the fifteenth-century mathematician Petrus Apianus in his publication *Cosmographia*."

I scrubbed more dust off the wall, quickly uncovering something that looked like those explanatory plaques you saw at museums. The text on it had degraded so badly that I couldn't make out any of it. "Yukikaze, can you read it?"

The mini kettle's analysis laser ran over the plate. "There are too many unreadable portions. The message is incomplete."

What the hell is this? What is it doing in the Other Dimension? No, stop. I don't have time to waste brainpower on that. I've gotta find something to get past this wall.

"It reads: 'Here is a display XXXX by our distinguished forebear XXXX proving our XXXX theory beyond a shadow of a doubt. XXXX the universe is essentially XXX as far as we can comprehend XXX. XXXX endless darkness. XXXX to shine a light of hope, we XXXX the Sails XXXX.'"

"That's all," Yukikaze informed me.

I wiped the sweat from my brow. "Anything else?"

"No. Howe—ver, the wall and the structure have———Restricted Zone's.....rra....."

"Yukikaze?" Static ate up her words. I opened my eyes wide in despair to have come so far only for her to break down here.

“Mr. Souya, please remove my core unit and place it in the center of the diagram—”

Her speech cut short; the lock on the top of the mini pot opened on its own. No time to stand there dumbfounded. Following her instructions, I pulled out the cylindrical artificial aqueous cerebrum in Yukikaze. Streaks of electrical currents, which were probably the AI bot’s activity, fissured through the cylinder, lighting it up like millions of stars shining in the dark night sky.

I brought the core close to the cosmography diagram. Right in the center of the map, a door just big enough to fit the cylinder opened. No time to consider what to do. I inserted the core. Light ran throughout the diagram, illuminating the markings. The sphere in its center glowed like a blue celestial planet I knew very well.

Something heavy shifted. Then thick doors slid open—the very same doors that had fooled adventurers for years. A path opened before me.

“Yukikaze, can you hear me?”

“Yes. Just as well as in the mini kettle. All in order,” her voice came through the receiver on my glasses.

“Send Pops my location. I’m going in. You stay here and keep the door open.”

“The risk is too great. I strongly recommend you wait for backup before proceeding.”

“That’s one piece of advice I just can’t take.” Ignoring her warning, I went on.

The tunnels behind the door differed from the rest of the dungeon, their walls and floors showing less degradation. They must have also contained a higher concentration of raw emiluminite, since I could see well enough without lanterns lighting the way. The good news was, I could see. The bad news, I had no map to guide me. Lana’s position still showed up on my screen, but I couldn’t read the layout. If you were to draw a straight line between us, it’d measure only one hundred eighty meters, but the place was an intricate labyrinth with a slew of dead ends. There wasn’t a direct path to my destination.

There were, however, plenty of the creepy saplings. I found an Ear standing

right in the middle of the intersection. Holding my breath, I crept closer, then threw a small rock I'd picked up to have the wraith turn its back to me. Wielding my ax backhanded, I thrust it into the thing's left shoulder, then bore my body weight down on it to push through to the heart. I twisted and dug the blade deeper and deeper until it rent the pumping organ. The Ear reached out both hands, desperately searching for anything. I tackled it, then decided to relieve it of its head just to be safe. Placing the blade of my ax against its neck, I stepped down hard on the ridge. Another one bit the dust. Once again, I was alone—at least, as far as my crude senses could discern.

On soft feet, I pushed on, going as fast as I could without making a noise. Past the broken door, in one room, I saw some kind of vessel not too different from something we could find in the modern age. But with no time to carefully inspect whatever it was, I would have to scrutinize it as much as I wanted to later. Right now, every second counted. Swiftly, quietly, and definitively, I needed to turn all my senses to the task at hand while keeping a lookout for danger.

I had to go in for the quick kill; there was no other possible option. One sapling, I could handle somehow, but two or more would overwhelm me. If they caught me, I was dead. That wouldn't bother me so much if it was only my life on the line. I'd never thought it amounted to much anyway. But if I died, help might not reach Lana in time. I couldn't die; therefore, I had to slaughter them with accuracy 100 percent of the time.

I killed eight saplings, my surprise attacks miraculously working every time. While still a far cry from the original, I'd managed to copy Pops's moves.

Fifty meters remained between Lana and me. My path led into a wide corridor. Instinct told me I'd find her if I followed it. I forced my ragged breath to steady. Never mind the advantage of a sneak attack or that the monsters didn't quite reach human stature; continuously slicing through flesh and bone and hearts, not to mention hacking heads off, took a heavy toll. Knowing that failure meant death and steeling my body for battle every time also chipped away at my stamina. Every muscle I had screamed out in protest at the unfamiliar labor. Pain twisted in my stomach. My heart felt about ready to explode.

But hell if I cared.

All I needed was to make it to the end of the day. I forced all the anguish down with sheer willpower, mentally squashing the exhaustion and pain.

I can do this. I can still fight.

Over my wildly pounding heartbeats, I heard soft footsteps approach, then saw a Mouth turn the corner. *Run!* I commanded my body, then sprinted for the ghoul. Its head plopped to the ground before it could even begin an enchantment.

Ever since I'd slipped through that door, I'd been firing on all cylinders. But I was working on borrowed time, the last flickers of light before the candle blew out. I didn't have long. I just had to power through. Every second lost could mean Lana's life. Hastily, speedily yet soundlessly, I noiselessly burned through my very life force to get even one step closer to my goal. Silently, I hunted my prey like a murderous beast, like Rhora herself, slaying the gruesome saplings to which she gave birth.

Then finally, I arrived—at a necropolis, an impossibly huge domed chamber. Majestic geometric patterns covered the lofty ceilings, and effigies of mythical gods lined the walls. Like tabernacles, rows and rows of stone coffins stretched out before me as far as the eye could see, adorned with deceased adventurers' trophy kills. There were maybe one hundred, no two, or a thousand—actually, more than ten thousand at least.

In my peripheral, I found my enemy and my wife. I took off my shoes and crouched low to hide behind the coffins as I made my approach, then used my poncho to wipe my bloody, oily ax. The blade looked awful; badly chipped, it would almost certainly shatter the next time it found a mark. Shifting it over to my left hand, I took out my karambit and gripped it in my right. This was it—the final push. *Don't mess this up, don't panic, but hurry the hell up.* I ordered my body to move.

Mr. Souya, a suggestion. A message from Yukikaze appeared on my glasses. *I have informed your party of your location. Please wait for them before engaging in battle. This is too dangerous.*

The closer I got, the louder my thumping heart pounded in my ears. I came to

a round, empty space in a corner of the sprawling cemetery. It immediately brought the image of an operating room to mind. Recently shredded clothes, pieces from a robe and underwear, accessories, and a staff lay scattered on the ground—the newest additions to the other broken weapons and antique gear haphazardly strewn about. Aged bloodstains covered the floor.

I saw Lana’s porcelain skin. Naked, both her arms and legs had been stretched out atop a stone bed that looked like a birthing table. She seemed to be asleep, her face resting in a pleasant expression as if she was dreaming peacefully, completely oblivious to the revolting ghoul that was Rhora at her side.

This wretched thing had some way to subjugate her victims, though whether that was through poison, drugs, or magic, I could not say. The dark voids she had for eyes drank in Lana’s body. She traced her long claws along the beautiful elf’s skin, eliciting a quiet “Ah” as they passed over her protruding breasts. I gnashed my clenched teeth together, making a gravelly scraping noise.

Not yet. Hold it. Just a little farther, and you’ll be totally hidden in her blind spot.

I had one shot. I had to kill her with the first blow. No way in hell I’d let her slip through my fingers. Pops’s intuition had been on point. For thirty years—no, much longer, this monster had deceived adventurer after adventurer, yet here I stood right by her, and she had absolutely no idea.

I stood diagonally behind her. Just a tiny bit more, and I’d be in the perfect position.

Just a—

—little—

My eyes flickered over to a half-open coffin. I couldn’t unsee it. The image of the elf’s bust tortured, toyed with, starved, left to shrivel up and dry, and strangled to death. For a second, I hallucinated I saw Lana’s future. With nothing but rage and destruction on my mind, I leaped from the shadows, my body low, as low to the ground as it could go, and with all the speed I could muster, I struck.

I’m gonna freakin’ kill you.

Blood went flying everywhere. Red droplets splashed on Lana's cheek.

"Grh! Agh!"

As Rhora had whipped around, her claw pierced my left shoulder. I'd messed up. At the very last second, I came up short, failing to conceal my presence.

Still, I can work with this!!

"You know, *rg*h—"

I leaned into the situation literally, walking forward until Rhora's claw dug all the way to the hilt into my shoulder. A wild, beastly howl escaped me before I plunged my karambit into Rhora's other arm, driving it deeper into her flesh. She could not easily break free from the talon-shaped blade's grip. We had each other locked together, one arm each immobilized.

"There's someone coming for you." Rhora's other claw came down on me; I blocked with my ax, but it sliced into the blade. "And he's a goddamn beast. If he hadn't been after you for so long, he would've been basking in glory by now."

Rhora roared, spraying her foul breath in my face. I pulled my head back, then rammed it into hers. She writhed violently, swinging me along with her. We bumped into the stony bed and sent Lana falling to the floor. She looked unharmed. Relieved, I turned back to the ghoul. Both of us had lost our greatest asset—the ability to cloak ourselves in the shadows. Our weapons were far from deadly; the brawl didn't even come close to a mudslinging match.

My ax shattered. I didn't care. I pummeled Rhora with the hilt and slashed away at her with the chipped blade. The creature slashed me all over with her claw, ripping my skin. It was sharp as hell. But in such close quarters, she couldn't work up the speed she'd need to cleave my limbs or body in two. All I had to do was fend off fatal attacks. She could take all the blood, flesh, and bones she wanted from me. My friends were on their way. If I could just buy some more time, I'd win. Even if worse came to worst, I'd have saved Lana—and that'd be a huge victory.

But then.

Squish. I felt something stab me in the stomach. A taillike tentacle protruding

from the wraith's body had pierced my abdomen. All-consuming drowsiness engulfed my body. I faltered, my vision flickering in and out. Sweet sleep called to me, promising entry to heaven if I just let go.

I bit my lips hard. Even that pain felt dim and distant.

Not yet.

I fished for the pen syringe out of the open mini kettle. It had no needle, instead delivering drugs through pressure alone. Raising it up against my neck, I pushed the button.

"Rgh!"

Lukewarm fluid rushed into my veins. My temperature shot up like crazy, and my body began to shake. The drugs were strong. It temporarily numbed all pain, cured exhaustion, and increased your focus. Use it too often, and it'd cripple you for life. I'd brought it along in case of emergency, if one of us sustained a life-threatening wound. My heart beat even faster; all sense of pain or fatigue disappeared instantly, scaring me.

I woke up. The claw pummeling toward me suddenly seemed to decelerate as if in slow motion. Though I'd regained my senses, I couldn't move properly. What I could do, though, was make sure Rhora's other claw pierced through my right shoulder. The pain came but felt distant. I rammed my broken ax into the ghastly thing's arm and gouged at it. I screamed. The snatcher was lighter than I'd imagined. I slammed her against a nearby stone coffin, but whatever power kept her floating in the air whirled me around.

Our nasty brawl continued. Sometimes, my head would crash into something, and I'd lose consciousness for a second. An endless stream of blood gushed from my shoulders.

Rhora, you don't want to die, do you? But not me. As long as I can kill you, I'm set. Worst-or best-case scenario, all I want is to save her. Nothing else matters.

That's why you've lost this game.

Rhora and I toppled over. I found a shard of my shattered ax lying next to me. Gripping the broken blade between my teeth, I stabbed it into the wretched ghoul's neck. Fervidly, vigorously, I drove it in, never letting the monster out of

our bloody embrace. She let out an earsplitting scream.

Just a little more—

Just a litt—

—le—

—*Click*. I snapped. My body reached its limit. Only then did I realize I was drenched in my own blood. Draining the last dregs of energy, I tried to force myself to my feet, but the connection between my muscles and mind had severed. I couldn't move. No matter what I tried, my body wouldn't budge. The drug wore off, too, for one simple reason: I'd lost too much blood. The shard of ax had eaten into Rhora's neck, but it wasn't nearly enough to kill her.

So this is the end, huh? Can't say I feel regret, exactly. If anything, I think I did pretty well for myself. But I'm sorry, I apologized silently, then lowered my gaze.

Faces of all the friends I'd met in the Other Dimension flashed before my eyes. Memories of the good days, tender meetings and warmth, of the short yet adventure-filled time I'd spent here raced through my mind. The night I picked up a sword to defend my friend's honor. The morning after, when I saw the girls' shining faces as I awoke. The evening I met a tiny little goddess. They all felt so far away, as if everything had been just a dream—a fantasy.

This is where my adventure ends.

The murderous freak violently extricated her claw from my right shoulder. At the very least, I could go out staring her in the eye like a real man. Fixing my glare on her, I said, "Mind if I get in one last thing?" She raised her arm to strike.

"How does it feel to get your ass kicked this bad by a nobody like me? Freakin' loser."

Her claw came down, lodging itself in my forehead. A dull *thud* reverberated through my bones. Then I saw a steel blade sprout through the wraith's chest. It pierced straight into where her heart would have been without a shred of mercy.

"At long last, I found you."

Pops withdrew his blade. Rhora wailed; it sounded like a last, pitiful plea. The

sword came down, cleaving off everything above the pathetic monster's shoulders.

"Wait..... That can't be all you've got." The livid adventurer stabbed at the mutant. Over and over and over. "You can't be this easy to kill!" he roared, torturing the monster's already-lifeless body. For a second, I saw his raw emotion, pent up from decades of fury, and felt the pure rage of a young man. He released all his anger onto the corpse, beating it until eventually his longsword broke under its master's strength.

After a brief, dumbfounded pause, Pops was back. He was the father of adventurers once again. I saw my friends nearby.

"Souya, you did good. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you."

"Pops, take care of the others," I managed to say, then finally releasing the last straws of my consciousness. Only the gods knew if I could return alive with these wounds.

Oh, but you know, I feel the smallest sense of accomplishment. I can die in peace.

CHAPTER 5

At Adventure's End

[86TH DAY]

I didn't die.

Instead, I was seeing déjà vu, looking up at an unfamiliar ceiling—er, rather, canopy. I'd been sleeping on a luxurious, four-poster canopy bed, though one surprisingly unadorned and tasteless. My equipment and a change of clothes rested on top of a nearby dresser. A sunset stained the sky outside the window. From the height of my vantage point, I realized I must've been in the palace. My body was wrapped in soft, silky clothing... It was nothing I'd ever worn before.

My throat was parched. I tried to reach for the pitcher and jug by my bed, only for excruciating, paralyzing pain to ravish both my shoulders.

"Rgh!"

I lost my balance and toppled out of bed, hitting my head hard on the floor. The door flew open.

"Souya!" Lanceil rushed into the room. She lent me her shoulder and helped me back on the bed. "Are you all right? Do you hurt anywhere?"

"L-Lana? Is Lana okay?!" I grasped for an answer to my most important question.

".....Yes, safe and well. She's waiting for you. We were able to extract all the poison in her system successfully, and she sustained no external injuries," she explained. "How is your body feeling?"

"Did I register on the twentieth floor?" That was the second most important.

"Yes. After that, you were immediately transported to the Jumichla Healing Temple until your condition stabilized enough for us to bring you to the castle. So do you feel pain anywhere on your body?" Lanceil prodded and touched me

all over. She was gentle, but—

“Yes, it hurts everywhere, like hell.” My back, legs, hips, neck, limbs, and head all throbbed with pain. If anything, the parts that didn’t hurt were in the great minority.

“Excuse me.” Lanceil undid my robe and removed the bandages wrapped around my body. Then she lifted off the gauze, checking my wounds. “You don’t seem to have a fever. Is there any part that hurts particularly more than the others?”

“No.” Nothing I couldn’t handle.

“Not only were you poisoned, but you were also so severely injured, both of your arms had almost completely severed from your body. Five Healers spent an entire day treating your wounds. I imagine the pain will continue for a while. If it becomes unbearable, I can prepare some medication.”

“I’m fine.” *What’s a little pain?* I thought—until I tried to move my shoulder and fainted in agony. Sweat streamed down my brow, and my vision blurred.

“Souya, I would have you rest longer, but the king has ordered me to bring you to him the instant you awake. Can you walk? Shall I carry you on my back?”

“I can walk on my own. But could you give me some water?” My throat was so dry I could hardly talk.

Lanceil poured water into a cup, then, for some reason, brought it to her own lips. Before I could say anything, she pressed those lips to mine and gave me the water mouth-to-mouth. She did always come on pretty strong, but I felt more passion in her gaze, more heat in her body now.

Did I do something to deserve this?

I changed into my washed and patched-up poncho, with Lanceil’s help, then slung my quiver over my back, slipped on Heuress’s Gauntlet, and put my glasses on. I didn’t need them to see or anything, but recently, I didn’t feel right without them.

Looking down at the gauntlet, a complicated mix of emotions came over me. Lümidia’s mortal enemy had been vanquished. While I didn’t know the

particulars of their feud, I bet Rhora hadn't been too happy to meet her end at the hands of a talentless nobody like me. The thought of that abomination, which had survived for so long only to meet such a humiliating end, tickled me. Through my gauntlet, I could feel the hero chuckling in delight.

The silver-haired beastmaid led me out of the room, down a hall toward a basement floor, and into yet another room for the dead. Rhora's corpse rested atop a funerary urn made of stone. Around it stood King Remlia, Pops, the Guildmaster, and Lana's father, Mellum Raua Heuress. From the side, he was the spitting image of Éa.

"Souya, how do you fare?"

"Well enough to converse, Your Majesty, thank you." I bowed my head at the king's consideration.

"Aye. Now then, Saorse, you may begin."

"Yes, Your Highness." At the regent's prodding, the Guildmaster launched into his briefing. "My analysis of this fascinating monster has revealed several interesting findings." He pulled out a thin poker and pointed to the corpse. Only the shoulders and below retained their original shape. Her head, pummeled into mincemeat, was safely stored in a large jar.

"First, her hide. While visible now, it disappears at the slightest magical charge. It can also perfectly camouflage, concealing all noise, smell, and even body heat," he explained. "However, it does have one weakness. Those with very low levels of ryvius or magic can see through the disguise, as this Otherworlder can attest. In other words, it cannot fool those unfit to be adventurers. I believe this to be a compromise it must have made when evolving to escape from formidable explorers."

The Guildmaster continued, "Furthermore, as you can see, it has no intestines or heart, in fact. A single lung is the only organ it possesses resembling anything human. In addition, it has a tail-shaped tentacle that produces anesthetic, paralyzing venom, and a floating organ similar to those found in winged serpents. Upon appraising the articles left by its victims, I found some that date back at the very least six hundred years ago. Given that time span, I postulate this creature survived by *relegating its bodily functions to its victims.*"

In an unusual twist, the Guildmaster looked to another for permission. “Proceed,” the king decreed. Pops gave him a nod, too.

“Apologies. I have also made a discovery regarding the saplings. As Pops suspected, these were created from the remains of fallen adventurers. Many of the victims had one or several limbs amputated, and I observed several deformities in the bones of their lower abdomens.”

It’s a goddamn horror story. What the hell was Rhora thinking, making all those disgusting things?

“Pardon the intrusion, Remlia, Medîm, Mellum, and Souya.”

The last person I’d expect to see in a mortuary appeared: the Dragon-Slaying Goddess, Gladwein. A hooded cape covered her frame, perhaps to shield it from prying eyes.

“My, Lady Gladwein. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“A bit of unfinished business.”

The king’s deferential attitude toward the herculean goddess made me realize she was truly an important figure. I’d really gotten away by the skin of my teeth, picking a stupid fight with her.

“Souya, your right hand.”

“Huh? Yes, milady.” Surprised by the sudden request, I offered her my hand. The powerful deity enveloped it with both of hers, then brought it to her forehead. Faint lights fluttered about like fireflies. I know this sounds strange, but it looked like she was praying. Just as my goddess had once done, this divine being now brought her hands together in orison. But whom would a goddess even pray to? And what for?

“Ah, my daughters have imposed on you greatly.”

“Daughters?” Lümidia, I knew, but don’t tell me—

“I had two daughters, one a maladroït who showed skill for naught but her archery. Her name was Lümidia. The other showed such promise, people hailed her as the God of War reincarnate. Her name was Rhora.”

You’ve got to be kidding me.

“I doted upon the promising daughter and scorned the inept. Such is the way in military families. Only with these clear distinctions can one hope to train another. However, child-rearing is a difficult task. Not all goes as planned.

“One day, Rhora delved into the forbidden arts in her search for a greater power and devoured the dragon I had once slain. Thereafter, the dragon’s rage befell our family, placing us on the path to decimation. Many brave warriors turned to ash in its flames. The brutal war that ravaged the world at that same time ultimately ruined my clan. Rhora took advantage of the chaos to flee the Left Continent, then went on to commit even further atrocities on this land. She awakened the great spider of old, endangering everyone’s life.”

“Lady Gladwein, perhaps it would be prudent to avoid divulging such matters to a stranger,” Mellum interrupted the goddess with trepidation.

“Do not fret, Mellum. He has long known the truth.”

“Wha—?” His surprised expression looked just like Lana’s.

“Lümidia pursued Rhora, alighting on this land. It was then she joined hands with the mist master Heuress to vanquish the giant spider, cornering Rhora, but failing to prevent her escape. After that.....” She chose her words carefully. “Lümidia left a blood descendant among the elves, then perished. I do not pretend to know the life Rhora led in the dungeon where she sought refuge. And yet, now she lies at my feet, naught but bones and dust, and Lümidia stands before me, through this Otherworlder’s borrowed body.”

The eyes of the goddess filled with tender sorrow and affection as they met her daughters’. “At last, you have avenged us all. Well done, my daughter.”

Lady Gladwein held me in her arms. A strong, all-enveloping sense of relief and safety hugged me close. Though different from Lady Mythlanica’s embrace, it gave me a familiar, motherly feeling. The ill-starred road of destiny along which the Hero of the Hidden Name had traveled ended here. Her gauntlet dissolved like the sands of time. At the very end, she used my voice to say:

“Farewell, Mother. Forgive your failed daughter for her shortcomings.”

“Farewell.” Lady Gladwein said but one word and, through it, had accepted her daughter wholly. Then she tousled my hair, vigorously roughing it up. I

know this sounds disrespectful, but to be honest, I felt as if a huge, wild beast was trying to roughhouse with me. After a pause, she announced, “With this, I leave you. Souya, Medîm, I shall prepare a reward for your valiant efforts. Come to my residence on a later date.”

““Yes, Lady Gladwein,”” Pops and I replied in unison. The goddess left. Now we turned to the issues the currently living must bear.

“So, Pops, did you, um...?”

“Aye, we found her.” Only then did I notice the long item wrapped in cloth in Mellum’s arms, likely the staff that once belonged to his younger sister, Alma.

“We said our good-byes in private. No need to make you see that.”

“You did, then.....”

The adventurer looked as if a possessive spirit had finally released its clutch on him. *Though, I was the one actually possessed, you know.*

“Souya, Medîm, you have my thanks as well. You brought our fallen friend’s murder to justice,” the king thanked us. “.....Oy, Mellum.” He poked the elf.

“My thanks, Otherworlder,” relented the brusque man.

“No need to thank me. It’s only natural for a husband to protect his wife. Any real partner would have done it. I have done absolutely nothing to earn your gratitude,” I retorted sarcastically, the biggest smile I could muster plastered on my face.

“My thanks were for avenging my sister, not for rescuing some incompetent woman. Though, I myself would never allow my wife to put herself at such great risk in the dungeon,” he shot back just as sardonically without blinking an eye.

“Let us leave this place. No pleasant conversation can be had over a corpse.”

We all retreated from the mortuary at the king’s suggestion, leaving the Guildmaster behind to continue inspecting Rhora’s corpse. To the kitchen we headed, where several extra chairs had been added to the usual counter. King Remlia, Pops, and Mellum sat next to one another on one side; I sat on the other, facing the three.

“Lanceil, I hope you would not deny me my ale on a day like today.”

“No, Your Highness.” The doting beastmaid placed four bottles and cups on the counter. “A few side dishes to accompany your drinks,” she offered, setting plates of seasoned, thin-sliced bacon and pickled onions before each of us. They reminded me of the appetizers served at pubs in Japan.

“What might these be, Lanceil?” I asked the woman recently devoted to the study of culinary arts.

“Smoked bacon sautéed with curry powder and onion pickled in sweetened alcohol. I hear they are similar in taste to the *rakkyo* bulb pickles eaten in Souya’s home world. The bacon, I have chilled thoroughly so as not to overpower the alcohol. My understanding is partaking in these together does wonders for your illness, Your Highness.”

They’ve got rakkyo here? And she’s right, having it with pork improves thiamine absorption and helps digestion. They also go perfectly with fried-pork cutlet curry.

“These are all I need,” Pops mumbled, mindlessly popping the pickled onions one after another into his mouth. As I thought, he looked down, deflated—like he suddenly aged.

“Lanceil, what spell did you cast on this bacon? I sense a deep, complex flavor among the bitterness and heat. This is no commonplace spice, this ‘curry powder,’ did you call it? What, in fact, is it?” King Remlia marveled.

Oh, would curry blow up if I started selling it? Maybe I’ll get the trade group to do it for me? It’d mean another headache, though, that’s for sure.

“Éa blended the curry powder, a seasoning made with a mix of nuts, seeds, and herbs found on trees in the Remlian Meadow and the Heuress Forest, as well as medicinal shoots and a variety of other ingredients.”

“Oh-ho, Princess Éa did? I admit my surprise.”

After hearing this, Mellum took a few big bites of bacon.

“She has Souya’s regular, attentive instruction to thank for her success. I, too, owe whatever skill I possess to him, though Your Majesty would be the best judge of that.”

“Aye, wonderfully delicious meals. My health as of late has seen remarkable improvement. And yet, I fear there is still something lacking in your cooking compared with Souya’s. You would do well to continue your diligent studies.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. My sincerest appreciation for your kind words of encouragement.” Lanceil bowed her head.

I bet that missing bit’s called MSG. Éa will probably figure out a way to make it sooner or later.

While chomping on an onion bulb, Mellum inquired, “Remlia, what relation does Lanceil have with this Otherworlder?”

You really gonna ask that now, asshole? Oh, this bacon’s goood. And the rakkyo pairing tones down the greasiness perfectly.

“Souya, have you.....? What have you done with Lanceil?” *C’mon, Mr. King. Don’t ask those delicate questions about your daughter’s private affairs.*

“What a difficult question to answer, don’t you agree, *my lord?*”

“Definitely.” Lanceil and I locked eyes, and I felt even more awkward. I didn’t know about her, but this was an unbelievably weird position to be in.

Wait, hang on. Right now, I’m sitting at the same table with the fathers to both my (fake) wife and my consort (in waiting), aren’t I? What the hell with this setup?

“Speaking of, I hear you haven’t done the deed with Tutu yet,” Pops muttered, stealing the king’s *rakkyo*. “That’s her livelihood, you know? Hurry up and give it to her if you don’t want unpleasant rumors flying around.”

“Hey!” There couldn’t be a worse time to ask that, you know?!

“Tutu, is it? I’ll remember that.” *Lanceil, your smile is freaking me out.*

Strangely perceptive, Mellum wondered, “Tutu.....? Ahhh, Totomelange’s daughter. I remember Baafre always carrying her on his shoulders. So she’s already of working age?”

Pops absentmindedly countered, “‘Already’? At least twenty years have since passed. Just look at us.”

“Yes, you’ve aged.”

“You, on the other hand, have clearly not matured in appearance nor as a person.”

“Naturally. We elves are the epitome of perfection, not doomed to grow old and perish like you. That goes for our nature, as well.”

“That wasn’t a compliment, you know.”

“What?”

Ah, yeah. Now I could picture their younger selves bickering.

“*Will* you desist? Today of all days is not the time.” The king cut their argument short. I bet that’s what it was like back when they were a party, too. “Now, Medîm, you’re quite sure you wish no part in the bequeathal of retrieved legacies?”

“Aye.”

“I know not the total, but it will come to no mere sum.”

The bequeathal of retrieved legacies was the right given to those who discovered items left behind by perished adventurers. If any members of the deceased’s party survived, the items would automatically be returned to them. In this case, however, considerable time had passed for some of Rhora’s victims, and very few of their companions remained to reclaim those legacies. Many of the heirlooms had undoubtedly degraded over the years, though they’d still be in better condition than similar keepsakes discovered in monsters’ bowels. Plus, they were rare artifacts found on the notorious Deranged Stratum. The final total would by no means be modest. Why wouldn’t Pops want to keep any of that?

“Souya, I owe you an apology,” the man in question confessed.

“Huh? An apology?” He’d caught me off guard, but I had a hunch I knew what he meant.

“In truth, we could have made it through the nineteenth floor in much less time, but I used you and your party as bait. I cannot accept the legacies. Soon, I’ll compensate for deceiving you.”

That explained why we had taken the long way around. If you had asked if I was pissed off, I'd have to say yes. But considering what we'd accomplished dampened my anger. We'd saved Lana and avenged Lūmidia. And after all that, I would also get the information I'd sought. All in all, I guess we were even.

"Honestly, I don't give a damn," I told him. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I'd like to ask about that incident we discussed."

Pops looked saddened, but I ignored him, turning my attention to the main reason I'd come. I knew it was dangerous, that I might rope Lana into another mess, but I'd finally get the answers I'd been after.

"Very well, Souya, the time has come to keep my word," the king of the adventurers agreed. ".....Mellum, King of Elves. I have your permission?"

"For what?"

He addressed the elf with added respect. "To divulge the measures we took to this man, Souya the Otherworlder."

"Can you take responsibility for that, King Remlia?" Mellum responded, equally as polite.

"I stake my life on it."

"Oh? Quite the wager." Talk about going all in. Had Lana been carrying that heavy of a burden all this time?

"Your Highness, allow me to excuse myself," Lanceil offered, then made to leave.

"Stay. This concerns you as well," King Remlia stopped her. The beastmaid sat by my side. After quietly strengthening his resolve, the king began to tell his tale.

"It all began with Ellusion's plan to expand lands for agricultural use. Ostensibly, they claimed the effort aimed to increase food supplies to share among allied nations. However, it was nothing but a ruse to invade neighboring regions," he explained.

"They first set their greedy eyes on the Heuress Forest. Through merchants indebted to Ellusion, they meant to approach the elves and feign interest in

purchasing the land. Then when those negotiations inevitably fell through, they would ensure the Heuress elves inflicted casualties among their merchant pawns, forcing my kingdom into action. Such was their heinous scheme.”

Dirty, but clever.

“My son, the first prince, Bellheart, saw through their scheme—but it was already too late,” continued the king. “Ellusion cleverly manipulated a rival elven family, the Hillens, who detested the Heuress clan. Ancient and of a so-called pure-blooded lineage, they had for many years raised doubts about the veracity of Heuress legends. Bribed by the promise of land after Ellusion took control, the Hillens began murdering my people. When my son Bellheart went out to stop their madness, he fell under attack—”

My hand instinctively found Lanceil’s. We were talking about her late brother, a topic I imagined must have pained her. The beastmaid squeezed my hand tightly. She was a stouthearted young woman.

“—but killed every one of his would-be assassins.” What? “Lanceil, your brother lives.”

“Huh?! WHAAAT?!” Lanceil shouted, too taken aback to control her voice.

“However, all was not well. A knight errant of the Church of St. Lillideas had joined the Hillen elves in their aggression and then in their downfall. Nevertheless, no matter the cause, for a prince of Remlia to take the life of an allied nation’s knight would, in the worst-case scenario, give Ellusion cause to destroy the alliance in favor of direct subjugation. As a result, I consulted with Mellum and decided to feign Bellheart’s death. The knight’s death posed a challenge, but in the end, we managed to attribute it to a drunken fall in the river where he drowned.”

From there, Mellum took over the story. “We eradicated the entire Hillen clan, a task the prince made considerably easier by decimating their active forces. Afterward, we laid the blame for the prince’s supposed death on a Heuress citizen and agreed to pay a certain fee in compensation, after which King Remlia would secretly reward our cooperation. At least, such went our plan, but—”

Unable to keep her silence, Lanceil interrupted the King of Elves. “Forgive me,

Master Mellum! Your Highness! Where is my brother now?!”

“In the West of the Left Continent. He now lives in disguise, serving one of the continent’s regents. I imagine it shall not be long until Georg joins him as well.”

“You have had correspondence?!”

“By shadow rabbit, from time to time. I shall show you his letters at a later moment. Now, restrain yourself.”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty. Forgive me. I could not help myself.” Lanceil burst with excitement. Her tail had pushed up her skirt and swung vigorously back and forth. I knew full well it was a family matter, but it still made me jealous somehow.

Stock-still, Mellum resumed his tale. “—Such went our plan, but we ran into difficulty. One of the Lillidean knights mustered a private army and descended upon the forest, outfitting every last soldier with dwarf-made firearms. Who can say from whence those guns came or to what end she wanted to achieve by marching into our forest?”

Breaking his silence, Pops chimed in. “Revenge. That knight, Elmina, I believe was her name, had been the fallen errant chevalier’s lover. She saw through our ruse, then attacked. Those are the most dangerous kind of women. We had laid out a compromise, but she lost all sense of reason, acting in a manner unthinkable for a battalion member. The blood of every elf in the forest would not have satiated her crazed hunger for vengeance.”

“So who shot Éa?”

“Elmina, or one of her soldiers,” Mellum replied.

“So how did Lana play into this?” I already had enough context. It was time to get to the main point already.

“Remlia, does he know?” Mellum shifted his gaze to the king.

“Aye. In fact, he vanquished the beast with Werner using otherworldly weapons of some sort.”

“This peasant?”

“Yes, I am a peasant. Those beasts were nothing.” All three men shot daggers

at me; I could feel the intense pressure. I definitely shouldn't have taken that bait.

Mellum continued, "Elmina unleashed a cursed beast within my forest. I know not how it began, but my daughter vanquished the abomination."

"She did?"

"Indeed. With some superlative extension of Hoense magic, I imagine. However, it was fatally flawed. The flames raged on even after they had ravaged the beast, burning the forest and innocent citizens alive. The unmitigated fool."

"But wouldn't the beast have hurt even more people if Lana hadn't stepped in?"

"No," he flatly denied. "If only she had the patience to wait for me, I would have ended it all."

"How could she know for sure you'd be able to slay it?"

"How dare you ask such ludicrous questions. Who do you take me for?" he haughtily demanded like a typical arrogant elf. Or maybe he actually was that powerful.

Either way— "You expect me to believe the asinine father who couldn't even keep his own daughters from harm could pull that off?" I was livid. Letting the anger get the best of me, I taunted the elf.

"Oh, so I'm an asinine father, am I, peasant? Well then, how about I give you the opportunity to demonstrate that beast-vanquishing prowess of yours here and now?"

"Done. We're taking this outside. I'm warning you, self-control is not on the menu. I'm going to rip you to shreds."

"Cease this at once!!" King Remlia bellowed furiously at us both. "Souya, do not forget your place. That is no way to address the King of Elves."

"Exactly. Infuriating though he may be, he is technically the King of Elves." Pops threw in a supporting jab for me.

"Forgive me, Elven King. As husband to an elven wife, I felt I had to speak up.

Still, as reluctant as I am to say it, please accept my apology.”

“Do the three of you mean to incite my anger?” he replied, enraged. “Now, now,” the other king urged him to calm down. The four of us drained our glasses, washing away our ire with it in the traditional adventurer method of reconciliation. Spicy, bitter, stiff alcohol burned our stomachs.

After pouring us all another drink, Mellum said to me, “Once my daughter’s spell had obliterated our forest, the ash-covered remains were soon tilled for farming. Regardless of the deviation from their original plans, Ellusion achieved its ultimate goal, acquiring new agricultural lands. The marquis lined his pockets and kept these secrets sealed behind his greedy lips. The knight Elmina disappeared; her whereabouts remain a mystery. As planned, we then feigned a war between the Kingdom of Remlia and the Heuress, temporarily impeding Ellusion’s greater ambitions. At the end of it all, we were left...with a princess who turned her own people to ashes, and another on the brink of death.”

“Why didn’t you help her? You could’ve done something, couldn’t you?”

The arrogant elf smirked at my silly protestations. “In war, one must provide a clear admission of defeat. Foolish heims could not appreciate the sacrifice of our forest or the sustenance our lands would produce, both too far removed from the direct taste of victory. Laualliuna notwithstanding, Éa takes after me in her pristine beauty. To see her fall into the depravity of uncouth adventuring, weakened and in pain, would more than suffice the appetite for triumph, as well as deceive any Ellusion operatives lurking in Remlia.”

“Then you should’ve become the damn example, asshole,” I spat, my fury turning my speech indecorous.

“There is only one true king, and he cannot be replaced. Women, however, are plentiful and expendable.”

If Lanceil hadn’t caught me by the shoulder, I would’ve rammed my fist into his face. This asshat was the King of Elves? And the girls’ father?

“Souya, I’d like to apologize as well,” the king of Remlia added. “My illness blinded my judgment.”

Honestly, I wanted to send both these fools flying.

Snickering quietly, Mellum said, “Otherworlder, you have made a fatally incorrect assumption. Unsightly as she may be, Laualliuna is still my daughter. She accepts her duty as princess and has the fortitude to sacrifice herself to save her people, to take her own life to protect her bloodline. Though, I cannot expect a mere commoner to comprehend the burdens royals must bear.”

Who the heck would want to comprehend that shit? You’d never convince me a father could dispose of their own goddamn daughters like trash.

As I seethed, a question came to mind. “Was Lana in on your scheme?” The elder princess detested the idea of war. She’d even married me to stop Remlia’s idiotic son from instigating another, a move that wouldn’t have made sense if she had known her father and Remlia’s covert plans.

“She knows nothing. I have only ever asked for her obedience,” replied the callous elf. “And she is no longer my daughter. I have cut all ties between us. Yet even I could not have imagined the heights of stupidity to which she would climb, marrying a trifling heim.”

So all her worry had been for nothing. Lana had thought and thought as hard as she could to find a solution, only to be played by a mistaken moron. Even so, she dutifully did everything in her power to prevent violent conflict—and *sold her body to me*. The elven princess offered herself as sacrifice to this so-called trifling heim.

“Thank you very much, King of Elves. You’ve helped me make up my mind.”

All right, I’ve decided. It’s done. I know how to move forward now. Despicable as it is, it was worth it for the truth.

“Take your disgusting thanks elsewhere,” the elven regent bristled. “Ah, regarding Éa, I could not have fathomed you would be able to save her from that wound. Would you consider sharing your medical expertise with the elves?”

“Hell no.”

“Hmph. You may keep Éa for the meanwhile. When the time comes, I will have you return her to me.”

“You’d better prepare to have your whole goddamn forest razed before you

try.”

I’d die before I saw eye to eye with Mellum. Even his resemblance to Éa made me want to puke.

“It’s as if I’m watching young Medîm and Mellum again.” The king sighed, defeated.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ll take my leave,” I said in parting and got up from my seat.

Ah, can’t waste these.

I shoved the rest of my bacon and *rakkyo* in my mouth, packing my cheeks like a chipmunk, then quickly devoured them.

“You did exemplary work, adventurer,” King Remlia applauded. “I expect more great things from you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” I bowed my head at the king’s kind words, then rushed out of the room. Lanceil followed. “Lanceil, is Lana back at camp?”

“No, she is staying at an inn close to the palace called Haven from Two Blue Moon Monsoon. The staff has been informed to expect you.”

We jogged down the hall. Driven by impatience, I only then realized the pain had subsided. “And the others?”

“Shuna and Bel have returned to Lady Gladwein’s residence, and Éa is at camp,” the beastmaid replied. “I will join her there. It would not do to let my sister feel lonely.”

Outside the castle, night had long fallen over the land. A short walk took us to the hotel, where I parted with Lanceil.

Before she left, Lanceil said, “Souya, while it may not be my place to speak, I do hope you shower Lana with love and do not let her go. Otherwise, your gentle doe might one day disappear. And remember, I come next in line. Do not forget.”

“Huh?” But before I could ask anything, she had vanished into the night.

Putting that aside, I stepped into the inn—no time to waste standing around

confused. It was a bright place, very similar to a common private dwelling, but neat and tidy. Though many hotels in the area opened their first floors as taverns, this one appeared to be solely meant for lodging. The clangor of the city did not cross the threshold into this calm, quiet space.

A sign posted near the entrance read, DO NOT DISTURB THOSE WHO SOFTLY SLUMBER, OR YOU SHALL REST IN PEACE FOREVERMORE.

“Excuse me, I’m supposed to meet someone staying here,” I mentioned to the petite, young girl at the front desk. She looked almost elfish. I wondered if perhaps people of her race all had such youthful appearances.

“Lord Souya, I presume. We have been expecting you,” she responded in a mature voice. She was probably older than me. “If you’ll follow me,” she said, then led me to the second floor. “Allow me to explain a few details regarding your stay. Royal representatives have already paid us an extraordinarily generous sum, so you are welcome to stay for however long you wish. Please let us know if you require anything, and we shall provide it. We can deliver your meals to your room at any time. Should you require our services, kindly ring the small bell located by your room. The walls are completely soundproof, so we would not be able to hear should you call out for us,” the receptionist explained. “May you have a pleasant stay.” With that, she left me in front of the designated room.

I rapped on the door using the metal knocker affixed to it. After a pause, a sleepy-eyed Lana opened it.

“May I?”

“Come in.”

As soon as I stepped in the room, I clasped her in a tight embrace and hungrily sought her lips. Lana struggled against me in surprise, but I passionately took her hands in mine. Then shedding all my gear by the threshold, I carried her over to the bed and pushed her down. Low light revealed tranquil furnishings in the room. There was only one bed.

“D-darling, you’re scaring me. Calm down.”

“I can’t.”

As I held her head, I ravaged her with my tongue, swirling it together with hers, softly biting her lip, licking the top of her palate. Though her eyes were closed tightly, and her body was stiff with nerves, she slowly began to soften into my embrace. In one smooth motion, I stripped off her loose robe.

“Ah,” she moaned, her eyes dewy with tears. It made me crave her even more. Having just awoken after dancing along the line between life and death, a weird switch had turned on inside me.

.....Ah, crap. I completely forgot what I came to say.

Changing positions with Lana still in my arms, I rolled us over, so she lay on top of me.

“Your father and King Remlia told me everything about the forest and how it burned.”

“.....I see.” Her face dropped. Pressing her beautiful breasts against my chest, she clung to me like an anxious child. “That rabbit, the one that shows you visions of death. I’m sure you noticed, but I didn’t see anyone die.”

“Yeah, I know.” *You’re a terrible liar.*

“I don’t have the right to feel sorrow for anyone’s death. How could I after robbing so many of their lives? It would be unforgivably preposterous.”

“More would have died if you hadn’t stopped that beast.”

“Perhaps. Then again, perhaps not. It is a moot point.” It was human foolishness to ask yourself a long list of what-ifs and then regret you even began asking in the first place—a trait I couldn’t hate. “When that monster kidnapped me, I saw a dream.”

“A dream?” Rhora’s venom—it put people into a deep, deep sleep and kept them hostage like that until they died, never knowing the unspeakable torture their bodies endured. “It was peaceful. I was back in the forest, with all the people I’d killed, living a quiet life. It was tranquil, uneventful. Neither you nor my sister were there with me. A foolish, self-serving dream. That is what I am, a shameful disgrace. Laualliuna, the tainted princess. You must despise me now, don’t you?”

“Not even close.”

“Huh?”

I caressed Lana’s ears with my free hand. They twitched, and her body jerked. *Looks like I’ve found a nice weak spot.*

“Have you forgotten who I am? I am devoted to Lady Mythlanica, the Goddess of Malevolence. So you razed your home to the ground? You killed innocent people? What about it? If you wanted to make me despise you, annihilating a country or two wouldn’t nearly be enough. Slaughter a thousand, ten thousand people, and it still wouldn’t phase me. Try decimating the entire Great Land—no, destroying the entire world. Only then would I maybe consider the idea of disliking you.”

“What? Wait, that’s—”

“Don’t take me so lightly. If you’re feeling unsure, I’ll swear it to you now. By my goddess Lady Mythlanica’s name, I forgive you entirely.”

“U-um, my ears— Ngh!” I lightly twirled both ears at once, and she twisted her thighs together. This was fun. “S-seriously, not my ears or—”

When I flicked the very tips of her elven ears, Lana seized me with all her strength, biting my shoulder. After a pause, she loosened her grip and relaxed her body. Her breath was ragged, her damp skin clinging to mine.

“*Haah, haah.....* My love..... Either have a serious conversation with me or play with my body; pick one. Or I’m going to get angry,” she whispered with a threatening tone. I felt a little guilty. “You’re so— I swear, I don’t know what to do with you.” She sighed, exasperated. “.....But yes, I suppose if anyone in this world was to love me from the bottom of their heart, they would have to be someone like you. No—they would have to be you.”

“I doubt it.”

She bit down hard on my collarbone for some reason. “It would have to be you, right?”

“Yes, only me.” It hurt—pretty bad.

Then, as if intent on paying me back, Lana ripped my shirt off. She nibbled my

earlobes. But I wasn't going to lose; I fondled her breasts and ran my fingers down over her plump bottom. She murmured adorably in response.

I adored her. Never had I loved anyone before, but if this was what you called love, then I'd give all of myself to it. I'd carve it into my heart like a curse, there to remain for the remainder of my short life.

"Lana, marry me."



“I already did.” *Oh, that’s right. Oops.*

“I mean, spiritually or, like, physically, you know— Ngh—!”

She smothered my lips with hers, earnest yet clumsy. Her sweet smell was so close it made me dizzy. As our breathing became hot and heavy, we wove our tongues against the other’s until they almost melted together; the border between her and me seemed to dissolve. It was as if we had always been one. I wanted to tell her the millions of dirty thoughts in my mind, but the desire to put my mouth to better use was stronger. But first, I repositioned myself just the slightest to connect us even more deeply.

Words of desire escaped our lips, delirious with passion, wild as a beast’s, frenzied and urgent. There were many more things that still remained unsaid between us, bonds that needed mending. They said all flames must die; perhaps then, this love would one day flicker out as well.

But even so—

—I thought.

Even so, especially so, this moment right now is worth an eternity.



[96TH DAY]

Ten days, Lana and I lazed away, enjoying each other’s company. The moment we got back to camp, Éa chewed us both out. Lanceil smiled knowingly when she saw us, Machina busied herself with chores, pretending not to know anything, and Yukikaze, who had returned, was bouncing around in the meadow with the flying rabbits. Not even Lady Mythlanica backed me up.

“Honestly, I could’ve kept going for a *long* while,” I confessed and immediately had my wife confiscated. Éa took her and Lanceil to the city to meet up with Shuna and Lis for a sleepover. We’d made enough money on the last expedition to live luxuriously for a while. It didn’t hurt to let loose and splurge every so often.

I’d handed over the items we had inherited from Rhora’s victims to the trade

group. They sold it off for us, starting with the gear that could be appraised for monetary value. We still didn't know how much we'd get in total, but at this point, we were already at seven hundred thirty gold. Mage's staves from ancient times were far more powerful catalysts than recent ones and went for truly exorbitant prices.

I'd tried to give Freyja and her two companions a bonus for their work, but they refused to take anything aside from the fee we had originally agreed on. Inept as she was at taking care of herself, the Champion of Light had a steadfast sense of morals.

Our legacy items continued racking up coin. Even after appraisal fees and taxes, we'd still have a huge chunk of cash left, enough to split evenly among all our party members, buy land, build a house, and purchase everything you needed for daily life. What caught my attention, though, were the items that couldn't be sold. Most had basically disintegrated to dust, but some still worked just fine. I'd asked Machina to analyze them but got an *Evaluation Access Denied by Higher Authority* error message. This was just my gut feeling, but no matter how you looked at it, those items were just as—no, *more advanced*—than some we had in the modern world.

The biggest puzzle, though, was that door that could only be opened with an AI core unit and the cosmography inscribed on its walls. It had to be somehow, even if only tangentially, related to my ultimate destination, the fifty-sixth floor. My questions only led to more mysteries. To have any hope of solving them, I'd have to go back and explore the dungeon.

.....Yet.

"Souya, could I have a moment of your time?" Lanceil returned to camp alone.

"Sure, what's up?" I asked, feigning ignorance, though I could guess what she came to say.

"Would you consider serving His High—my father?"

"Sorry. I can't."

I didn't trust King Remlia. He was a good king, a good ruler—but I never

appreciated that. I preferred a king who chose to walk on a path to his own respectable death. I wanted a sovereign who would succeed in the battlefield or die fighting for his people, the kind of king who shone during the darkest hours, in bitter warfare.

In other words, King Remlia hadn't done anything wrong necessarily; I just had a weird concept of my quintessential king. If I were to enter his service while ignoring my ideals, sooner or later, I'd betray him in the worst possible way.

"I thought you might say as much."

"Hmm?" What did that mean?

"I take back what I said before. I want to see the outside world. *If you plan on going somewhere*, you must take me with you—please."

"I'm not planning anything like that, but why?" I lied.

"Oh, I simply wanted to let you know, Sou— Oh, should I call you sire instead? Is it overly familiar of me to call you by your name?"

"Call me whatever you like."

"Then I'll see what my heart says each day and use that. So, Souya. I wanted to tell you that no matter what choices lay before you now, I will follow you to the ends of the world."

She'd seen through me. But I had to be cruel to be kind here. "And if I said I can't trust you?"

"We appear to have a misunderstanding. Right now, I am by your side because I choose to be. To be truthful, His Highness ordered me to spy on you for him," she confessed. "But I refused."

"You did *what*?" *Hold up, she's not here to keep tabs on me?*

"I refused. Then once again, I told him, 'I leave to serve at Souya's side.' He struggled to comprehend at first but eventually accepted my wishes. Essentially, my *father* has *given me away*." Lanceil's hands balled into tight fists.

Wait, what's that supposed to mean? "Sorry, I'm not following."

“I am fully aware that, as a beastmaid, I will never have the opportunity to properly wed. However, as your consort, I can stay by your side for the rest of my life.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

“I am under no orders. I am simply choosing to stay by the man who has my heart. My father has given his permission; he has allowed his daughter to go out into the world on her own. That’s what I am telling you.”

“Ahhh, gotcha.” Still no idea.

“Whether you leave or stay, I will follow you—until the final days of my life.”

“.....But what’s your real goal?” I still couldn’t trust her.

“That is my real goal, my real desire. Souya, do you really think I would be capable of deceiving you?”

“Honestly, not at all.” A quick flashback of the memories I had of Lanceil, and I was reminded of how I had always been able to read her emotions. She was impulsive, or rather, not great at keeping secrets. Maybe I should say she had a straightforward personality and held no ulterior motives. But then that would mean she actually felt something for me.

“What could you possibly like about me?”

“Hmm? Everything.” Hadn’t seen the unconditional acceptance coming. “More specifically, you are the man who defeated me in battle; you are kind and an excellent cook. I also find it adorable that you’re something of a late bloomer. One second, I feel as if I’m proudly watching my little brother grow up, then the next, your acceptance of all manner of diversity reminds me of my older brother. A formidable power secretly dwells in you; though that said, your lack of caution toward yourself awakens my protective instincts as well.”

So wait, is self-interest her motivation? Or her heartfelt feelings? I’m getting even more confused.

“But I have Lana, so—”

“And I have received her permission.” *You did all that groundwork already? I take back what I said; you’re totally capable of deception.*

“Elven women, not to mention a onetime elven princess, are raised in a polygamous culture and understand men’s proclivities. Heroes crave sexual satisfaction. Even my father, despite all appearances to the contrary, has had more than his share of women.”

“I’m not the hero type,” I instinctively retorted.

“But you are a hero.” Lanceil fixed her eyes burning with feverish passion on me. “Anyone who can vanquish a hero is a fine hero in their own right.”

Can I be sure this beastmaid isn’t just happy I slew a heim hero? I thought with groundless suspicion. Women were complicated and mysterious. I didn’t have nearly enough experience to understand what went on in their minds.

“Now, I would not like to keep Lana and Éa waiting, so I’ll leave you here. But please do not forget. I am here on no one’s orders but my own.” Lanceil paused. “.....You won’t easily be rid of me, sire,” she whispered, delivering that terrifying threat with a smile as bright as the sun, then disappeared over the meadow.

I started to sweat, somehow both scared and excited. There I stood, gazing at the grassy fields until it dried, then took a deep breath. *All right. Last step.*

“Machina, Yukikaze, I need to talk to you,” I called out to my AI partners.

“Comiiing.”

“Me tooooo.”

The big pot and the small kettle rolled over to me.

“I want your opinion on something important.”

“Of course. Ask us anything.”

“We are listening.”

“I’m going to quit exploring the dungeon.”

For about three full seconds, both machines froze. “*Wh-wh-what did you say?!*” Machina twirled in panic, her arms flailing about.

“Calm down. Elves and heims have very different life spans. In Lana’s long life, I will only be with her for a brief moment. For her, the least I could do is make

the best of the time we have together. And the dungeon has no place in that.”

“Mr. Souya, let me get this straight. For her sake, you’re choosing to forego any hopes of returning to your original world or receiving the reward promised to you?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s how it works out.”

It’s not like I’ve got any reason to go back anyway. But in this world, I have friends. I have a wife. I have a sister—

My head throbbed a bit. No, it felt like static had interrupted my thoughts.

—Right, I’ve got a sister here. I’ve had good experiences and painful moments, but I’ve also been able to overcome those.

Shuna and Lis would definitely complain once they heard I’d quit adventuring, but I could arrange for them to be with another party—with Freyja and Lazalisa. I wouldn’t delve into the dungeon with them, but I would support them as much as I could. Adventuring into the dungeon was not the only way to live. If I was careful with how we spent our current funds, I could probably provide for the girls for the rest of their lives.

“Mr. Souya, I urge you to reconsider. Let’s talk this over again, together, from the beginning. Yukikazzie, come on. Tell him.”

“If that is what you desire, Squad Member Souya, then I will not object. Thank you for all your hard work.”

“Yukikazzie?!”

Forcing myself to ignore Machina’s anxious fit, my voice cold and merciless, I told her, “Sorry, I’ve already made up my mind. Code break, code break. Requesting emergency command code authorization.”

“Understood. Initiating voice identification. You may proceed,” a monotonous voice from within Machina replied.

As a last resort, I created the emergency command code, which was a password that could override the machines. The effects of Wild Hunt could make me unrecognizable to Machina, so I set up this code just in case. But I never could’ve imagined I’d use it like this.

“Each outcry of the hunted Hare

“A fibre from the Brain does tear

“A Skylark wounded in the wing

“A Cherubim does cease to sing”

“Code authorized. Freezing all Machina Unit personalities. Accepting all commands up to security level three.”

“Send this message to the Firm: *All squad members have perished; rescue not needed.*”

“Roger that, message sent. Status of receipt is unclear.”

“.....I see. Freeze all functions and power off.”

“Understood. Would you like to set up a restart command?”

“I.....” For a second, I wavered. Anxiety plagued me at the thought of not having the AI bots’ help from here on out. But I couldn’t risk the Firm tracking my movements.

I made up my mind—I’m going to live the rest of my life here, as a person of this dimension. I’ll be damned before I complain about being scared.

“No need for a restart command. Machina, Yukikaze, thank you for everything.”

“Understood. Good night.” The two ceased all functionality.

Guilt pierced my heart. All I had left to do was take out their self-destruction remotes, and..... Yeah, I’d never be able to do that. It wasn’t like with my guns. They were asleep, not dead.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, knowing they wouldn’t hear it, then turned my back to them.

Just then—

“I had such high hopes for you—”

—I heard someone say. The voice came from the Machina Unit, which should have been shut off. It was a powerful, oppressing, manly voice without any

trace of humanity, like an amalgamation of electronic sounds.

“Who are you?”

“Many humans, I have watched, but you are the first and last to have forgotten his mission due to a woman. And yet, you are closer than any before you. How terribly ironic.”

Was this some kind of secret messenger for the AI system? Wait, don’t tell me someone’s hacked it? What the hell is going on?

“I will show you the world. In doing so, I will make it painfully clear that you have no other choice but to continue delving into the dungeon.”

“Wha—?”

Suddenly paralyzed, I crumpled to the ground. Yukikaze’s mini unit had injected something in my leg.

“Coordinates fixed. Range set to minimum. Setting interference level at... Force-activating portal.”

An explosion of light—then a portal appeared. The Machina Unit grabbed my leg and hurled me in without even giving me the chance to protest.

“Lana!” My scream sounded far away. Darkness enveloped my sight. For a second, I was floating; gravity reversed. I heard the gushing wind echo. Soon, though, there was light everywhere. Then I landed on ice—or rather, what I thought to be ice was, in fact, a freezing marble floor. My fingers had touched it for only a second, and yet the cold seeped deep into my bones. The air, just as frigid, shocked my lungs and sent goose bumps crawling all over my skin.

I was in a large chamber. Its white ornamentations gave it the feel of a grandiose cathedral. Its ceiling bore a mural depicting the story of a maiden and a sword-wielding man, and through the windows, I could see bleak *snow-covered fields* stretch out into the distance.

A line of brawny men in black armor stood to my left. To my right, a line of maids and butlers. Before me rose an imperial throne, a large flag emblazoned with a skeletal dragon hung behind it. Sitting atop the throne was a queen.

Young-looking, she was probably in her later teens. She wore an opulent dress

under an equally elegant fur cape and held a jewel-studded staff in her right hand. Her flaxen hair was tied up in a bun. A small crown rested on her head.

Her voice refined and regal, she addressed me. “We have no words to thank thee, Champion of Light, for answering our summons. The Black Elves have thrown the Left Continent into turmoil, and that fiend has dispatched troops to ravage our Aschetalia. O Champion, Savior of Countries, we beseech thee, lend us thy strength to save our land.”

“.....Huh?” I blurted out, stupefied.

“Huh?” she replied, just as confused.

What did she just say? “Left Continent”? Wait, Remlia’s on the Right Continent, and that disgusting Ellusion is on the Central Continent, so I must’ve flown..... Wait, you’ve gotta be kidding me. Was I transported here?!

“Sorry, um, could you please send me back to where I came from?”

“.....Pardon?” Puzzled, the queen tilted her head.

TO BE CONTINUED

AFTERWORD

Good day, good evening, good morning. I'm the author, Hinagi Asami. Thank you very much for picking up a copy of *The Otherworlder, Exploring the Dungeon*, Vol. 3.

Volume 3! We've made it to Volume 3! Thank you for waiting for what turned out to be quite a long time since the last book!

I struggled quite a bit with the structure of this volume. A straightforward narrative made it redundant as a novel, but cutting out pieces left holes in the story. If I had randomly stuffed it with everything I wanted, it would have been twice the length of Volumes 1 and 2. So in the end, I focused on writing the essential points while adding or editing some of the main characters' adventures, which I think resulted in a better narrative.

While this third novel in the series is a single volume, it contains three books' worth of content. I'm kidding, of course, only joking. I was sure my editor would object when I ended this one with a *To be continued*, but I actually got the approval without any real issue. Even if there wasn't a next volume, I'd hope to have the story passed down by word of mouth.

What's going to happen next?!

Looking back, last year was very busy. I had my first novel published, along with the second volume in the series *Incredibly*, and the story was also serialized as a manga by Kaoru Hoshino on *Comp Ace* and *Comic Walker*. Whenever the first volume comes out, please, please do check it out!

Now that I'm on my third afterword, I've come to a realization: *Ah, I can't write these for shit.....*

Come to think of it, in one light novel I read, the author used the afterword to

talk about Bell Marks, a system similar to collecting box tops to fund education for kids. Back then, my younger self scoffed at it, thinking, *C'mon, who cares about Bell Marks? Talk to me about the story! I want to know what happens next.*

But of course, now that I'm a writer, it's become clear that afterwords are a tricky business. I want to talk about the story you just read, but then again, I said basically everything I had to say on the topic in the novel itself. Plus, what kind of author would give away spoilers in their own book? So what do you say? I don't know! I've got nothing! Someone, give me a question, please!

Now, all these years later, I am painfully aware of how wise my predecessor was. I almost want to start collecting Bell Marks for myself to have something to talk about. Not that I have the time for it, though!

Lastly (though I really, really hope this is not the actual last note I'll write), I'd like to graciously thank my editor and proofreaders, Kureta for the amazing illustrations, the Dragon Novels editing department, all the readers who purchased a copy of this book, and everyone who collaborated with me on this project.

How far will this series spanning the Heisei and Reiwa eras go? If I'm lucky enough to have a fourth volume, I look forward to seeing you again there!

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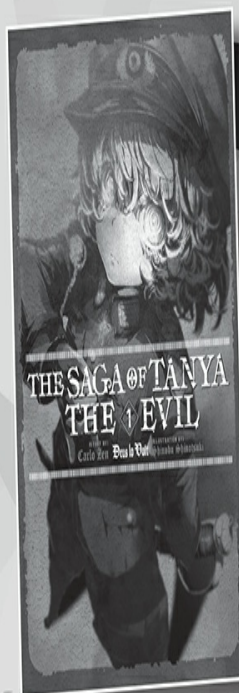
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