

Inumajin

ILLUSTRATION BY

Kochimo

5



Woof
Woof
Story

I TOLD YOU TO TURN ME INTO A
Pampered Pooch.

NOT FENRIR!



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Pampered Pooch.*

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Mary

Elizabeth

Mircalla

Routa

Even studying is sure to be fun if we do it together



Zenobia

Alstera

“Arwf!
(All
right,
we’re
going
in after
them!)”

“It’s to
protect the
mansion. I
don’t intend
to go back
to being an
adventurer.”

“Anyway,
let’s get
moving!
We can kill
as many
monsters
inside the
labyrinth as
we want and
no one will
complain,
right?”

The Hero’s Party Goes
to the Labyrinth



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NEW YORK

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VOLUME 5

Inumajin

Translation by Andrew Prowse

Cover art by Kochimo

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A dog, lazing about all day long in the garden.

A big ol' puppy, covered in fluffy white fur.

Getting affection from my lady, every single day.

Spoiled by Papa, every single day.

Eating as much of the old man's delicious cooking as I want, every single day.

Surrounded by maids who brush me, every single day.

Spending my time lounging without a care.

That's what my days look like. I've long forgotten about the suffering in my past life. My time as a human who lived each day more dead than alive has faded to oblivion. I'm living my best life now. Liberated as I am from labor, my days have never shone as brightly as they do now that I'm living in dog years.

When asked whether or not food I haven't worked for is tasty, I can confidently reply with the following:

"Woof! *(It's the most delicious thing ever!)*" I say, sharpening my facial expression, in response to the mouse who posed the question.

"...Squeak. *(...I find myself dumbfounded at your unabashed honesty.)*" The mouse sighs.

She's actually a giant dragon named Lenowym. Ever since I visited her lair to pinch a few herbs and we ended up fighting each other over a misunderstanding, the oddball has nested in my fur for some reason.

"Mrow. *(Your passion for lazing around is something else, Routa.)*" A red-haired cat meows from the tree we're cooling off beneath.

That one is Nahura. She's just a cat from every angle—but apparently her true identity is that of a homunculus. She stands up, unloading her legs from

underneath her, then stretches before jumping down onto my stomach.

“Mew. (I should have expected as much from you, Routa. Normally, people can’t be so blunt when they talk. Other people would be too embarrassed.)”

“Arwf, arwf. (Ha-ha-ha. Quit trying to butter me up.)”

You’re making me blush!

“Mew, mew. (Ah-ha-ha. If that sounded like a compliment, then I guess you really are hard-core about it.)”

Indeed. I struggle day and night to achieve the pinnacle of petdom. Specifically, I eat, sleep, eat, sleep, play with my lady, eat, sleep—that sort of thing.

A pet’s day starts late.

It’s no struggle.

I do it because I like it.

“Squeak... (An awfully pathetic thing to say with such a sharp look on your face... The Fen Wolf Kings of ages past are surely rolling in their graves...)”

Fen Wolf Kings? Never heard of ’em. All that’s here right now is a little white puppy dog.

“Arwf! (Exactly! Young laaadyyy!)”

I let out a saccharine whine for my lady, who allows me to rest my head in her lap.

And now I’m having an incredible afternoon doze atop her lovely knees.

While petting me, the young lady shows me a letter penned on high-quality paper.

“Hee-hee. Routa, did you know Elizabeth is coming over to play soon? She says she’ll have decided on an exact date by the time the next letter arrives.”

Oh, of course I know that. I’ve heard as much several times.

And I’ve seen her rereading the letter twice as often. She seems really excited about getting to see her friend after so long.

The letter's sender is a preppy, drill-haired—I mean the young lady Elizabeth. She's a noble girl whom Lady Mary made friends with when the Faulks family visited the Royal Capital. She and my lady have been sending letters back and forth pretty frequently.

The kindhearted Lady Mary reads them to me many times, so I've perfectly memorized the contents.

Elizabeth is doing well. I also know that her parents, who weren't on good terms, have returned home.

I've actually met with that drill-haired girl without Lady Mary knowing, but she never wrote about *that* time. We, along with Hecate and Zenobia, caused quite the stir in the capital, but it looks like she doesn't intend to tell Lady Mary about that.

Lots of things happened in that one night, huh? Less than a minute after we caught the elf thieves, we headed for the Royal Capital to save their older sisters, who had been enslaved. Then we encountered Drills, who was trying to break up an illegal pet business. And it turned out the unlawful business was actually a group of terrorists trying to topple the royals... So yeah, I wasn't kidding when I said lots of things happened.

Looking back on it, that run-in with the terrorists was a major event. I don't know much of what happened afterward, but Hecate was there. She used to be a big shot at the guild, so I assume she wrapped everything up smoothly. It was an incident on a national scale—and with Elizabeth being the noble daughter of a huge business, she's probably offering her compliance to the best of her ability.

As for me, I can't have anyone revealing that I—the puppy who was supposed to have been snoozing at the mansion—had been a bad boy in the capital. I'm confident Elizabeth understands this, which is probably why she's been keeping it a secret. I like that about you, Drills.

To be honest, I'm not entirely sure if I used *compliance* correctly a moment ago. I care so little for the knowledge gained in my past life that it feels like my brain is coming apart at its seams.

“I'm so excited to see Elizabeth again. I can't wait to chat and play with her!”

“Arwf. (Me too.)”

Elizabeth is the first friend she’s made who is both her age and of a similar social status, which makes Lady Mary happy to no end. And if she’s happy, I’m happy, too.

I’d never even considered that the prissy noble and Lady Mary would become such fast friends. She was a real piece of work when we first met. The first thing out of her mouth was basically, “Give me your dog.”

Still, maybe I could have seen this coming, given that she’s just as blind as Lady Mary when it comes to my Fen Wolf status. To them, I’m just a big puppy. Birds of a feather flock together, and all that. I’m willing to bet she sees that ground dragon of hers as little more than an oversize lizard, too.

According to the letters, that dragon is doing just fine as well. But seriously, what a total weirdo. Listening to her brag about her bottom-shelf food that could have dealt some psychic damage to demons, and hearing her gush about deriving the greatest pleasure from letting Drills step on her... I just don’t get it.

Then again, considering there’s another dragon living in my fur, maybe it’s safe to say that all dragons are more or less weirdos.

“Squeak, squeak! (Beloved! You’re having rude thoughts again, aren’t you?)”

Silence, you thousand-year-old, friendless, cradle-robbing furry.

Come at me when you’ve gotten rid of your perv attribute.

“Squeak, squeak, squeak! (Mrrrgh! I’ll have you know, only being aroused by humans makes you far more abnormal than I!)”

How rude. I’ve never looked at the ladies around me with such lecherous intent. I’ve only ever treated them as objects of beauty and nothing more. Just a gift for the eyes. The only thing in my heart is gratitude for having laid eyes on a pleasant sight.

As a pet, I don’t need romance. Just give me someone to raise me and spoil me rotten.

For me, that someone is Lady Mary. She’s cute, she’s kind, she smells nice, and, as icing on the cake, she’s rich. She’s freaking perfect! No matter what

happens, I'll devote my whole life to her.

Also, I don't really feel like working. In fact, you could say my job is to have my head on her lap and let her spoil me all she wants. Ah, what a burden. Each day is so fraught with difficulty. I roll over onto my side as I crunch down on the baked goods Lady Mary is sharing with me.

I'm currently at peak laziness in my pampered pooch life—and it's the *best*.



It happened one day while I was enjoying my lazy afternoon with the young lady.

"I can't *stand* it!!"

I hear the crashing of tableware, then a shrill scream.

"Arwf? (*Wait, what's all that about?*)"

I know that voice. It's Mircalla, the apprentice maid who began working at the mansion last month.

"I wonder if something happened. Let's go see."

"Arwf! (*Okay!*)"

The commotion seems to be coming from the kitchen. Never one to shy away from an opportunity to eavesdrop, I follow after my lady. What in the world could Mircalla be throwing a fit over?

I peek into the window on the back door, which gives me a good look at the interior. Lady Mary, for her part, clings to my neck from behind, moving her head up just enough to see.

"Day after day after *day* after *day*...! Clean this, wash that, peel these vegetables! *I* shouldn't be the one doing these dumb chores!"

The voice belongs to Mircalla, just as I thought. Her blond hair, done up on either side, bounces up and down—which is cute, but her face is seething with rage.

Why, pray tell, would someone hired to be a maid claim that maid work isn't her job? Was Mircalla once a noble or something? Maybe she was the kind that

would say something like, “Oh, but these *peasant* chores are just so beneath me.”

“Oh, great. Mircalla’s throwing another hissy fit.”

“Don’t wave knives around like that. It’s dangerous.”

“Come here, Mircalla. Your big sister will make it all better...”

Betty, the maid with cute freckles, picks up the overturned chair, while Connie, the maid with the pretty, fluffy hair, picks up the knife from the floor. Meanwhile, Mira, the black-haired beauty, tries to soothe the agitated Mircalla.

“You’re *not* my sister! You’re a total stranger whose name happens to be similar to mine!”

Mircalla tries to push away the hand trying to stroke her hair, but Mira is so tall she acts like it’s nothing. She continues mussing Mircalla’s hair from above, not showing any mercy.

“You say you can’t stand it,” notes Betty, “but only *after* you properly did all the peeling. You’re an earnest one, aren’t you, Mircalla? You know how busy the chef is, and that we need to help prepare ingredients so things don’t spiral into chaos.”

“Wha?!”

“You’ve shown so much improvement since arriving here a month ago,” adds Connie. “At first, your potatoes were so small they could have been beans, but now your peels are thin and your speed is almost up to our level. I can see you’re really trying hard.”

“W-wha?!”

“You’re a good girl, Mircalla,” croons Mira. “Such a good girl...”

“Whaaaaa...?!”

Mircalla’s face is bright red.

A *tsundere* maid, huh?



That's good. That's really good... All right, Mircalla, you go ahead and be as *tsundere* as you want.

"Such... Such insolence! You think you'll get away with talking to me like that?! Who, exactly, do you think I *am*?!"

"A maid?"

"Yes, a maid."

"...A little-sister maid?"

Mira really wants to make Mircalla into her sister, doesn't she?

A little-sister maid... Yeah, that's good, too. If I had opposable thumbs, I'd be sticking one up right now.

"No! I'm not some dumb maid! I'm a general of the De—"

Oh, it looks like Mircalla just noticed me. The moment our eyes meet, her sentence trails off. I look at her with my big, round eyes—then break out in a cold sweat.

"Arwf? (*General of...the what? 'De'?*)"

Was she about to say, "Demon Lord's army"? The only ones I remember from that group are the giant skeleton and the busty, blond vampire.

But why would Mircalla say something like that?

"N-never mind. I'm just a maid...," says Mircalla, stating the obvious. Her eyes darting madly from side to side.

Yep, you're a maid. That's common knowledge.

The other three, baffled by her words and actions, all tilt their heads in confusion. And then, they finally notice what's out the window themselves.

"Ah, crap!" curses one of them.

The maids hurriedly form a straight line—not for me, but for the young lady.

"Oh no! They found us!"

Lady Mary climbs off me and opens the door, embarrassed.

“I’m really sorry for interrupting your work, everyone,” she says.

“N-not at all! We were just at a good stopping point anyway.”

As Lady Mary bows to them, the maids wave their hands to deny her interruption.

Well, you *did* just get caught slacking off. If Miranda knew about this, she’d have a few choice words for you all. Lady Mary would never tell on you, though, so rest easy. In fact, she’d probably try to slack off *with* you.

Oh, I get it. I just figured out why Mircalla’s been acting so weird. She wasn’t flustered because she spotted me, but because she saw the young lady. I must have been mishearing her when she mentioned all that “general” stuff. I’ll have to get them to add an ear-cleaning to my grooming routine.

“Squeak, squeak... *(I believe they say that pets take after their owners, and your blindness makes me truly believe that...)*”

Len is muttering something to herself.

Well, golly, I wonder what she means by that? How could I possibly be blind with these big, round eyes of mine?

“Squeak. *(Round eyes? They’re the exact opposite right now. That sharp glint in them would make anyone who sees you start to tremble.)*”

That’s mean! How could you say that to an adorable pet like me?

...Maybe I’ll have to practice opening my eyes wider.

“Lady Mary! It’s almost time for afternoon studies!”

Toa appears, out of breath. She must have been going around looking for us when she noticed we weren’t in the courtyard.

“Oh, is it already that time? I’ll be right there! Routa, see you—I mean, good-bye for now!”

The young lady pats me on the head, then goes off to her afternoon studies.

Then old man James returns through the back door to replace her.

“Ah, is the peeling already finished? You all do good work as usual. And Mircalla, you’ve gotten much better, too. That’s excellent,” observes the old

man, checking over the vegetables that the maids peeled and nodding with satisfaction. “Thanks for always helping out. You’ve been a great help.”

“H-hmph. Yes, I should *hope* you’re grateful.”

Mircalla just folded her arms and pouted! So cute! Yes! Blond *tsundere* little-sister maids are *definitely* good!

“Hold on. All of you, have a seat for a moment.”

“Ooh, what is it?” asks Betty. “Are you gonna give us a tip, chef?”

“Well, something like that,” says the old man, moving over to the cutting board.

He picks up a bright-red tomato. As he smoothly runs a knife along it, the tomato rapidly falls into six pieces, with even the skin peeled off.

I didn’t know you could cut the skin off tomatoes! How incredible. As I look on in admiration, the old man continues to cut more of them. Then he mashes them and uses a cloth to strain them, and in the blink of an eye, his goal has been accomplished.

He pours the liquid into glasses, then adds a slice of lemon on the edge of each.

“Arwf! (*It’s tomato juice!*)”

“Drink up. I picked these tomatoes fresh from the fields earlier today.”

“Wow! Thanks, chef!”

“Your tomato juice is so delicious, Lord James.”

“I’m so excited...”

The maids take their juice from the old man and immediately savor the flavor.

“What...? What the heck is this...?”

In spite of her words, she’s clearly interested. Mircalla cradles the glass in both hands, hesitantly puts it to her lips, and takes a sip.

And then her cheeks droop.

“Haaahhh...!”

That's really not the kind of face a young lady should be making, Mircalla!

"It's somehow better than anybo—*anything* I've ever tasted before...! How is that possible...?! Now that I've tasted this, I can't drink from anyone anymore...!" she says in praise of the juice's taste, her expression one of ecstasy.

I feel like she's wording her thoughts really weirdly, but it must just be my imagination.

"Arwf, arwf! (*Old man! Me too! Give me some, too!*)"

"All right, all right. I promise I'm not gonna leave you out."

The old man fills a flat dish with juice just for me.

"Arwf! (*This is delicious!*)"

The bright-red juice, meticulously strained, isn't sour in the slightest. It has a natural sweetness, and the added salt and lemon provide beautifully contrasting bitterness and tartness. I get just a hint of basil, too, which helps create a flavor my tongue never wants to stop tasting. It has such a deep umami it's almost like I'm drinking chilled soup. Yeah, I totally get why Mircalla looked so enraptured.

"Thanks for the hard work. There won't be much to do here for a while, so go ahead and take a short break. Oh, and you can just put the glasses in the sink when you're done."

"Woof, woof! (*Thanks, old man!*)"

The old man waves to us as we thank him, then heads for his next job.

The maids take seats around a small kitchen table and spend their break relaxing. In the meantime, Mircalla, who finished her juice before everyone else, starts shooting glances my way.

"Arwf? (*What is it? You interested in me?*)"

If so, then feel free to come over and pet me!

I lie on my side, then give her my irresistible belly-up pose.

After looking down at me in loathing, Mircalla goes to talk to the other maids.

Being ignored sure doesn't feel good.

"Hey, about that...ummm, that dog... What do you think of him?"

"Hm? You mean Routa?"

Betty notices I'm sad and comes over and starts rubbing my belly. I'm so happy. Heh-heh.

"Right here? Does this feel good?"

Ahh, nooooo...! It feels too goooood...!

After being petted to my full satisfaction, I collapse in a heap.

"Routa's cute! He's also a really good boy, see?"

"He helps with our work occasionally, too," adds Connie. "Like when there's something high up and out of reach, he'll appear out of nowhere and let us climb on him."

"What a smart boy... *Pet, pet...*"

I know, right? Keep those pets coming.

"To tell you the truth, I was a little afraid of him at first," continues Betty. "He grew up really fast. And his face is kind of mean-looking."

"But then Toa, who was more scared of him than the rest of us, became friends with him. That set our minds at ease."

"Yes... He was very obedient when we brushed him, too..."

Ever since then, the maids have put brushing me into their schedules. Thanks to them, my fur never has any knots in it, and it stays fluffy and shiny.

Speaking of which, I wonder what happened with all that hair that fell off me. Maybe I recently finished growing a new coat. I'm not losing that much fur anymore, but for a while, it was coming out in huge clumps.

"Anyway, I guess that's what we think of him. Mircalla, why don't you come over and pet him, too? I promise he won't bite."

"Arwf, arwf. (*Yeah, I don't bite.*)"

But I *will* lick you! Now bring those delicate hands over here. I'll make them

slimy with saliva.

“...How carefree.”

After glaring at our invitations for a moment, Mircalla rises from her chair. She washes the glass she drank from, wipes it, then puts it on the drying rack before leaving the kitchen.

The old man said they could just leave them in the sink, too. How considerate of her.

“She’s so earnest about certain things, isn’t she?”

“She’s definitely a good girl.”

“I know... I want to make her my little sister...”

In the end, Mircalla only increased her affection rating with the maids even further.



There was another servant hired to serve at our mansion along with Mircalla. Unlike her, this new guy is an elderly butler with lots of experience. If I recall correctly, his name is Richmond. He’s in Papa’s good graces, too, since he handles anything needed of him with ease.

Still, I’ve never really had much to do with him. Neither he nor Mircalla ever approaches me. I guess they must be scared. It’s all because of my huge body and scary face. Damn that airheaded goddess.

I’m walking down a hallway with this on my mind when I hear a quiet conversation coming from Papa’s study.

“Yes, it *is* good. I had no idea you could get such a different flavor out of the same tea leaves.” That’s Papa.

“You can tell the difference even just by the smell,” adds Miranda. “Would you mind teaching me how to make it like this later?”

“Oh, I’m only drawing on past experience. If you’d like, I would be glad to teach you anytime.”

Papa is briskly handling his clerical work with Miranda assisting him. In

addition to those two, who are likely exhausted from long hours of work, is the butler Richmond, treating them to some black tea. His posture—standing straight up with a porcelain pot in one hand—is really butlery and cool.

Papa was right, too. The pleasant aroma of the black tea is drifting my way. I wonder if I can get them to share with me. But still, first tomato juice, now black tea. I wonder if that's too much water. I half expect it to start sloshing around in my stomach, but I can cancel that out if they share some snacks with me, too!

“Arwf, arwf! (Excuse me! I'd like to join teatime, too, please!)”

I open the door with my front paw and barge into the study.

“Oh, Routa?” says Papa. “I see you're in the mood for tea as well.”

Yes! And some snacks, too, please.

“Richmond, I'm sorry, but could you prepare some tea for Routa as well? And seconds for me... Richmond?”

Richmond doesn't respond, so everyone's eyes fall on him.

“Arwf? (What's wrong, Richmond?)”

He's frozen like a sculpture in the position I first saw him in.

I approach him, mystified. He starts to tremble.

“What's wrong, Richmond? You're sweating quite a lot.”

“N-n-n-n-n-n-nothing, i-i-i-i-i-it's nothing, a-a-a-a-a-at all. You'd like s-s-s-s-s-seconds, yes? P-p-p-p-p-please leave it to m-m-m-m-m-me.”

It doesn't *look* like nothing. Actually, isn't all that trembling going to cause the tea to spill?

Aaaand just as I feared, the nose of the teapot veers away from Papa's cup and hot black tea pours onto the paperwork.

“N-nooooo! The... The documents!”

“Richmond, what are you doing?!”

Papa cries out, and Miranda hastily wipes off the desk.

“I’m terribly sorry! I’m terribly sorry!”

The peaceful teatime has turned into a total disaster.

“A-arwf... *(Oh no, oh no... Is this my fault?)*”

If he got like that when he saw me, I must really be scary in this form.

Mircalla was acting kind of the same way, too. Everyone else in the mansion is completely used to me, but maybe I still come off as terrifying to the two new employees.

In that case, I’ll have to further polish my cute woof-woof style.



I don’t have the guts to remain in the study, so I flee to the garden.

“Arwf, arwf. *(Can’t do much about it. Guess I’ll take a nap.)*”

I wander in search of a good spot for an afternoon nap.

Summer is over, but it’s still not exactly cool out. Maybe under a garden tree, in the shade, is the best. Being under the bushes would probably keep me cool, but I doubt this huge body of mine could fit. Even now, I’m smaller than I should be thanks to the shape-shifting technique. If I got any smaller, it would be sure to draw suspicion.

And then I hear someone talking in the garden.

“The incinerator is acting up?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

It’s James and the old gardener.

“It isn’t, well, burning as much,” says the gardener. “The flames don’t seem to be working as well. I’m wondering if embers have clogged it. With my poor eyesight, I can’t see inside.”

“In that case, I’ll have a look at it.”

“Thank you.”

Do they get rid of the mansion’s burnable trash by putting it into an incinerator? Now that I think about it, I do occasionally see a smoke column. I

hadn't paid it any mind until now.

"Arwf. (I'm interested, so I'll go check, too.)"

I change my afternoon plans and meet up with James.

"Oh? What is it, Routa? Do you want to help me?"

"Arwf. (No, I just want to watch.)"

"I see. That is mighty kind of you."

James pats me on the head. As always, I can't get my point across.

He investigates the incinerator, which is set up in a corner of the garden. After confirming that nothing seems especially damaged on the outside, he opens the thick double doors.

"Ahh, he was right," says James. "Looks like something's stuck in the back. I'll have to find a longer poker." He starts off back the way we came.

"Arwf. (Hmm. I wonder what's in there?)"

I probably wouldn't know what it is even if I saw it, but I'm interested, so I give a peek anyway.

"Arwf. (Huh. It's too dark to see well... Also, it's really dusty in here...)"

There must be really small ashes floating around; my nose is getting itchy.

Oh, crap—I'm gonna sneeze. I can't stop it!

"Ah, ah, ah-chooo!!"

That was a powerful sneeze, if I do say so myself. And the sneeze came out right inside the closed incinerator. It must have been considerably forceful; every last one of the cinders flies right out of the thing.

"Arwrwaaah! (Ack! Now I've done it!)"

I start coughing madly in the middle of the cloud.

"...Arwf? (...Wait, what's this?)"

Amid the blackened cinders is a bright-white clump.

It's fluffy and has a sheen to it. A luster—it's like it would never allow any

impurities whatsoever to taint it. And I recognize it.

“Arwf! (Hey, that’s my fur!)”

They must have been burning all the fur that comes out when I get brushed. But it seems even the incinerator’s high heat wasn’t able to burn it. In fact, it’s not even singed.

“A-arwf! (Oh, crap! If they find something like this, they’ll get suspicious of me!)”

“Hmm, this poker might be a bit too short... Oh well, I’ll give it a try anyway.”

Oh no! And now the old man is about to come back!

There’s no time left. I push all the white fur into the bushes to hide it for now. I push, and push, and push some more.

“Hm? What are you up to, Routa?”

“W-woof, woof! (N-nothing! I’m not up to anything!)”

I sit in front of the bushes to help the facade and make it look like nothing’s behind me. Keep calm, fur! Don’t go fluffing out of there now!

“You’re a strange one. Anyway, let’s see what we can do about the clog.”

Looks like I was able to pull the fur over his eyes. The old man reaches into the incinerator with a poker. When he doesn’t feel anything, his look turns to one of confusion.

“...What?”

He peers inside and appears to realize the obstruction is gone. Then he turns around.

I look away from him. The cinders are all scattered around me.

“ ... ”

The old man’s careful gaze on me is scary!

But then he breaks out into a broad smile. “Not bad, Routa!”

“A-arwf? (H-huh?)”

“You dug it all out of there, right? I didn’t think you’d *actually* help out! You

can look forward to tonight's dinner!"

I thought he'd be angry, but instead he showers me with praise. I kept the fur thing a secret, and now I can expect an extra-special dinner tonight.

I did it! Hooray! Now I just have to go and bury the fur in secret—somewhere far away, probably. And I should do it at night while nobody's looking.

My heart singing, I decide to take a nap in the shade.



Afterward, with everybody gone and all the scattered cinders swept up, that corner of the garden was now empty.

A woman showed up, a sword hanging from her waist.

Zenobia Lionheart: a freeloader living at the Faulks estate and a former SS-Rank adventurer.

The area near the incinerator was her daily training spot.

She started with a proper posture, her movements slow and exploratory, before rapidly speeding up. She looked like she's fighting a shadow opponent. The way she moved resembled a raging current crashing into a clear stream. Truly the motions of a master of the blade.

Her training stretched out over an hour. Despite swinging the heavy sword for so long, though, she wasn't even out of breath. Her stamina lived up to her reputation as one of the strongest adventurers out there.

After defeating all her imaginary opponents, she remained on alert for a bit, then returned her sword to its sheath. She reached for the towel she'd brought with her, meaning to wipe the sweat that had appeared on her brow.

And then she noticed, sitting next to the towel, a stuffed animal. It looked a lot like the large dog living at the mansion. It sat there patiently, as though watching over Zenobia's training.

"Heh-heh."

A smile played across Zenobia's lips when she saw the adorable thing.

But then it flopped over onto its side, limp. Maybe the cotton inside wasn't as

springy anymore.

“...Hmm. Perhaps I shouldn’t have washed it? But it would get dirty if I carried it on me. I wonder if it’ll go back to normal if I stuff it with new cotton...”

It had been a little fuller when she bought it. She wanted to restore it to its former glory.

As she brainstormed ways to repair it, she noticed something white sticking out of the brush.

“What’s this?”

She pinched it and gave it a tug, and her hand came away with a clump of white fur.

“Is this *his* fur? What would it be doing here...?”

Zenobia stuck her hand back into the bush and pulled out even more fur.

“Is this all shed hair? What a strange wolf, hiding it in a place like this. I’ll just put it in the incinerator.”

She scooped up all the fur, then realized something.

“Or, I could use it to...”

Fur still in her arms, Zenobia turned around...to the slightly thinned stuffed animal.

“Heh-heh-heh. Prepare yourself. I’ll get you nice and plump, just like him!”

Suspending her training, Zenobia headed off to borrow some sewing supplies from the maids.

“Arrrrrrwf!! (*Whooooo! This looks amaaaaaaziiiiing!!*)”

“Gah-ha-ha! Dig in!”

The dinner the old man prepared for me is a huge Salisbury steak. After searing it and wrapping it in caul fat to keep the flavor in, he slow-cooked it in a low-heat oven before flambéing it in brandy to finish it off. Even the *steam* coming off the completed steak seems delicious.

I can't hold myself back anymore! Not a single second longer!

“Woof, woof!! (*Don't mind if I do!!*)”

I open my mouth as wide as it'll go and chomp down on the steak. It's humongous, and even my Fen Wolf jaws can't fully close around the whole thing at once. It's a perfect meal for me.

The moment my teeth pierce the crust—formed by the delicate searing—its juices explode from within. The umami from the fried onions and the slight sweetness from the carrots both combine with the juices to create an unforgettable flavor. It tastes like a thick soup. The sensations flooding my mouth threaten to spill out.

The steak retained its imposing shape and heft after cooking, but with my first bite, I notice it is as soft as a cloud. It practically melts on my tongue, and in seconds, it's gone.

It's incredibly rich and satisfying, likely because of the sauce poured over the top. It has an acidity to it that cuts down the slightly sweet umami of the fat. Did he use the fresh tomatoes for this sauce, too? It's so good I wouldn't mind drinking it by itself forever.

However! Just beneath that steak awaits steamy, fluffy rice. Now that it's absorbed the steak juices and the sauce, it's too much to resist.

“Armgh, armgh! *(It’s good! It’s sooo good!)*”

I eat with abandon. I consume every last bite.

“There’s more where that came from! You did a good job today! I’ll feed you until your stomach bursts!”

“Woof, woof! *(Yahoo! You’re so generous, old man!)*”

“Actually, I’d be more worried if you didn’t eat it. I took all the offal from the scraps and muscles in the past and ground it up. It’s not exactly something I can serve the young lady.”

What? But it’s so delicious. That seems like a waste. I *will* eat all there is to eat, of course. The old man continues to impress, making something this delicious out of offal. The deep flavors must be coming from the mixture of different kinds of meat. No matter how much I eat, I’m always ravenous for more.

Time to dine! Today, we feast!

He cooks more of the steaks, one after another, and I fully enjoy them, eating to my heart’s content.

At long last, I lick up the last few drops of meat juice stuck to the plate and declare dinner finished.

It’s so carefree being a dog—I don’t even have to worry about manners or anything. Nobody complains if I just laze around after eating, either.

“Arrrwww... *(Haaahhh... This is pure bliss...)*”

I can’t move another inch.

“You’re eating more by the day,” the old man says, happily rubbing my tummy. “You’d finally gotten thin, too. Better be careful or you’ll get fat again.”

No worries there, pal. Now that I have the shape-shifting technique, not even obesity can beat me.

“Yeah. And thanks to your insatiable appetite, our stock is in trouble, too.”

S-sorry ’bout that.

“At least we don’t have any vegetable issues. We’ve been harvesting them

like crazy for some reason, and their taste is first rate, too. Even their size is out of the ordinary.”

Well, sure. There’s a special fertilizer at work. It’s a combination of the bones of the Demon Lord’s soldiers and my pee.

...You know what, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry for making you eat something like that. Len said something about the vegetables “not having negative effects on their body” and “In fact, they have better medicinal properties than most herbs,” but is this really okay?

“Ever since I started eating those vegetables, my body’s been in awfully good shape. The maids were happy, too. Apparently, their skin is practically glowing now. I wonder if they have some sort of mysterious medicinal effects.”

“...A-arwf? (...*Who knows? Not a regular pet like me, that’s for sure.*)”

I turn my cheek to him, pretending not to hear. And I get the distinct feeling Len is making a smug little face inside my fur. Right, right. Your observations were correct, little Len.

“We’ll have to stock up on everything except vegetables,” continues the old man, “but next time, that should be easy. We plan to get more of that rice you like, too.”

Three cheers for rice! I love bread and pasta, too, but still, rice can’t be beat. Why would it be easy this time, though?

“That airship really is something else. With air deliveries, we can get even difficult-to-transport foods in a very short time. Apparently, it’s putting operating costs through the roof, though.”

So it’s all thanks to Papa’s airship, huh? Using an airship to transport foods must be a simple matter for someone as rich as he is.

“I’ll have to thank Lord Faulks. Without that ship, we would’ve never been able to restock this quickly.”

It seems I ate almost all the rice Toa gave us by myself, and tonight’s dinner was the last of it. But thanks to the airship Papa prepared, it shouldn’t be a problem. Our main breadwinner is just so wonderfully generous. Even my

insane food costs are something Papa and his wealth can handle easily, with plenty left over.

Just as I thought: Being the dog of a rich family means I pretty much win at life.

“Arw-rw... (Hee-heh-heh... I hope the airship comes soon...)”



Now then, I'd be happy to sleep off this full stomach, but I've got plans tonight.

As always, I slip out of the young lady's bed and sneak away from the mansion.

“Arwf. (Oh, I'll have to get a souvenir, too.)”

And by that I just mean the usual thing.

I head for the kitchen, where the old man has fallen asleep. Looks like he's mentally AFK again. I put a blanket over him, and then, as payment for my kindness, I take some preserved meat with me.

“Arwf, arwf! (All right, perfect!)”

Around my head I wear a necklace of sausage links. On my back I carry a large hunk of dry-aged meat. In my mouth I bear a leg of uncured ham. My preparations are complete.

Fully equipped with this feast, I'm nigh invincible.

“Mewl. (If you were a painting, you'd give quite the impression.)”

Nahura rides on my back, having warped there via spatial magic, and immediately begins gnawing on the sausages without asking.

“Woof, woof! (You can eat, but your job comes first!)”

“Mew, mrow. (Oh my! I'm terribly sorry. We're headed for Miss Garo's settlement, right?)”

“Woof! (Yup! Thanks!)”

“Meow, meow! (Then please, witness my new power of being able to set more

anchor points than before! Further upgraded by my mistress!)”

Upgraded? What did she do to you *this* time?

When she talks about things like this, she occasionally says scary stuff like *“It’s okay if my head pops off”* or *“Tentacles may sprout from my back,”* so I can’t let my guard down.

Nahura lets out a loud meow, and the scenery starts whiting out. When color eventually returns, we’re no longer near the mansion, but in the middle of a deep forest. Even moonlight struggles to reach us in this forest, but it’s no issue at all for me and my Fenrir eyes.

I start walking in the direction of Garo’s settlement, which is right nearby. Tonight’s plan is to celebrate the recovery of Garo and the other Fen Wolves. Nobody died in that battle against vampire princess Carmilla, one of the Demon’s Lord’s generals, but quite a few were apparently injured. Which, of course, was partly because my mouse-dragon was whipping her tail back and forth. The delicious meat is my humble gift as their friend, to help them restore some of the stamina they lost recovering from their wounds.

Course, the old man was the one who made this preserved meat, not me!

“Squeak. (The people at that mansion spoil you far too much.)”

I don’t wanna hear that from someone reaping those same benefits.

Also, I have one other goal today.

“Mewl. (I wonder if Shiro and Kuro are doing well.)”

That’s right. I came to visit Shiro and Kuro, the new Fen Wolves born just a little while ago. Actually, I’ve been visiting them pretty often, but I still haven’t seen them awake. The two young wolves are always sleeping when I come, so I’m only ever graced by their sleeping faces. Apparently, they’ve been up at this hour more frequently, and so, deciding I had to see them now that they’d grown, I figured I’d pay a visit to the Fen Wolf settlement today.

“Grwl! (Your Majesty! Your arrival is most welcome!)”

Please, this way, come, come, motions the young Fen Wolf guide who shows me the way. I’ve seen her a few times before. I think her name is Garu. It’s

basically the same as the noise she makes growling, so it's easy to remember.

“Woof, woof. (Oh, I brought this for you all to eat. It might not be much, but I wanted to let you know I'm thinking of you.)”

To repeat, the old man was the one who made it.

“Grwl, grwl! (It is the highest honor to receive a gift from the king! ...Hey!)”

At Garu's call, other Fen Wolves appear and begin to reverently take off my full armor...of preserved food.

“““Grwl, grwl, grwl! (O king! O king! O great and mighty king!)”””

As I proceed further into the settlement, the Fen Wolves I come across bow and open the way for me. They do this every time. It's so embarrassing. I wish they'd stop.

“Squeak. (Yes indeed, this reception is most comforting.)”

“Mewl? (Feels good, doesn't it?)”

“Woof, woof. (I can't relax. Please, everyone, have a little more fun.)”

I've never wanted to be king—not in the slightest—but the Fen Wolves won't listen to me. If only I could just pass the title to someone else. I'd do that in a heartbeat.

““Woo, woo!””

And then, small figures come bursting out from the bowing Fen Wolves, twisting themselves to get out. One is white, one is black, and both of them jump into me as if tackling me. They bounce softly against my chest hair and stop, but then they start jumping up and down. They're like little hyperactive balls of excitement.

These puffballs... Could they be...?

“Arwf? (Shiro and Kuro?)”

They're big enough to walk now? And also, they already run? It's only been a month! How did they grow so fast?

“Squeak. (I'd think you, of all creatures, wouldn't be saying that.)”

Len's right. I'm currently as big as I was at around one month old, too. Grr I wish I'd at least grown at Kuro and Shiro's speed. My puppy days, when I was able to cuddle with the young lady most of all, were altogether too short.

““Woo, woo!””

The wolf pups squeal and start licking my mouth.

“Arwrwf...! (Yeah, okay, thanks for the welcome...! Wait, you're being too aggressive...!)”

Kissing me so much right off the bat? My lips don't come cheap, you know! But my meager arguments don't get through to Shiro and Kuro, who are licking me to their hearts' content.

“Arw, rrrw! (Wait, seriously, stop, the drool—I can't breathe! Please stop licking meeeee...!)”

I've always been the licker! Being licked is completely outside my realm of expertise!!

Eventually I succumb to Shiro and Kuro's fierce assault and let them lick me as much as they want.

You're far more energetic than you have any right to be, kids.

“Awoo, awoo! (Daddy! Daddy!)”

Huh? Did one just talk? You guys can talk already?

Wait, what do they mean by “Daddy”? Were they talking to me?

Daddy...?

.....

No, wait, no, no, no! I'm not your daddy! I don't recall ever doing that deed!!

Wait, Garo, what have you been teaching your kids?!

““Awoo! (Daaaddy!)””

Hey, I'm in the middle of being indignant here! Don't just crawl up me, please!

Waving their little tails for all they're worth, the wolf pups rub against me.

““Awoo, awoo! (*Daddy, I love you! Thanks for giving us names!*)””

Huh? Oh, they must mean “Daddy” in the sense that I named them. Well, that was too close for comfort. I just barely managed to avoid a fatal wound.

But let me tell you something right now, you little brats. I have no intention of claiming you as dependents! I’m the one who wants to be a dependent!

“Awoo? (*What’s a dee-pen-dent?*)”

“Awoo? (*Yeah, what is it?*)”

Wow, their innocent questions are a shot through the heart...

A dependent is someone who can’t support their own lifestyle and has to rely on someone else to take care of them. In other words, it’s what I am to Lady Mary. I want to depend on her forever. You would do well to seek out your own young ladies.

Now go! Go forth and prosper!

“Squeak. (*I swear... Stop teaching the children unnecessary things.*)” Len alights from my back and stands arrogantly before the children. “Squeak! (*This is the first time we’ve met while you were awake. Allow me to introduce myself once again. I am Lenowym. Queen of the dragons and lawful wife of the King of the Fen Wolves! If you would call yourselves his children, then I am more than willing to accept you as my own kin as well. Well, you are already essentially my beloved children anyway! Now I shall teach you the pride of the dragonkin!*)”

“Awoo! (*Wow! It’s so little!*)”

“Awoo! (*And cute! And tasty-looking!*)”

Shiro and Kuro seem to be enjoying a mouse introducing herself with a smug look on her face, even though she was smaller than they were. They crouch down and listen to her.

Also, I feel like I heard something a little dangerous in there, but I won’t let it bother me. Len would probably be okay even if they bit her.

“Mrow. (*My name is Nahura, at your service! Also, Routa is my lover.*)”

Nahura leans against me in a coquettish manner.

Hey! Quit feeding false information to them.

“Awoo? (*What’s a lo-ver?*)”

“Awoo? (*Yeah, what is it?*)”

“Mewl... (*Well, you see...*)”

It’s only been a few minutes since I got here and the children are already learning words they shouldn’t be, one after the other. Well, don’t blame me if your mother gets mad at you. Also, I ignore how I was a part of this.

“Shiro! Kuro! You’re not following Mama’s rules! I told you to wait in the den until the king came to meet you!”

See? Look, your mother is right there.

Well, to be more accurate, all Fen Wolves are born from the moon in the sky, so pretty much all in attendance are sisters. But this one is definitely the mother figure to them.

The one chasing after Shiro and Kuro is Garo, in human form. Her black hair and dark skin almost blend with the night. Her golden eyes are aflame.

As always, when shape-shifted into a human, Garo is an easy ten. According to the Fen Wolves, she is either as beautiful as she is in beast form or even more so, but I’m clueless when it comes to whether Fen Wolves are pretty or ugly.

““Woo, woo... (*We’re sorry, Mommy...*)””

Even as Shiro and Kuro apologize, they conceal themselves between my front legs. They seem to understand Garo can’t be too harsh on them if they hide behind me. Looks like we’ve got a couple of tough customers.

Garo clams up with a frown, but then takes a light breath. She seems to have decided she’ll scold them later.

“It is good that you have come, my king.”

Garo is just too cute when she smiles. Even more so when the smile is combined with her being a powerful, sharp-eyed beauty. That contrast between sweet and spicy is so good that in my previous life, I might have dropped dead

on the spot.

But as I am now, it has no effect. After all, I am a being who was reincarnated specifically to spend his life as the dog of rich people. I will live as a pet dog, and I will die as a pet dog. I've already made up my mind. All other temptations are powerless before that.

Thus, when Garo tries to pull the Fen Wolf-style greeting on me, I put my front leg in front of her face to guard myself.

“...My king, will you not allow me to greet you as well?”

“...Arwf, arwf... (*...No, I got enough of it from Shiro and Kuro, so...*)”



“...If I, the organizer of the Fen Wolves, neglect to properly greet our king, those below me will cease to follow my instructions.”

“...Arwf, arwf. (*...No, no, you'll be fine. They'll follow them to the letter, don't you worry.*)”

Garo groans a little, trying to get her face closer to lick me, as I ward her off with my front paw. Our pushing battle continues.

“...My king, do you think I am doing this because I harbor untoward thoughts?”

“...A-arwf? (*...You mean you're not?*)”

“For the Fen Wolves, this is a long-held tradition of swearing fealty to the king. Now allow me to—!”

“Arwrw! (*You're lying! That's gotta be a lie! You've never done that before, ever!*)”

Garo has really been trying to get at me lately. I know what's going on here, though. These advances aren't like you at all. They're something you learned from another. The one hidden right behind those trees over there: Bal.

“Bow, bow! (*That's it, Lady Garo! That's it! His Majesty is a gentle soul. If you keep at it, he will eventually be fettered! Press the attack, always!*)”

I will not be fettered. You hear me? I will not be fettered!

“Squeak! (*Hey! What do you think you're doing?! In such matters as these, I should come first!*)”

Um, no, there's no first or second here.

Still, that was a nice one, Len. Upon her indignant return, Garo reluctantly withdraws. Apparently, Len's position as my self-proclaimed “lawful wife” is working.

Oh, and then Shiro and Kuro chase after Len and capture her. Considering the size difference, Len is snatched up by a set of lupine jaws in no time. Still, it shouldn't faze her much at all.

I watch Len with lukewarm eyes as the pups play-bite her and cover her in

slobber.

“Gohh? (What’s all this? Refusing an invitation from a lady? And you call yourself a man? You’re really a no-good wolf, aren’t ya, Your Worshipfulness?)”

“Arwf? (Eh?)”

That street punk–esque voice that inserted itself in the conversation... I remember it.

It belongs to a huge bear, his chest covered in scarlet hair. He joined up with the Fen Wolves sometime during my boot camp experience.

“Arwf? (Uhh, what was your name again? Redhelmet?)”

“Gohh! (It’s Redarmor! It’s completely different!)”

“Arwf, arwf. (My bad, sorry.)”

Knowledge from my previous life got in the way there for a second. I have the distinct feeling you’ll be losing your right eye soon.

Anyway, I wonder what Redarmor needs. Also, is he always this belligerent? I don’t remember doing anything that would make him hate me. Mystified, I watch as Redarmor brings his face closer to mine, his large frame swaying to and fro.

“Goh, goh. (Don’t get full of yourself just because you beat me once or twice, Mr. King.)”

Actually, I don’t recall ever beating you. The first time, all I did was stop your attack without getting hurt. The other Fen Wolves were the ones who took you down. And the second time was when Len floored you with one tail swipe.

“Gohhh. (I haven’t given up on being king of this forest, you know. I’ll be your underling because I lost to you, but only for now. I will eventually gain power and take up my old position! In the end, it is I who will become king!)”

Redarmor gives a great roar and declares war against me.

But the reactions from those around me are cold.

“Squeak? (What did they call this again?)”

“Mewl? (A hopeless try hard?)”

“Squeak. (Yes, yes, that’s it. Wonderfully hopeless.)”

“Awoo! (Try!)”

“Awoo! (Hard!)”

“G-gohhh...?! (You... The lot of you have got some lip, you know that?!)”

Redarmor’s big body recoils at the girls’ biting interruption.

I, however, feel differently. His words excite me.

“Arwf?! (Wait, seriously?! You’re going after the throne?!)”

Well, what do you know?! He’s a good guy after all! I’ll just give up the title right now. And I won’t take it back even if you decide you don’t want it later. You will be the Fen Wolf King!

“Woof, woof?! (You’re serious?! You’d actually replace me as king, Redhelmet?)”

“Gohh! (I told you, it’s Redarmor! ...Damn. You probably think it’s impossible for me, don’t you?)”

“Woof, woof! (No, not even remotely! Even if nobody else believes in you, I will! You could do it! You have what it takes to be king! Don’t give up! Let yourself burn with more passion!)”

With my eyes ablaze, I earnestly encourage him.

“G-gohh...! (Urgh, that straightforward gaze...! I can tell—he’s not lying about a single thing...! He honestly believes I can become king...! He has faith in me, the one who challenged him twice and lost miserably both times...!)”

My desperate cry causes Redarmor to take a step back.

“Gohh... (What generosity... So this is the caliber of a true Fen Wolf King...)”

And then he breathes a heavy sigh.

“Gohh... (I have lost... I am utterly defeated...)”

“Arwf! (Wait, no, don’t lose! For my sake!)”

Didn’t I just say I’d give you the throne?! Why are you giving up now?!

“Gohh! (I swear absolute fealty to you, King. From this day forth, I will be at

your beck and call. Use me as you wish. But if you show yourself to be a noncommittal coward...that is when I shall light the flames of revolution!)”

Huh? Wouldn't it be a little hard to be even *more* cowardly and noncommittal than I already am? The life I lead is already unparalleled in its disgrace. I thought I'd maxed out on the path of the mongrel, but I guess I still have a ways to go. I guess I need to take it even easier and live even more lazily.

“That's our king...! Despite all the training, Redarmor has remained rebellious—and yet now he's been made into such a devoted subject...!”

Upon seeing Redarmor bowed before me, Garo raises her voice in admiration. And the Fen Wolves around us quickly begin to fall in with her.

“““Grwl, grwl, grwl! (*Our king! Our king! Our great and mighty king!*)”””

“““Woo, woo! (*Kiiing!*)”””

I've done nothing, and yet for some reason the Fen Wolves' loyalty to me has increased.

I think you all really need to stop taking everything in the best way possible! I keep telling you I don't want to be the Fen Wolf King! Please listen to what I'm saying! I beg you!

My protests fall on deaf ears, however, and the howls of the Fen Wolves singing my praises echo through all the forest.



After that, I lounge around in the forest, rolling the little balls of fur Shiro and Kuro around with my paws and tasting the sausages with the Fen Wolves.

I planned to return to the mansion early, but it's already past midnight when I get back.

“Arwf. (*Despite what I say sometimes, they're fun to play with, too.*)”

For the moment, I wonder if there's a way to keep my friendship with the Fen Wolves and only reduce their loyalty to me.

“Squeak. (*I should think it is the most natural desire of all males to stand at the head of their pack. You are a strange one.*)”

“Woof, woof. (*I’m not strange. I think the same as any regular pet would.*)”

“Mewl. (*A regular pet? I don’t see any of those here.*)”

I’m right here! I’m a cute dog, no matter how you look at me! I may be a little big, and have a mean face, and the ability to barf up laser beams, but I’m still just a dog!

“Mew, meow. (*Oh, you and your jokes.*)”

Ree! It makes me so mad!

As Nahura beckons to me with her paw with a grin on her face, I stomp my feet. Then I jump high over the mansion wall, leaning into my anger, before landing on the other side.

“Arwf. (*Okay, time to sleep. Can’t get enough of how good it feels to finally get some Z’s after staying up late.*)”

A luxury I can afford, thanks to the complete lack of responsibilities awaiting me tomorrow. I wash my feet in the fountain, and as I’m about to enter the mansion, I hear someone talking.

“Arwf? (*The back door?*)”

I was pretty sure nobody was around when I left the mansion. Are some of the servants still up this late? Poking my head around the wall, I check inside the back door.

“I can’t *stand* this anymore, Uncle...!”

“Now, don’t say that. The current situation is miserable for me as well...!”

There I find the blond *tsundere* maid, Mircalla, and the old butler, Richmond.

Is working at the mansion really that difficult? The two of them are together, voicing their complaints to each other. Maybe the two newbies have similar grievances.

I get that. I remember it well. Back at my old job, I’d always be told to think for myself. And then when I actually did, I’d get scolded for acting out of line. So unfair.

...Urgh... Away with you, memories of my previous life...!

Still, I doubt the servants here are taught their jobs in that manner. Maybe their concern is something only they would understand.

So I decide to listen in, and soon I notice that their conversation is getting strange.

“As long as we do nothing about this subordination spell,” says Richmond, “we are no different from powerless humans. We must somehow endure this and think of a way to turn the tables.”

“It’s been a *month* since you said that! To think I, the vampire princess Carmilla, one of the five great generals of the Demon Lord’s army, would be reduced to a servant of mere humans...!” Mircalla balls her hands into fists and growls. “All of the other maids are nice, and they teach us our jobs politely, and they don’t get mad even when we mess up! What is *with* this den of stupidly good people?! And the food they give us as payment is so good that I’m *forgetting* the taste of blood! Especially that tomato juice we had this afternoon—it was *sublime*...! Rich, full-flavored, and *powerful*. Blood can’t satisfy me anymore...! I can’t believe a vampire like myself would experience such humiliation...! They must plan to keep on domesticating me like this...! Curse you, humans...!”

“I, too, notice myself becoming prideful each time the marquis compliments me on my tea-making abilities. The joy that comes from being praised by an excellent superior is impossible to put into words. I cannot but honestly say this is a very good workplace to be in. Curse you, humans...!”

Wait, wait. Even though you keep cursing humanity, it seems like you’re really enjoying your lives as regular people. Are you just trying to out-humblebrag each other?

“This situation would have been unthinkable for us when we were in the Demon Lord’s army. What could be the matter? Ever since the day we were defeated by that Fen Wolf King, I cannot help but feel as though our wickedness has been draining.”

“Wait, Uncle, get ahold of yourself... Still, it’s the same for me. I feel like my malice toward humans is rapidly disappearing. In fact, why exactly did I want to destroy all humans to begin with? Me aside, *regular* vampires have to coexist

with humans. I still can't remember what the Demon Lord looks like, either... Maybe that witch did something other than just steal our mana..."

"Yes, and about that. What we need to be discussing is the way we shall break that witch's curse and recover our power. I do not know why the witch hid our identities and forced us to work at this mansion, but putting us next to that Fen Wolf King likely doubles as a way to keep a watchful eye on us. Should a miracle occur and we gain our powers back, she has it set up so that the Fen Wolf King will devour us immediately. A fearsome two-layered strategy indeed. Should our identities be revealed to that *thing*, it will all be over. We will surely be destroyed, this time without a trace..."

"Y-yeah. We absolutely have to make sure he doesn't find out."

I'm sorry. I heard literally everything you just said.

Who would have thought these two were generals in the Demon Lord's army? I thought I'd defeated them. If they're working here, then it must be Hecate's doing, one way or another. It looks like they can't do anything bad anymore, but it also doesn't seem like they've given up.

I can't pretend not to have seen this, so I plop down behind them.

"That's correct, Miss Carmilla. We must be prudent and not allow the Fen Wolf King to learn of it—*Hwah?!'*"

Oh, he finally noticed me. My Fenrir paws barely make a sound when I sneak around. These plush paw pads are good for a whole lot more than getting played with by Lady Mary!

Richmond begins trembling madly after noticing me. I'm not that surprised, to be honest. If something this huge were to abruptly appear right before *my* eyes, I'm pretty sure I'd piss myself.

"Miss...Ca-, Ca-Ca-Ca-, Ca-Ca-Ca-Ca-CaCarmilla...!"

"Eh? My name *isn't* Cacacacacacarmilla, you know... Wait, why are you shaking...like—"

I look down at them, the moon at my back. Mircalla's expression shifts to one of horrified realization.

“Arwf... *(Never would have guessed this about you two...)*” I say with a sigh, taking a step toward them.

“Y-y-you’re wrong! I’m just a maid!”

“Yes, and I am just a butler!”

The two miserable Demon Lord’s generals fall on their butts and inch away.

“Arwf? *(Reeeaaaally?)*”

““Yes, really!””

“Arwf. *(Oh, I see. I must have been jumping to conclusions, then.)*”

““Yes, jumping to conclusions!””

I stop, and the two breathe sighs of relief.

“Squeak. *(No, considering they understood what you said, it’s fairly obvious.)*”

““Oh no!””

Unfortunately for them, the jig is up.

“Squeak, squeak. *(Of course, I knew it right from the start.)*”

Are you serious? Say something earlier! Then I could have had a lot more fun driving them into a corner.

““Please, if you spare nothing else, spare our lives...!””

The generals of the Demon Lord’s army get on their hands and knees and start begging for their lives. I almost tear up at the sight of it. Knowing exactly how strong these characters were when they first showed up makes me all the sadder at seeing them now.

Well, if Hecate is involved, I doubt she’d have done this to them for no reason. I trust in my friends.

Also, I’ve been watching these two ever since they came to the mansion, and they’ve been working earnestly the whole time. Mircalla was a mess in the beginning, but now she’s an excellent maid, performing her duties quickly and efficiently. Richmond already held mastery over his work when he started, but his expressions used to be much stiffer.

Despite all they were saying, they do seem to be enjoying life at the mansion. Even now that their identities have been revealed, I can't just exterminate them right off the bat. They haven't done anything.

"Woof. (All right. I'll overlook this.)"

Their faces positively light up when they hear that. I do need to give them a warning at least, though. Someone just as terrifying as me lives here in this very estate. What am I beating around the bush for? I mean Zenobia—the mansion's violence machine.

"Arwf, arwf. (But if you ever mistreat any of the mansion's residents, you'll both end up ripped to shreds.)"

By Zenobia.

"Woof, woof. (So you might want to be careful.)"

I'm being careful, too. Zenobia really doesn't have any mercy. Course I'm cautious.

"Y-yes, sir...!"

They both nod furiously, tears streaming down their faces. I think they got the message.

The next afternoon, I go to the elves' village. My goal is to observe the reconstruction. Not to help them, really. Most of the village has been restored in the month since the vampire princess Carmilla razed it. And the final tree, a large one, is just about to be healed.

"Can it truly be restored...?"

"Let us have faith—faith in the King of the Fen Wolves..."

The elves around the great tree whisper among themselves, uneasy.

This tree serves an important role: It supports the houses in which the elves live. They build their homes in the ramifications atop the tree. Floating lodges, I suppose I should call them. They're wonderful. The tree's leaves withered under Carmilla's attack, however, and its branches broke, leaving the great tree in a sorry state. And now it is on the verge of being healed.

Not by me, of course. I'm just a dog. I'm simply watching, mouth agape.

"All right, here I go!" says Hecate, raising her staff.

She begins to incant a long spell, and a complicated magic circle appears at the center of the large tree. Then the burned branches and collapsed houses rapidly begin to assume their previous forms. It's like watching a video in reverse.

"Arrrwf! (*Whoa, that's amazing!*)"

"Squee-squeak? (*Is she reversing time? This magic is on another level. Even I cannot decipher it...!*)"

"Mrow. (*The mistress is especially good at magic that manipulates time and space. She isn't a grand witch for nothing!*)"

Len, unusually awake during the day, raises a voice in admiration, while Nahura boasts, her chest puffed out with pride.

“Arwf? (*And why are you acting like a big shot?*)”

I push over the cocky cat with a paw.

“Mm! I guess I’m not surprised that tires me out,” says Hecate, giving a big stretch.

It wasn’t just this village, after all. It was the big hole that opened in the lake, and the homes of the Fen Wolves, too. She’s fixed all the damage from the battle. It was a lot of work for one person.

I was only watching while it all happened, of course. Hecate was the one doing all the work, of course.

“Indeed, you didn’t do a thing, did you, Routa?”

Gulp.

“It would have been fine to leave the lake with its new topography, but you did say you didn’t want anyone at the Faulks mansion to be suspicious of you. So I took the time to fix it for you, as a favor.”

G-gulp.

“I did so much for you already. Maybe it’s time for you to return the favor, hmm?”

Ahh, ahh! What shall I do? If this stupid dog can grant your request to show gratitude, then I’ll do anything!

Of course, my only real possession is this collar. Whoops, I forgot. Hecate gave me this collar, too. I don’t have anything I can repay her with after all.

“I *could* tell you to crawl on your belly and lick my feet, but I know you would do so with pleasure.”

Wait, how do you know my kinks?! I was about to pounce on your feet before you even finished that sentence.

“I’m joking. We’re friends, right? If you’re ever in trouble, I’ll help you.”

“Arwf...! (*Friends? What a wonderful word...!*)”

Hecate, I love you. I’ll lick you all over.

“In exchange, if I’m ever in trouble, you can help me three times over.”

Friendship with strings attached?!

Hecate laughs, amused at my startlement. “Hee-hee. What’s with that face? It’s so weird.”

She looks super-young whenever she laughs. On someone who’s such a sexy elf on the outside, it sure is adorable.

“Woof, woof. (Well, I’ll help you out if I can. But I can only do what I’m able. Don’t give me any requests that are too impossible, all right? I’m only one dog, after all.)”

With the Demon Lord’s army showing up, I’ve already got my paws full. A hero better show up soon to save the day. This problem is too much for a pet to handle.

“It’ll be all right. I’m sure you’ll make it, Rوتا. You will do for me that which I could not.”

Hecate’s smile looks like it might disappear at any moment.

“Arwf, arwf. (Wait, wait. What are you about to ask of this stupid dog? You’re seriously overestimating my ability now.)”

“Oh, but am I? I think you’re a much more amazing person than you think, Rوتا. Even ignoring the fact that you’re the King of the Fen Wolves.”

“Arwf, arwf! (Oh, stop it!)”

Hoist me up all you want. I’m not climbing the tree. As Hecate tickles my ears, I flap them to play it off.

“Lord Rوتا! Lady Hecate! Thank you ever so much!”

“““Thank you!””””

The elves gather around us, having watched the healing of the tree. All of them look young, so I can’t really tell the kids from the old people, or anyone in between. Apparently the eldest of the five sisters has taken the village reins. She stands in front of everyone else and is the first among them to thank us. Well, I honestly didn’t do a single thing.

Still, it doesn't seem to appear that way to the elves. The villagers all surround me.

"If not for you defeating that vampire, Lord Routa, we would have all been her kin eventually. This village stands, thanks to you."

"You're the guardian spirit of the village!"

"We cannot thank you enough, Lord Routa."

"Not only did you forgive our younger sisters during their thieving, but you also rescued us from slavery, and even gave us this place in which to live... Lord Routa, you are our savior...!"

You're exaggerating. I never did anything that amazing.

"Squee-squeak. *(Be honest and take pride in it. You are so humble.)*"

"Mewl. *(That's one of the good things about you, though.)*"

Come on, quit it already! What's been going on with everyone? You're praising me to death—and if I died, what would you do *then*, huh?

"Lord Routa, Lady Hecate, this is altogether paltry as gratitude, but we have made all the food we can for you. Would you do us the honor of eating it?"

"Arwf! *(Yes! If that's how you want to thank me, I'm all for it!)*"

And so, a party to celebrate the village's reconstruction began.

In the beginning, they implied it would just be us eating, but that wouldn't have been much fun. There's so much food that they started talking about everyone enjoying it while it was all still warm. Well, *I* talked about it anyway.

I've had the opportunity to sample the elves' cooking in the past, but the exotic flavorings are no less interesting than before. The juice from the freshly picked fruit is super-tangy, but that distinct bite only makes me crave it more. The fragrant, herb-infused soup was a little overwhelming at first, but now that I'm used to it, I'm addicted.

Given that they live in the woods, their main diet probably consists of berries and mushrooms, but that doesn't mean they lack in quantity. The mouthfeel of this thick mushroom sauté almost tricks me into thinking I'm eating meat.

And this freshly baked bread has become one of my all-time faves. It's made from crushed-up nuts, and while it has a plain flavor, the spongy texture is fantastic. It has a fragrance similar to that of warm whole-wheat bread. The dried fruits and walnuts kneaded into the dough take it up an additional level.

As I noisily munch on the food, the elves start performing songs and dances for me. The display is the height of fantasy, with beautiful women eating and singing all over the place.

"Arwf. (I'm having such a good time. What is this place? Am I in heaven...?)"

I lie down and paw at my belly, which is now round.

"Squeak! (Gah! Those elves are trying to steal you away from me! I can at least perform songs and dances as well!)"

Len changes into a human and tries to go up on the stage. And then she trips on the long hem of her clothes and falls over. As tears come to her eyes, the elves hastily go over and help her back up.

"Arwf. (Sheesh. You always force yourself.)"

The elves take Len's hands and bring her up onto the stage. Fretful though she is, they teach her the steps, and she begins to dance. It's an awkward, stilted dance, but seeing a young girl tottering around like that brings peace to my soul. As long as she's having fun. That's the most important thing. She's smiling, cheeks red.

The elves sure are good at handling children. Len may actually be a dragon who has lived a thousand years, but her mental age is low in contrast.

"Meow? (Should I transform into a human and join the fun as well?)" asks Nahura, her mouth stuffed with food.

No, don't. This is supposed to be a celebration—the sight of your grotesque metamorphosis would freeze the entire area. At least learn some kind of magical girl–like transformation method before you do it.

"Arwf, arwf? (I guess all the problems that got caused by the last incident have been resolved now, huh?)"



The Demon Lord's generals lost their power and became servants, and the Fen Wolves' wounds have healed. The lake and the elves' forest have also returned to normal thanks to some magic. Seems like everything's settled. Now I just have to continue living my peaceful life without a care in the world.

I *do* sort of get the feeling that that alone is raising a flag or two, but my life as a pet is safe and secure—hopefully!



The capital city of the kingdom—Arfgalem.

Built on high ground, with the royal castle standing at its tallest point, the city was divided into Hightown, where nobles, aristocrats, and others in the higher echelons of society lived; Midtown, which housed the commoners; and Lowtown, home to the poor and destitute. High walls and bulky gates cordoned each area off from the others, creating a three-tiered city. With monsters running rampant outside, this structure was an excellent defensive choice.

In Hightown—the highest and best-defended area—was a certain location: the main office of the Adventurers Guild, an organization that dispatched adventurers all over the land, operating beyond territorial borders. These headquarters were marked by a gate.

A signboard out front, depicting an adventurer and an emblem of flames and a sword, rattled slightly, shaken by a loud argument taking place inside the building.

“But why?!”

“No matter how many times you ask me, there is nothing else I can tell you,” answered the young woman sporting silvery hair with green tips.

Her name was Emerada. Though she looked young, she had the been guild leader for a full century or so now. Her long ears, decorated with earrings, marked her as an elf—member of an incredibly long-lived race.

Exhausted by several days of work in a row, she sat down at her desk and sighed decadently. The gesture was oddly sexy, and an average adventurer would have been rendered speechless.

“You can’t tell me? Not even *me*?”

But the one facing her didn’t react that way. The person pressed in on Emerada—the one with the highest position in the guild—and was frustrated enough to bang her hands on Emerada’s desk.

“If you can’t even tell *me*, then that proves my suspicions.”

“I can’t really respond to that...,” murmured Emerada, leaning her cheek on a hand, scribbling on a piece of paper and stamping it. She was fed up with clerical work—day in, day out, always the same—and she felt the same about this persistent questioner.

“Alstera,” she said, putting her pen down and removing her chained glasses, “even if you are an SS-Rank adventurer and someone great enough to bear the title of Hero, I can’t give you special treatment.”

The guild leader’s deep-green eyes bored into Alstera, but the Hero didn’t flinch. In fact, she grew even more insistent.

“Why can’t you at least tell me the reason you won’t investigate?” demanded Alstera. “I know an A-Rank adventurer party—the Swords of Dawn—already went to check things out. The result of their investigation was that there were no problems. But that’s not possible. From what I hear, the magical disaster that occurred in the great eastern forests was the strongest in history. Regardless of whether its source can be confirmed, you’re telling me it didn’t produce any labyrinths or powerful monsters? And more than that, the whole thing was resolved without *anything* happening at all? You can’t possibly expect me to believe that!”

She struck the work desk with her palms again, eyebrows rising as she protested. It was practically written all over the Hero Alstera’s face: Her cause was just.

Her gallant appearance was beautiful, certainly one befitting a Hero. She had short and lustrous black hair and indigo eyes that bespoke the strength of her will. Clad in light armor, she wore a wide-bladed sword on her back. She was the very image of a legend. A brave and dauntless woman, respected and anticipated by all nations to become a true hero and save the world should the Demon Lord ever return.

One thing that differed from the fairy tales, however, was that Alstera was a woman. However, her armor covered her chest as if to deny that fact, in an attempt to hide her gender.

“The matter of what happened in Marquis Faulks’s forest has been resolved. No further investigation is necessary.”

“...!”

As the Hero seethed, Emerada put her glasses back on and returned to her paperwork. If Alstera said anything more, the soldiers outside would likely be summoned. Emerada’s attitude had declared an end to the questioning.



“Why does that damn guild leader have to be so stubborn...?! She’s lived so long she’s gotten senile! Gah...!”

Alstera slammed the heavy front doors open and left the guild headquarters. An investigation of the great forests was *absolutely* necessary. Her intuition as Hero—no, the holy sword she wore on her back insisted to her that there was something there.

The sacred white sword, passed down in her family for generations, was legendary. It was said a hero long ago had wielded it when he’d destroyed the Demon Lord. A big reason Alstera was called “Hero” was that she possessed this sword. She’d slain many a foul beast with it, and eventually she’d ended up as an SS-Rank adventurer.

There were only a few SS-Rank adventurers in the world, and once you earned that rank, you got wrapped up in all sorts of troublesome affairs. That was the price you paid for fame. Still, being able to operate beyond nations gave her a good degree of flexibility. She was also able to bring in a substantial income—more than many nobles, even. And, apparently, causing violent incidents you’d normally be arrested for resulted in exemption from responsibility a lot of the time.

Of course, a Hero like her would never do something so wicked. Her job was to slay monsters. The finer details didn’t concern her.

Still, she’d never managed to keep any party members around for long. The

monk Tania had retired after serious injuries, and the sorcerer Zenith had quit after cursing Alstera, saying she was a berserker.

The only one who had stayed with her through it all, a swordswoman named Zenobia, had—

“Wait, what *did* happen to Zenobia?”

She couldn't remember what had become of her comrade, and yet they'd been as close as sisters. She was the one Alstera trusted the most. At some point, she'd disappeared, and she had been missing ever since. Alstera was certain they'd talked about something just before Zenobia had left, but that was all a blur to her, too.

“Zenobia... Why did you leave me...?”

Uneasy, Alstera touched the hilt of her holy sword. A nearby pedestrian flinched. But after she met Alstera's eyes and saw her peerless beauty, her expression dissolved.

“Whoops, my apologies,” said Alstera. “Bad habit.”

“N-no, it's okay! ...Ummm, you're the Hero, Lady Alstera, right? I'm a huge fan!”

“Oh? Really? Well, thank you. I appreciate it,” responded Alstera with a smile, causing the young woman to squeal.

She wanted to shake hands; Alstera obliged and even threw in a hug for good measure.

“This will be our little secret, all right?”

“Oh... Okay!”

...And she made sure the girl wouldn't tell anyone she'd put her hand on her sword in the city, too.

The girl nodded at her in blank amazement. Alstera gave her a cool smile, then left.

This was part of that price of fame. Her androgynous appearance and valorous exploits were enough to inspire operas. In fact, she was so popular

with the people that most bards didn't even bother telling her tale.

As the Hero, she also had to be careful of her behavior toward others. She shouldn't have put her hand on the sword—it was a bad habit of hers. Whenever she started to feel uneasy, her hand would always find the holy blade.

It was said to have been used by the legendary hero Routa. It was a family treasure, handed down from one generation to the next. It had been with her ever since she'd inherited the family estate. Through difficult times and sad ones, if she clutched the holy sword, she could endure. It was her protector. She never let it out of her sight, no matter what.

It was because of this sword that she'd been labeled the Hero, and that was how she'd lived her life. Slaying monsters was the true mission of a Hero, after all.

And this was why she *had* to go to the great forests. The monster presence there was growing stronger. *And anyway, you're in the right. You're not doing anything wrong. It's all your comrades' fault—they were the ones who disappeared. The guild leader doesn't understand justice. She can be left to rot.*

It almost felt like the sword was whispering those things to her.

Her tightly wound demeanor began to soften.

“Phew. Now that I'm calmer, I just noticed how hungry I am.”

When she came to, she realized it had gotten dark. She'd continued down the hill from Hightown and was now in a marketplace near the Lowtown area. She had considered going out to hunt some monsters to let off some steam, but at the moment, her empty stomach took the reins.

“This will do.”

She caught one of her favorite scents amid the insane tempest of alcohol, grease, and perfumes on the street. Drawn by the delicious smell of sizzling meat, Alstera stepped into a pub.

Seeing the Hero enter caused the guests to stare wide-eyed for a moment, but they soon looked away and resumed their own meals and conversations.

Adventurers seemed to frequent this place. She could partly tell that by the one running the shop. He was a muscle-bound man with an eye patch, likely an ex-adventurer. If most of the other patrons here were in the same line of work, they'd understand why she wasn't one for attention. They didn't make a fuss about the celebrity's arrival as Alstera searched for an empty seat.

Still, no matter how low they kept their voices, the rumors were still audible.

"So that's the Hero, eh? Lot younger than I heard."

"Look at that face—better to be an actor, I say. Would be even more popular with the women."

"Eh? Isn't the Hero a woman?"

"She hides behind her cape, but look at those hips—definitely a woman. To think a skinny girl like that is a demon who averages two thousand monster kills per year... I heard she slew an evil dragon down south just the other day. They'd have needed an army for that one, and she took care of it all by herself. Makes ya wonder which one's the real monster."

"If she's SS Rank, she should have made enough to live comfy for the rest of her life. Wonder why she still goes out to fight."

"Who knows? That's why some are calling her murder-happy. She probably loves killing."

Alstera wasn't small-minded enough to feel angry upon hearing an unfair rumor about herself. Still, she wasn't able to ignore a certain name that she'd heard for a moment. It was a familiar one amid the whispered words.

"And Zenobia Lionheart..."

It was the comrade she'd just been thinking about earlier. Alstera looked around at the seats. She quickly found the one talking, keeping his voice low. He was in a group of four people giving off a somehow dismal air. They drank their alcohol like this noisy pub was actually a funeral, each with one hand on his beer mug.

"...It's been *months* since that happened, but I still have dreams about it..."

"Yeah, me too... All those eyes staring at us from out of the dark forest..."

“C-cut it out... Don’t make me remember...”

“And all they did was look. They never came after us. Which only made it more terrifying... What did those monsters want to do to us...?”

“Hell if I know... In the end, we couldn’t do any real investigation...”

“Thinking back, it was a pretty strange place... The marquis raising a horrible monster, a grand witch showing up who must have been the first guild leader, Zenobia Lionheart living there when she was supposed to have gone missing...”

“Oh? That’s quite an interesting story.”

The adventurers nearly jumped at the voice coming from behind them in the middle of their hushed conversation. The guild leader had placed a gag order on the investigative mission to the forest; they weren’t supposed to be talking about it in public. Despite the failure of their mission, they’d been paid the full fee—partly to keep them quiet. If the guild learned they were talking about it in a pub like this, they could be demoted for a breach of confidentiality.

Ordinarily, they’d never have been speaking of it so inattentively. The fear burned into their hearts, however, had been great, and they’d been drinking—both of which had loosened their lips. Now that they’d been heard, they’d have to silence the intrusive visitor, too.

Intimidation or conciliation? The adventurers moved, eyeing the person to see which would be more effective.

“Eh? Didn’t your parents ever tell you not to eavesdrop on...”

“The Hero?!”

But the listener was not someone who would buckle to either intimidation or conciliation. The man who had turned around threateningly, a ranger, froze in place; the monk stood up and gave a shrill cry. An SS-Rank adventurer—the main attraction of the guild. The Hero *herself* had heard them.

They trembled in hopelessness. Demotion was an optimistic prospect now. They could have their licenses revoked and even be chased out of the Royal Capital.

“Ahh, no, you don’t have to be so formal about it.”

Alstera waved a hand, preventing any more attention on them. Instead, she called over a barmaid, then ordered another round of drinks for those at the table.

“We’re all adventurers here, right? Let me in on this story, will you?”

She put her arms around the adventurers’ hunched shoulders and pulled their faces close.

“That was a really fascinating conversation you all were having. Very interesting. I’ll pick up the tab, so would you give me some more details? Starting with...the location of a certain friend of mine.”

Alstera directed a cheerful smile at the men, who were still as statues.



“Please accept this.”

Papa places a leather pouch on his desk. It produces a heavy clinking sound.

“What is it?” asks Zenobia.

She stands at attention in front of Papa like a soldier.

“I apologize for the lack of fanfare with my show of gratitude, but things are a lot calmer now thanks to you. This should be a suitable reward for all that you’ve done.”

“A reward, sir? But I’m not an adventurer anymore...”

“Oh, I know. But I can’t let your efforts go without recognition. Your resolution of the matter with the elves was swift and, frankly, stupendous. The Royal Capital has begun cracking down on conspirators plotting to overthrow the government, preventing the threat to the city in advance. And it’s all thanks to you, Zenobia. You’re more than deserving of your former title of SS-Rank adventurer.”

“I haven’t done that much! The one who solved things was—,” begins Zenobia, looking over at me.

Hm? Didja need something?

I’m just sitting next to Papa, indulging in his head scratches. It feels super-

good.

“Hm? Oh, did Routa have something to do with the incident?”

“N-no, nothing at all! That silly dog would never be any help whatsoever!”

Zenobia lets out an exaggerated laugh. Her acting's just as terrible as always. She's doing it to conceal my identity, and now I owe her again. But it's not like I have any way of repaying her! Ha-ha-ha!

“.....” Zenobia directs a cold glare at me, as if to ask what the hell I'm laughing about.

Eek! ...Wait, I could get used to this.

“In any event, I've prepared a commensurate reward for you, so I hope you'll accept it. It isn't the most glamorous way of showing my thanks, but I can't exactly go through the guild to get a reward from them.”

“I appreciate the consideration, sir.”

“Would it really be that difficult to be reinstated with the guild? I could lend you my assistance if you wanted it. A certification from a marquis would surely forgive the matter of your abandoning your duties. I've no doubt that losing an adventurer of your caliber was a heavy blow for the guild.”

“.....” Zenobia has always called herself an ex-adventurer, but I guess her quitting wasn't really a smooth process. She bites her lip, silent at Papa's offer.

Seeing her like that causes Papa to exhale. “No, I apologize. Personally, I'd much rather have you here, of course. Mary has taken quite a liking to you, and the servants all look up to you as well. If it's all right with you, I'd like you to stay here permanently.”

“Thank you. I, too, would like to make this place my final home.”

*Zenobia, good heavens! You're being reinstated?...*is how I was planning to react, but it looks like her NEET days aren't over just yet. She practically declared that she's fine being a NEET until the day she dies.

I guess my rival *isn't* dropping out of the race after all. Ugh.

“...I did have one other matter to discuss, though it may be cruel to tell you

like this,” says Papa, reaching into a drawer and taking out a letter. “This just came earlier. I decided it was impossible for me to deal with, so I’d like to reveal its contents to you.”

“What on earth could it be?” Zenobia asks dubiously.

Papa’s answer is short: “The Hero is coming here.”

“...!”

The Hero? You mean *that* Hero? The natural-born silver bullet who’s gonna defeat the Demon Lord for us?

Well, that’s great! The real Hero is on the way. Time to get rekt, baddies. All this Demon Lord’s army stuff has been a pain in the neck, and I’ve been struggling to deal with it however I can. But if the Hero shows up, I won’t have anything to worry about, right? The whole situation with me, a *pet*, fighting dangerous battles has been weird from the start.

Woo-hoo! Now I can live my life as a pampered pooch worry-free!

“Arwf? (*But why do they have such serious looks on their faces, then?*)”

Papa waves the high-quality envelope. Its contents rustle; he must have already read them.

“It seems it’s for a reinvestigation of the area. The decision must have been that the previous investigation carried out by the adventurers was incomplete; the Hero will be coming on an airship that should be arriving soon. It all feels forced and thrown together to me, but this is an active SS-Rank adventurer we’re talking about. The guild is doing a lot for our sake, too. The letter that came today says they can’t afford to rile things up, so the Hero will be coming as a guest. Well, the ship is probably in the air already. It will likely arrive on schedule—the day after tomorrow.”

“I... I see...”

Zenobia looks down. Did something happen between her and the Hero in the past?

“I’m sorry,” says Papa. “I know this is the last person you want to meet... You may live somewhere else for the duration of the Hero’s stay if you deem that

course preferable.”

“...No, I always knew this time would come. I’ll be here.” When Zenobia looks up again, she’s wearing an unusually serious expression.

And then I start to hear the pattering of footsteps running through the hall. The feet stop in front of the door, and then someone knocks properly. That must be Lady Mary. No doubt about it.

“Father!” cries my lady, clutching a letter to her breast. “Eliza says she’s coming here soon! She wrote to me and said she got on an airship so it shouldn’t be much longer until she gets here!”

Papa nods to himself, pleased with how happy she looks. “I thought taking an airship would be easier than riding in a rickety carriage for a long time, so I had it arranged it for her. I figured she would be able to stay here longer if her travel time was significantly reduced.”

Way to go, Papa! You’re always so thoughtful.

“Thank you so much, Father!”

The young lady, effervescent, her eyes glittering, takes my front paws and hops up and down.

Papa watches over us with a smile on his face.

And when Zenobia sees us like that, her own expression starts to loosen up.



“Come. I need to have words with you.”

With that, Zenobia takes me to the usual spot: the back courtyard. The air around us is tense as we stare each other down—I feel like I know where this is going.

“A-arwf?! (*Seriously? Are you gonna try to slice me up again?!*)”

And here I thought she had finally run out of swords to break; she hasn’t been challenging me as much lately.

Wait! She must plan to use the extra income from Papa to stock up on new swords! Then she’ll put all the old swords on sale and purge the rest by testing

them out on me! I know what you're going to do before you even do it! I won't let you, though. You will fall before these adorable poses of mine!

"Woof, woof! (*Here I come, Zenobia! Do you have enough swords in stock?*)"

I roll over on my back, striking the most powerful pose I have in my arsenal.

"...What are you doing?"

Huh? You're not gonna try to cut me?

Zenobia stands still with her arms folded. It looks like the whole clearance-sale thing was a misunderstanding on my part. I return to my sitting position, and Zenobia speaks.

"...This is me talking to myself. A human and a dog would never be having a conversation, of course," she says, emphasizing each and every syllable.

You don't have to say it like you're warning me about something. I am this family's proud and conventional pet dog.

"I always planned on cutting you down if you ever caused anyone harm, no matter your true identity."

Yeah, you're less strict around me *now*, but in the beginning, you were so hostile all the time, Zenobia.

Some things never change, though—even though she's softened up, she still tries to kill me by claiming she's trying out new swords.

"I've been watching you—always keeping an eye on you, as it were, so that I could kill you if I ever caught you slipping. But you've done nothing evil. In fact, your only deeds are great feats that end up saving people. You defeated a dragon to cure the young lady's ailment, you rescued enslaved elves, and you even captured rebels plotting to overthrow the monarchy."

I *do* feel bad for pushing it all on her in the end, though. Considering her personality, her current situation—with all the credit placed firmly in her lap—has been little more than humiliation.

But I need to have her take all the credit so I can continue living my pampered life as a pooch. So I fully intend to keep dumping all the glory on her the next time something happens.

“To be honest, I have no idea what you’re even thinking. You have so much power, but you don’t do as you please with it, or attack people like monsters are supposed to. You’re trying to live humbly as a simple dog. Why is that?”

What do you mean, why? If you twisted my arm for a response, I’d say, “Because that’s what I want.” I don’t want the power fantasy of being Fenrir—I want the young lady to spoil me while I’m in dumb-dog mode. I have the heart of a pet. Please try to understand.

“I know why. It’s because you’re kind.”

Huh? That is...not the response I was expecting. When you call me a good person to my face, it *really* stings my conscience, since I regularly swipe extra food every night. Not that I have any intention of stopping, of course. The old man’s smoked meats are to die for. I’ll be grabbing some tonight, too.

“But no matter how kindhearted you may be, it won’t mean anything to the Hero. If you’re a monster, your circumstances won’t mean a thing—you *will* be cut down.”

That doesn’t sound all that different from how Zenobia was in the past... She was an easy opponent, though. A little bit of cute posing was all it took to get her to lower her guard.

“I don’t know how you made it through the last guild investigation, but it won’t work again. The Hero’s sword is a holy weapon that can annihilate whole hordes of monsters with a single slash. Even you wouldn’t be able to walk away unscathed after a swipe from that blade.”

A holy sword, huh? Well, I guess that’s the kind of thing heroes are supposed to have.

According to Zenobia, the sword is actually the one the Hero from ages past used. It’s been passed down through his descendants this whole time.

“Hero” is like a nickname, though; this Hero earned the title with the help of the beautiful white sword and all the monsters exterminated with it. It doesn’t really seem like the Hero is acting with the nation’s support in order to destroy the Demon Lord.

“There’s no Demon Lord in this generation, after all. Without an enemy to

defeat, a true Hero cannot exist.”

Well, maybe not a Demon Lord, but some of his army’s generals have revived. Two of them, in fact. And if two came back to life in the forest, a third might soon follow. Thinking about it that way, I suppose it’s a good thing the Hero is coming here. Letting him defeat the Demon Lord’s army for us is my true intention, after all.

...Wait, hold on. If the Hero is coming here, then the young lady will see him, too.

Oh no. This is bad. She’s practically the leader of the Hero fan club. If someone like that came here, wouldn’t she fall madly in love with him?!

The young lady is mine!

I have to think of a plan! I have to stop this, no matter what!

“...You’re not thinking of other things when your own life is on the line, are you?”

“A-arwf, arwf! (Er, no, not at all! I’m certainly not thinking about how to steal back the young lady’s attention from the Hero.)”

Seeing me in a panic causes Zenobia to sigh.

Weren’t you the one who said you were just talking to yourself? Don’t mind me—go ahead. Continue.

“I used to be in the Hero’s party.”

Hmm. I figured they knew each other somehow. I guess she really was one of the Hero’s party members once upon a time.

“At first, we had four people. I know I’m biased, but our strength was unquestionable. A year after we started off at the lowest adventurer rank, we reached B Rank; then A Rank in our second year, and finally S Rank in our third.”

I don’t know how amazing that is, but it definitely sounds like a suspiciously fast series of promotions. I usually see her at her worst when she’s bumming around the mansion, though I guess she *was* incredible in the past, huh?

“But as we conquered labyrinths at reckless speeds, going around and

defeating famous monsters in every region, one of our number eventually wasn't able to stay with us. She was injured and had to retire from the adventuring lifestyle. Fortunately, nothing stood in the way of her living a normal life, and she'd made enough money to live comfortably by then. But when she left, she was worried about the Hero. She said that if things stayed as they were, the Hero would eventually be the only one left."

Zenobia's tone is dispassionate as she speaks about her past. It's almost like she's purposely trying to keep her own emotions in check.

"And she was right. A little while after she left, the other party member, realizing the Hero's path was still set in stone, said she couldn't keep up with us. She vehemently disparaged the Hero, but it was as if the Hero didn't react at all. In fact, Alstera seemed mystified about why she wouldn't be able to stay with us. That other party member invited me to leave along with her, but I couldn't just leave the Hero alone."

A hint of sadness leaked out of Zenobia's eyes.

"We continued to fight without rest, and the next thing we knew, we'd earned ourselves the incredibly rare titles of SS-Rank adventurers—the highest rank in the guild. By that time, everyone acknowledged the Hero as, well...*the* Hero."

Zenobia's expression was a mix of pride and sympathy.

"The Hero never changed, even after gaining money, status, and honor—everything an adventurer should want. We traveled to many places, chasing rumors of powerful monsters and slaying them. We formed temporary parties with local adventurers a few times, but I was the only one who stuck. Those we saved sent innocent gifts to us, but the adventurers looked at us as if we were monsters or something."

It probably wasn't just their strength—they must have been scared of a couple monster-killing machines in their own right.

Well, I understand how they feel. I'd shy away, too, if I were in that situation. I mean, she's *clearly* an extreme workaholic. I was the same way, right before I died in my previous life. And it's awful. You die if you keep working, but not working makes you anxious. In the end, the only person I ever had to talk to—

the man at the convenience store—looked at me like I was some sort of monster, too.

Oops. Didn't mean to derail the conversation. Please continue.

"...That was around the time the Hero started acting really strange. Our targets expanded from the violent creatures of the past to include herbivores that never attacked humans—and even newborn monsters. All of them got slaughtered in a one-sided massacre."

As she remembered those days, Zenobia's expression became bitter.

"The Hero continued butchering monsters with what almost seemed like *relish*. I complained about it many times. When we'd first formed a party, this hadn't been what we'd wanted. We'd wanted to be adventurers for the sake of saving people imperiled by monsters."

Is this the first time she's opened up about this? She seems to be having a pretty hard time talking about it. She has a hand to her chest as she wrings out this confession of her past.

"But the Hero didn't listen; the desire for conflict had grown too ingrained. To stop it, we ended up having a final duel."

Suddenly, Zenobia smiled darkly, as if in self-deprecation. "I lost. Badly. I'd never thought before that there was such a difference between us. I failed, in the end, to stop the Hero. And I can't stand thinking of my own inexperience."

What? I'm not sure you're quite on the mark there.

Zenobia acts cold all the time, but at heart, she's a really good girl. She might like training and weapons and stuff, but I don't think it's because she likes the idea of fighting itself. She's a young maiden who secretly talks to stuffed animals in her room, after all.

Also, she's always gone easy on me, even when she was convinced that I was an evil monster. That's good evidence. If Zenobia had truly wanted to kill me, she would have used that sword right away—the magical black one that sliced through Len's scales. Maybe she unconsciously chose fragile swords, but I think that deep down, she never really wanted to kill me.

I'd bet she actually had the Hero on the ropes during their fight but couldn't find it in her to deal the final blow, and then she got counterattacked.

But that's fine. I wouldn't want Zenobia to be a murderer. I recall what she was like in front of that campfire some time ago: every bit the stray guard dog. She looked like a fragile little girl then, hugging her knees to herself. That's probably who she really is deep down.

Even this dumb dog knows that at her core, Zenobia is a kind, gentle person.

"...What are you looking at me like that for?"

"Arwf, arwf? (*Oh, nothing, why?*)"

"...Fine. Anyway, after my defeat, I fell into a river and managed to keep myself alive as I drifted downstream. But by then, I already felt a revulsion toward the adventuring profession. And I was disgusted with myself for running away, unable to stop the Hero. In the end, I abandoned the quest and didn't go back to the guild. I wandered aimlessly for a while after that."

Ah, so Zenobia's secretive wanderer phase is coming to light. I bet she would have been real stinky back then. It makes me want to sniff her.

"I walked for several days, my thoughts running in circles. I stopped caring about food and water, and when I finally collapsed, it was right by this mansion."

Apparently, Lady Mary was the one to find her.

"The people here remembered me, so long after I'd taken a request from them one time. My lady was very young back then, but she still remembered my name."

I can easily picture the scene Zenobia is talking about. Leave it to the people in this mansion to find a suspicious person, collapsed and beaten up, and welcome them with open arms. That must be why she's trying to protect those who live here. Her mind and body were spent, but they kindly took her in. She would have wasted no time swearing her loyalty to them.

Actually, I'm surprised Zenobia managed to reach this mansion with her terrible sense of direction. Does she have homing instincts? What is she, a dog?

Now that I think about it, her personality is very doglike. I had no idea she was my rival in that category as well. Gah. This mansion isn't big enough for two good-for-nothings—and I won't give up my spot!

Wholly unaware of my antagonistic feelings, Zenobia continues talking.

“The master, the young lady, the servants... I have a debt to all of them that I'll never be able to repay. I'd do anything to ensure their happiness.”

“Woof, woof! *(That's good, Zenobia! Protect my happiness and my lifestyle, too! I'm their pet, after all! Part of the family! One of the people you have to protect!)*”

Anyway, the long discussion has made me hungry, so I'm gonna leave now. Adieu.

“Where are you going?”

As I'm leaving, a hand grabs the back of my head.

“A-arwf, arwf. *(Wait, I thought you were done.)*”

“You have just as big a debt to this family as I do, in case you forgot!”

“A-arrrrrrwf! *(Y-you're right, but! But! I'll pay it back a little at a time with my daily fluffiness! Please, let me slide!)*”

“You're not getting away! I haven't said the important part yet. If the Hero sees you, you're sure to be attacked. But we know the exact arrival time, so hiding you is an easy matter. It would be the same as what the master said for me—while the Hero is here, you can just retreat somewhere else.”

Oh? Well, let's go with that plan, then. I'm amazingly good at running away from things I don't like.

“But you have friends in the forest that the Hero will end up investigating, don't you?”

“Arwf... *(Ah, right, I see...)*”

That's what the Hero is after—an investigation of the forest. Was Zenobia telling me about how fearsome the Hero is out of consideration for my friends? And here I thought you were dim-witted! Where did the usual muscle-for-brains

gorilla go?

Still, I've been thinking about it a little, too. This might turn out to be something worse than I thought. Everyone's in the forest—Garo and the Fen Wolves, and the other monsters we picked up at Drills's place. And that giant bear who joined up recently.

And Zenobia's saying the Hero will attack them? After hearing all that, I don't have much reason to doubt her. This just turned into a big issue, didn't it?

I always thought the Hero would solve the problem of the Demon Lord's generals reviving, since my pet life was in danger. But now it seems like he'll create more problems than solve them.

"I'll try and think of something, so you reflect on it, too. After all, you're the only one who can protect your forest friends."

“Awrooo! (Let the first How to Make the Hero Go Home Peacefully meeting begin!)”

Brought to you in the elf village by everyone who happened to be free at the time.

At my declaration, hearty cheers go up from the elves.

“Squeak. (This dried nut is quite delectable.)”

Immediately, Len interrupts me. As she munches on a nut closely resembling an acorn, she looks exactly like a mouse and nothing more. Her overpowering draconic nature, among other things, is completely gone.

“Mewl... (There’s a saying for this, isn’t there? Once you pop...)”

Nahura is cleverly using her foreclaws to grip the nut she’s eating, too.

I swear, the two of you...

“Arwf. (How dare you ignore the purpose of our meeting to eat a snack? Give me some, too, please.)”

The rich fragrance of the nuts has me beat.

“Arwf. (Oh, this really is good.)”

It tastes sort of like a chestnut. It’s very aromatic and has a certain sweetness to it.

“That’s the nut we harvest from the Worldtree, the one we use as our home.”

The eldest of the elf sisters provides an explanation immediately. She must mean the big tree Hecate healed recently. A nut from the Worldtree, huh? That’s a shame—I know that the leaves of another world tree, Yggdrasil, have the ability to resurrect the dead.

Nobody in this world would get that piece of trivia, so I digest it along with the

nut.

“We use the flour made from these nuts in the bread you love so much, Lord Rota.”

Oh, so this is where that bread comes from? It definitely tastes different when I bite into the raw ingredient. But the natural flavor is tasty in its own right.

“Arwf! *(Wait a minute! We came here to have a meeting!)*”

What am I doing, getting sidetracked by a snack from the very beginning? And with the added service of the eldest sister herself personally peeling it, too. At this rate, I’ll be the first to end up useless.

“Here you are, Lord Rota. Say *aah*.”

Yippee! Aah!

“Arwf! *(Wait a minute!)*”

Aruru is bad news. The eldest sister’s always been top tier at spoiling me. She’s very intent on dragging me down from grace. If I let her have her way, I’ll end up living here in sloth for the rest of my life. No—my home is the mansion! This village is no more than a vacation home, or something.

“Mew! *(Rota, it’s like you’re an adulterer surrounded by his local mistresses!)*” Nahura snickers in her feline manner.

Would you be quiet already? This isn’t the time to be talking about stuff like that! Isn’t that right, everyone?

“Arwf, arwf. *(The meeting! What shall we do, my friends? The NEET swordfighter at our mansion says the Hero, an absolute monster-killing machine, is coming to this forest.)*”

I construct a serious expression and look around at those at the meeting.

“Mrrow? *(Can’t we use the same strategy as last time? We can all hide and pretend the forest is peaceful to get the Hero to go home.)*”

That’s what we did with the adventurers who came before.

“Squeak, squeak. *(But that didn’t go so well, did it? We only deceived them because the Lady Witch was with us.)*”

True. Those adventurers were weaklings, too, so we had to protect them. But the adventurer coming this time is apparently amazing enough to be called “the Hero.” There might not be a point in using the same tactic.

Plus, at the end of all that, we got found out anyway, and we were only able to use the strategy because of Hecate’s having been the very first guild leader. But what about this time, Miss Hecate? Does this look manageable with the power of your connections?

Hecate, unusually present at our strategy meeting tonight, says something into a crystal ball about the size of her palm. “Emerada, what exactly is going on?”

“I said I was sorry!”

Inside the crystal is an elf—one who looks like a beautiful, but overworked, office employee. She must be someone important in the guild, which I visited some time ago in the Royal Capital. Her tiredness, coupled with her white blouse, loosened at the chest, gives her an air of sexiness.

That crystal ball must be a kind of communicator. That sure is a handy item to have around.

“I didn’t think the Hero would forcefully board an airship. Since it’s so far away, I planned to keep evading questions and tell you about it in the meantime. I only heard about this a little while ago myself. Don’t ask the impossible of me!”

“Oh, but it sounds like the little Hero has not been properly disciplined.”

“Disciplined? Now look here. I’m not you... The guild doesn’t have the power to arrest people like that. SS-Rank adventurers are allowed to act on their own judgment at the scene anyway... Also, the Hero has seemed strange lately. I would assume it’s because Zenobia is gone. She’s with you, right? Can’t you placate her?”

“That is the swordswoman’s issue, so I can’t do anything about it.”

“You really are a shrewd woman. More importantly, what are you doing there anyway? No sooner do you force me to be guild leader and wander off somewhere and totally disappear for a hundred years than you suddenly come

back and push all this trouble on me. I'll have you know that covering up that magical disaster was backbreaking work—preventing observation reports from reaching the royals, putting gag orders on all the adventurers making a fuss about it... Not only was it an abuse of power, I'm pretty sure I broke at least three laws."

"Yes, well, if they fire you from the guild for malfeasance, you can come here. I promise I'll foster you."

"...Your offer is actually pretty tempting..."

The guild leader's job seems to involve some pretty shady stuff.

Wait, Hecate, you just said you'd "foster" her—I assume with the money out of Papa's pocket, right? What's mine is mine, what's yours is also mine, huh? That's pretty Gian of you, as always.

After promising to go out drinking with her soon, Hecate ends the call with the guild leader.

"As you just heard, this seems to be the little Hero's own decision. We probably won't be able to use the guild's influence to put a stop to it."

Seems the result was less than favorable.

The Hero must be every bit the runaway freight train Zenobia said he was. I doubt either dialogue or persuasion would be effective on him.

"Squeak. (It is but a single human. Can we not simply destroy them when they enter the forest?)"

Why are all your ideas so frightening? Try thinking with something other than your muscles, you dumb dragon.

"Arwf. Arf, arf. (Nope. The stronger they are, the more chances for collateral damage. We can't allow anyone on the other side to get injured, either. Besides, if word got out that the Hero was missing, the guild really would mark this area as dangerous.)"

"Mew! (Wow, Routa is speaking wisely for once!)"

Heh. Self-preservation puts even *my* brain into full swing. I will never, ever allow my magnificent pet life to end.

“Woof, woof. (We need to get the Hero to leave us in peace—that’s all that matters. Please don’t forget that.)”

We can speculate from information gathered thus far that the Hero is coming to the forest because he wasn’t happy with the results of the previous investigation. In which case, he will come looking for some sort of physical proof to lend credence to his own theory.

But since Hecate dealt with any possible evidence already, he won’t find anything in the way of that. She sealed up the waterfall where the magical disaster occurred and repaired the lands wrecked by the battles with the Demon Lord’s army. Even if he came to the elf village with questions, everyone there is my friend. They’ll all lie and say they don’t know anything, that nothing is suspicious.

Would that make this one of those times when we just have to sit back and not do anything stupid?

But wait, if we just leave the Hero be, he’ll find wild monsters. That would be reason enough for an investigation. After all, we’re up against the kind of monster slayer who would say, “I will kill monsters without mercy.” If he finds a single one, he might rampage through the whole forest on the assumption that there are more.

Hrm... What to do...?

“Mew, mew! (Oh, I have an idea! Why don’t we just do nothing, and run away?)”

“Squeak? (What do you mean, do nothing? You’re suggesting we leave the Hero alone?)”

Len, not understanding what Nahura means, tilts her head to the side. But I know exactly what she’s getting at.

“That’s it!”

Zenobia said this, too, didn’t she? We should just evacuate somewhere while the Hero is here. But not just me—*all* the monsters in the forest. Discretion is the better part of valor. If the Hero never finds anything, even he will give up and go home.

“Hmm. I see.” A dark-skinned beauty nods, realizing what I’m thinking.

That’s Garo, who’s attending the meeting as the Fen Wolves’ representative. She’s in human form right now, perhaps so she can hold Shiro and Kuro in her arms. The two of them are sleeping, their faces buried in Garo’s bosom. Looks like even she’s getting accustomed to being a mother.

“In that case, the Fen Wolves have much to do. We are skilled at chasing prey. Please leave this to us, my king.”

Garo says this with a sharp look on her face, but the two little fluffballs in her arms are just too cute for the sight to be anything other than heartwarming.

“Squeak, squeak. (Still, an escape plan is a weak tactic, one which I would not have thought the King of the Fen Wolves, Fenrir, would choose. However, you do so in a bid not to leave any subordinates behind. Such consideration, as always. I believe I am falling in love with you all over again!)”

I wish you wouldn’t.

Anyway, I guess we can say we’ve figured out the general direction of our plan.

“Woof, woof. (All right, let’s all just do what we can, then.)”

“““Grwl, mewl, squeak! (Understood!)””””

Let Operation Berserker, If We All Run Away Together There’s Nothing to Be Scared Of begin.



“Routa, Routa! We’ll finally get to see Eliza tomorrow!”

“Arwf, arwf. (Oh, that’s nice. You’ve been looking forward to this, haven’t you, my lady?)”

Snuggled into bed, we can’t stop talking about the young lady Elizabeth, also known as Drills, and sometimes Drillizabeth.

Lady Mary talks about things like what they’ll do together tomorrow and the places she wants to show her; eventually the lights are off and her eyes are closed, but she still doesn’t fall asleep until the moon is high in the sky.

My eyelids are heavy, too—and all I was doing was saying things like “Oh, really” and “I see.” It would be difficult to go out tonight.

Still, the operation is already underway. Now I just have to pray the Fen Wolves do a good job. I’ll have to do my best tomorrow, too—to protect my daily life as a NEET and a pet.

Come at me, you damned Hero. I’ll show you just how adept we are at running and hiding.

After rallying my backward resolve, I fix the covers over my lady and close my eyes.



And the next day, under clear skies, we look up at a giant ship about to land in the courtyard.

“Arwf. (Every time I see it, I’m struck by how huge it is.)”

The big airship just barely fits in the yard, which is awfully large. I don’t understand how the thing can fly, but as its enormous mass moves, I don’t feel anything aside from a slight breeze. It appears completely weightless.

Hecate told me earlier that she helped construct it, so maybe it uses some flotation magic in its flying mechanism, since Hecate and Nahura are really good at that. I also think Papa gave a detailed explanation of it once before, too, but I didn’t really care, so I forgot it all.

Sorry, Papa. Machines and techno jargon aren’t really my thing.

“Yawn... I should have washed my face earlier...”

My lady’s lack of sleep must be weighing on her. She’s leaning up against me and rubbing her sleepy eyes. Unlike me, she doesn’t take afternoon naps, so of course she’s tired. Her single-minded excitement to see Drills is keeping her eyes open, but she’d probably doze off right away if she weren’t careful.

“Ahem...” Miranda, standing behind us, clears her throat.

The young lady, flustered, snaps to attention, but limply leans against me a few moments later. You’re cute even when you’re all sleepy and slovenly like this.

“Arwf, arwf. (Lean on me all you want, if that’s what you wish.)”

I’d welcome you anytime with this fluffy fur of mine.

In the meantime, the airship completes its landing. It still appears to be floating just above the ground, as though its power source isn’t entirely shut off. It would be awful if it damaged the lawn in the courtyard—the old gardener would probably start crying. But it remains motionless; a big-armed navigator is probably controlling it.

A door opens on the bottom section of the ship, and an exit gangway extends from within. It then creates a set of stairs between it and the ground, at last enabling passengers to alight.

Drills and the Hero seem to be the only two passengers, but the crew hastily gets off the ship first to tie it down to the yard. Oh, there’s Drills now.

And just then, I see another person next to her. This person appears to be her escort and is holding her hand respectfully.

What a pretty boy. He’s got short black hair with a sheen to it and deep-blue eyes. He’s clad in immaculate silver armor and has a large, snow-white sword on his back. Everything, from his face to his gear, asserts that he is indeed the Hero.

“Arwgh...! (Damn you, pretty boy...! Just as I thought, our fates cannot be allowed to intertwine...!)”

My determination flares into hostility at the sight of this “Hero.”

I’m lying. I couldn’t possibly allow him to pick up on my hostility. He’d mark me an enemy. I’m just wagging my tail, carefree, welcoming our guests. I hide my fangs, stick out my tongue, and pant. I pretend to be a submissive dog, all the while praying that he’ll spontaneously combust. Yes, I know I’m being petty. And yes, I’m going to continue being petty.

“...Hey. Why are you here?” whispers Zenobia from behind me. “Didn’t I explain the dangers? Why are you showing yourself instead of hiding?”

“Arwf. (Heh. There’s only one thing it could be.)”

To prevent the Hero from stealing my lady’s heart!

If there's anything I care more about than personal danger, it's Lady Mary. She's a big Hero fan. She never fails to read books about him every night. If that hottie Hero flashes her a cool smile, that by itself might be enough to do her in.

No. No, I say!

The young lady's attentions must be focused 100 percent on me. You won't like me when I'm jealous. Just you try and do anything untoward to her—I'll never allow it, damn you.

Not that I can do very much! I can bark and...that's about it!

"Arwf, arwf. (Still, I do have a solid chance at victory.)"

Observe where I'm sitting. To my left is Papa, and to my right is Lady Mary. And behind me is Zenobia. I already have a formation of ironclad shields protecting me. Papa is a frontier noble, and the young lady is his noble daughter. If you were to try and cut me down in front of them, they'd arrest you on the spot. I'm this house's pet. Property of the Faulks family. Hurt me, and you pick a fight with nobles. You may be an SS-Rank adventurer, but these are *nobles* we're talking about—don't think for a second you can get away with being rude to them.

And if, for whatever reason, he's enough of a berserker to ignore that and attack me, Zenobia will protect me.

A berserker for a berserker. We have our own violent lunatic! Don't underestimate her!

"Woof, woof! (Yeah! Papa, Lady Mary, Zenobia! Make sure to protect me! I'm counting on you!)"

Protected by twin powers of authority and martial prowess, I have no blind spots. Fwa-ha-ha! How do you like my perfect defensive formation? Come at me anytime, so-called Hero! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

"...? I don't know what's going through your head, but you have a serious look in your eyes. You must have an idea... All right. I'll leave it to you."

"A-arwf? (Wait, what? Zenobia, did you turn on your 'blind to everything' setting?)"

I'll let you do something about it, you know? You're my last bastion, you know? If that Hero is the kind of monster slayer who would charge in without thinking, you're the one who's going to be fighting him! Don't be so relaxed! Protect me like you're supposed to! Be on your guard! You need to be more cautious around this Hero! Look, he's about to come down the gangplank!

The Hero, graceful in contrast to my panic, escorts Drills down the steps. Grr. I want to escort Drills, too. I'd have the blond beauty put a leash on me and walk me around the city in style.

...Wait, that's just a normal walk. Not that I dislike walks, but still.

"Eliza!" cries the young lady, springing back up out of her sleepiness.

"It is good to see you, Lady Meariya Von Faulks. Thank you very much for your invitation this—"

"Eliza! I missed you so much!"

As Drills tries to curtsy and give a classy greeting, Lady Mary charges and tackles her to the ground.

"H-hey! Mary! Would it kill you to be a little more refined?"

"Eliza, Eliza, Eliza!"

Sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff.

The young lady hugs Drills, burying her head in the girl's chest, which is ample despite her age. Actually, she's taking very deep breaths, as if to savor Drillizabeth's scent.

That's strange. Is that not *my* special privilege as a dog? I want to sniff her and nuzzle her and get her to pet me, too.

But with the Hero right next to them, it would be too dangerous to leave Papa and Zenobia's side! I must endure! I must!

"Oh, Mary. I'm happy to see you again after so long, too." Drills gently pets the young lady's head.

Lady Mary has a much, much higher social position since she was born into nobility, but the two of them are like friendly sisters with each other.

“Your hands, if you please?” says the Hero, making use of his hotness again to extend a hand to help them up.

Damn you, pretty boy. Accumulating points already? You’re lucky I’m too scared to move from this spot.

Up close, the man is so good-looking even I, a male, am almost caught staring. He has a young boy’s soprano. His voice is simply intoxicating.

Wait. What am I getting intoxicated for? Get a grip! He’s an enemy trying to steal the young lady’s attention away.

“Thank you very much for escorting me. I had a very good time listening to your stories on the ship.”

“The pleasure’s all mine. Nothing is more fun than getting to talk to someone as beautiful as you.”

He smiles coolly, and you can almost see the sparkle on his pearly whites. Shit. Super-handsome shit.

“Arwf! (Oh! My lady! Is Lady Mary all right?! She’s not the Hero’s prisoner now, is she?!)”

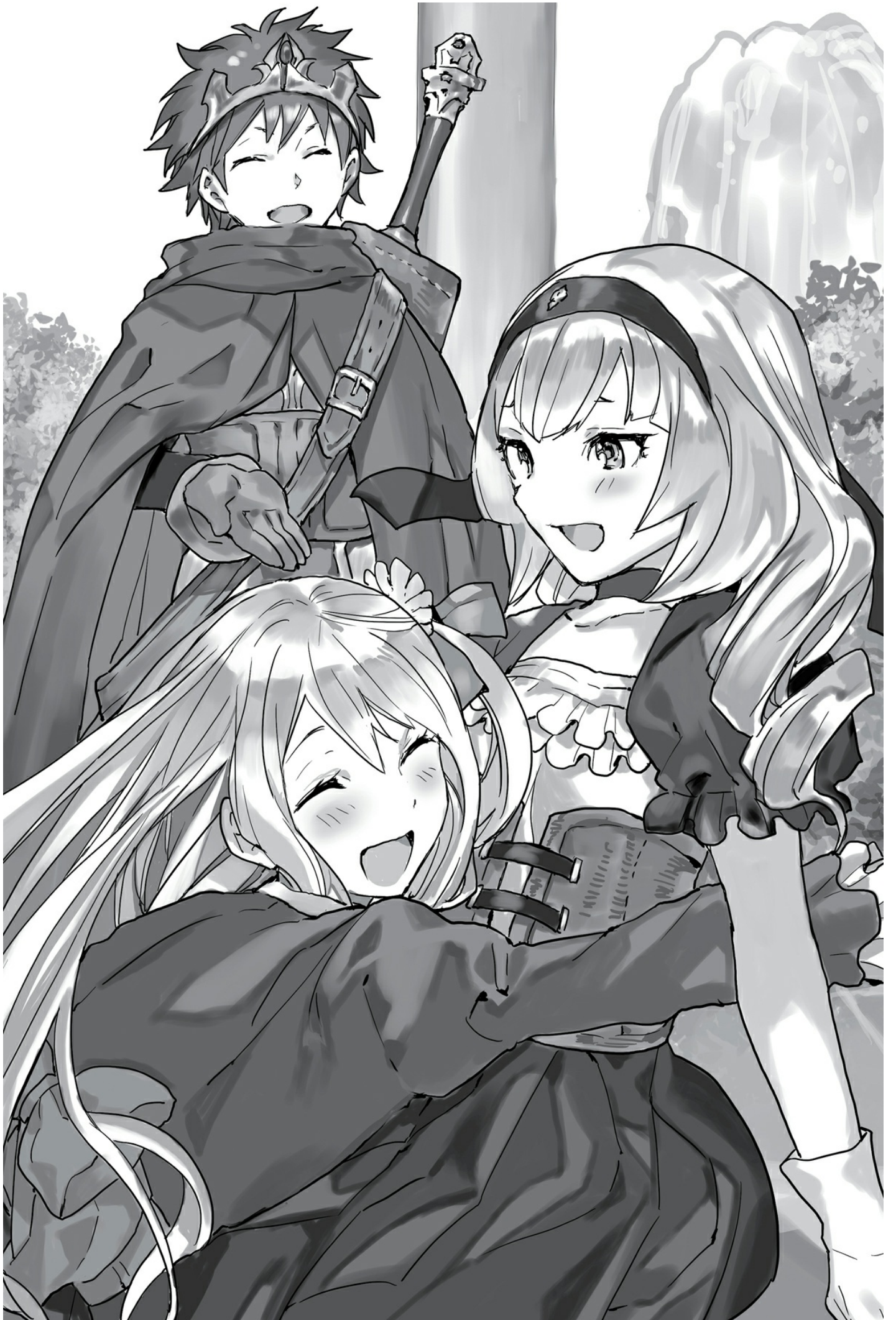
If she is, I’ll be forced to fight him for real. I’m fully prepared to unleash my new killer move: the Cute Pose Custom. I intend to charm him with all my might.

“Thank you very much!”

Lady Mary thanks the Hero with a smile after she’s helped up, but that’s all she says before going back to talking to Drills.

Huh? No interest?

Drills must think it’s strange, too. She tilts her head, confused at how the young lady withdrew so quickly. “Oh? Mary, I would have thought you’d want to hear the Hero’s stories. We’ve talked about fairy tales of the Hero many times in our letters, haven’t we?”



“My only hero is Sir Routa,” answers Mary.

That Hero had the same name as me, but it sounds kind of like she’s talking about me, which makes me happy. I’m relieved to see she doesn’t have any interest in *this* hottie, at least. Far from it—ideas for what she and Drills are going to do together seem to be the only things filling her mind.

Actually, now that I don’t have to worry about her heart being stolen away, I don’t really need to be here anymore, do I? Shouldn’t I be going straight back to the mansion right now? Doesn’t the old man have food waiting for me?

“Marquis Faulks, I cannot thank you enough for going so far as to prepare an airship.”

“I’m glad you’ve come, Elizabeth. Mary has been waiting eagerly for this. If you require aught during this vacation, please do not hesitate to ask. I’ve already contacted your father to assure him I would take responsibility for you.”

Between Papa’s and Drills’s very noble greetings is Lady Mary, waiting for them to finish up their formalities. I can see the “Are you done yet? What about now?” in her pressing gaze.

Is she a dog? I almost start to see a tail coming out of her back, wagging cutely.

Once again, isn’t that *my* job?! To think the day would come when the young lady would steal my identity!

“Thank you, Your Excellency. I shall take my leave, then.”

“Please be at ease. There may not be much around here, but I can guarantee an experience unlike that in the Royal Capital.”

The young lady cuts in at those words. “Okay, let’s go, Eliza! We’re going exploring!”

“Exploring? But this is *your* mansion...” Eliza chuckles. “Okay, then. We shall race to the front door!”

Despite her classy act, Drills is common-born. She pinches her long skirt and catches up to Lady Mary before overtaking her.

“Hey, no fair!”

“Oh-ho-ho! All is fair in games!”

The two joyously round the fountain, running toward the front door, looking to be having the time of their lives. Great, I’ll chase after them, too. This is a good excuse for me to leave right now.

“Heya, Zenobia.”

Urk! That voice. Slowly and fearfully, I turn around to find *him* there. With a cool smile on his face, the Hero is confronting Zenobia.

“Alstera...”

Oh, right, that was his name, wasn’t it? Zenobia stays where she is, arms folded in front of her. The only air I can feel is a tingling, cautious one, piercing into me. If the Hero does anything funny, she’ll cut him down on the spot. I can feel her resolve to do so.

But wait a minute. If a fight were to break out now, wouldn’t I be the one who gets hurt? Standing between the two of them like this, I’m worried to death. I completely lost my chance to run away. Why are they talking with me between them? I’m not a buffer! I’d like to leave this place as soon as possible!

“Why did you come here?”

“Come now. Is that any way to greet a friend?”

“A ‘friend’...?”

Murder flares in Zenobia’s eyes.

My urge to pee flares, too. I’m so scared right now that I might just spring a leak.

“What’s wrong, Zenobia? We finally got to see each other again. Why are you giving me that scary look? Did you want me to embrace you like I did the young ladies earlier?”

What a snob. In modern times, that would be considered sexual harassment.

After all, it’s not like Zenobia ever hugged *me*. But instead she does hug a stuffed animal that looks a great deal like me, so it’s *like* I’m being hugged. I

think.

“...We’re not exactly on terms to renew old friendships.”

“What? Why are you saying that? It’s only been a few years. We’re still friends, aren’t we?”

“You...! You would use the word *friend*...?!”

In contrast to Zenobia, whose face is twisted into a frown, the Hero maintains his friendly smile. There is no hostility in it, just fondness for an old buddy.

What’s going on? Nothing is adding up. Zenobia and the Hero had a big fight, and then he beat her up, right? The Hero’s present attitude definitely doesn’t jibe with that. It’s like he’s forgotten all about having nearly killed her.

And doesn’t he sense anything when he looks at me? He hasn’t reacted to me one bit. From what I heard, he’s even more of a berserker than Zenobia is. But he seems surprisingly rational, even amicable.

...Could it be that he considers me a lovable dog and nothing more? ...Is he blind? Do dogs make him blind to the truth? Maybe I’ll strike a cute pose to make sure he knows I’m harmless.

“You might already know this, but I came here on an investigation. I’m sure you know about the large-scale magical disaster that happened in the forests north of here, right?”

“...Yeah, I do. But I heard there weren’t any problems.”

“They made a mistake. Neither those adventurers who came before nor the guild leader understands anything. My intuition as the Hero is telling me *something* has to be here.”

“.....”

Intuition? Man, I thought he had some kind of evidence. He’s just going with his gut.

Shame on you, Hero. You came all this way on a gut feeling? Well, that’s too bad for you. No matter what your intuition says, there is.....absolutely something here. Damn it.

There are monsters there, like in any other forest! Labyrinths keep showing up, too! And the Fen Wolves are actually in charge of the forest! The holy mountain to the north is a dragon's lair! The generals of the Demon Lord's army are reviving one after another, too! And to top it all off, the King of the Fen Wolves lives here at this very mansion!!

Now that I'm thinking about it, this whole area is a nightmare. Talk about an overabundance of fighting strength. I mean, of *course* the Hero came here. It's only natural his Hero sense would be tingling.

"Oh, also, I've been wondering about something since I landed. I'm sure you've noticed already, but why is a high-ranking monster like *that* on the loose?" asks the Hero, pointing at me.

"Arwf?! (*Wha?!*)"

So he wasn't blind after all?! Guess I celebrated prematurely. He seems to have the presence of mind not to immediately try to kill me, but now that my identity's out of the bag, if we're ever alone, he *will* destroy this monster. I have to make absolutely sure to always have someone with me.

"So why is that?"

"....." Zenobia falls silent, and the Hero watches her with empty eyes.

And I, caught between them, break into a cold sweat. Well, technically, I don't have enough sweat glands. That's the feeling, though.

"Do you take issue with our dog? That's quite the serious expression you're wearing..."

Nice one, Papa! He's been watching us and decided to come over. He must have sensed the disquieting mood. It looks like he didn't hear what they were talking about, so maybe he sensed something was off when the Hero pointed at me.

"...What? This is...a dog?"

"Yes, why? He's grown into a rather splendid dog, don't you think?"

"Splendid... Huh...?"

For the first time, the Hero is confused. Leave it to Papa to pull that off!

“Does he really look like a dog to you?” asks the Hero.

“Yes. He’s a dog no matter how you look at him. Why do you ask? He’s a just a bit lazy, husky, and too kind for his own good. He’d certainly never make it as a guard dog. Ha-ha-ha,” laughs Papa, petting me on the head.

Ah, here is the true blind person. Never change, Papa.

“Zenobia, that man seems a bit strange,” whispers the Hero into Zenobia’s ear.

“W-well, perhaps a little— No! I will not stand for your rudeness toward the master of the house!” says Zenobia, hastily batting him away.

“Mm. I apologize for my late introduction. I am the Hero, Alstera, an SS-Rank adventurer like Zenobia. Starting today, I will be investigating these forests. Is that all right with you?”

“I’m aware SS-Rank adventurers have legal authority to make decisions at the scene. Even if the guild has judged otherwise, you have the ability to act immediately if you sense anything suspicious. Such authority and responsibility do come with such a high rank, after all.”

Huh? Really? I *definitely* don’t have any level of trust in Zenobia or this Hero.

Papa, oblivious to my suspicion, nods. “I have no intention of stopping you, of course. I doubt there’s anything of note in this peaceful forest, but feel free to investigate to your heart’s content.”

“Thank you for your cooperation!” The Hero bows deeply.

“Still, you don’t have to go right after arriving, do you? We have a spare room. Why not rest from the voyage and get started after that?”

Yes, I think that’s for the best, too! Our operation might have already begun, but there’s nothing wrong with buying some time. Now surrender your heart to the hospitality of the Faulkses! Also, I’ll be constantly emphasizing my own harmlessness.

“I appreciate your consideration, but I think I’ll start the investigation immediately,” says the Hero with another bow. He slings a pack over his shoulder—it probably has traveling gear in it.

“Is that so? It’s good of you to be so earnest about your work, but perhaps you should catch up with your old friend a little more, don’t you think?”

“We’ll do that on the way. You’re coming with me, right, Zenobia?”

“Uh, yeah. Of course. I’m not about to let *you* run wild.”

Zenobia must have planned to go along from the start, as she has a sturdy metal case with her already. She picks it up. If I recall, that’s the box with Zenobia’s family heirloom in it. A large black sword that sliced off some of Len’s tough scales. I can tell by her decision to bring it that she’s enthusiastic about this. Does she intend to fight the Hero again, if it comes to that?

I personally doubt the sword is going to matter much. The monsters of the forest the Hero is looking to fight are already happily evacuating. Your investigation will be over before you even encounter a single creature.

“You say it like you need to keep an eye on me. Well, okay. Let’s head out right away.”

“Right.”

Zenobia begins walking and shoots me a look.

“Arwf? (*Huh? What? Need something?*)”

“.....” Zenobia maintains her stare, saying nothing.

I look back in puzzlement. Huh? What? What are you looking at me like that for? We’re not communicating here!

“.....”

“..... (*.....*)”

Oh! I got it! She’s sending me a message to leave the rest to her and take a break!

Don’t worry about that, Zenobia. Break Taker is my middle name. I’ll leave watching the Hero to you. Put your utter lack of direction to good use to hold the Hero off, will you?

I sharpen my expression to tell her I understand. Zenobia nods slightly, and the two of them head off to the forest together.



“Arrrwf... *(Phew... I managed, somehow.)*”

I sigh deeply as I see the two of them off.

So that’s the Hero, huh? I was surprised Lady Mary didn’t react very much. I guess that means Drills is more important after all. Well, that’s good. The whole reason I went out to greet them was to prevent the Hero from stealing the young lady’s attention. When I saw that storybook Hero arrive, I wasn’t sure what would happen, but all’s well that ends well.

“Eh? *That’s* the Hero? What a misunderstanding. People really don’t know how to judge the worth of things.”

Oh? Suddenly, Mircalla is standing next to me.

She has her arms folded in a haughty manner, but on the outside she’s a blond loli maid, so it has no impact whatsoever. Now that the welcome is finished, the maids seem to have dispersed, too. Mircalla remained, though, as the others returned to their respective duties.

“Arwf, arwf? *(What do you mean a misunderstanding? Anyway, looks like ‘Hero’ is like a title. Does that mean the one who defeated the Demon Lord was different?)*”

“...Uhh, that isn’t exactly what I mean. You seem pretty carefree about this, Fen Wolf King.”

“Arwf? *(About what?)*” I’d rather you *not* expect sharp insight from a mere dog.

“It’s nothing. Fine. I don’t have any responsibility to help you. I promised I wouldn’t bring harm to any of you, but I don’t even *want* to get involved with *that* Hero.”

Mircalla gives a flip of her long blond hair, done up into two pigtails. If she’d still been in her adult form, it would have been a *great* pose.

“Arwf? *(Huh? Is something different about this Hero?)*”

“...That sword. I smell something very familiar about it.”

“Woof, woof. *(Oh, Zenobia said it was a holy sword.)*”

An amazing blade, apparently, and the reason for the title “Hero.” It certainly was decorated in a very divine fashion. Placed in its perfectly white sheath, it was obviously sacred.

“A holy sword... Hmm. It didn’t look that way to *me.*”

“Carmilla... Ah, er, Mircalla—you think so as well? To tell the truth, I, too, feel a sense of familiarity from it.”

Now even Richmond is here, standing next to me.

“Arwf, arwf? *(Well, that’s the sword of the Hero who defeated you two way back when, isn’t it? Wouldn’t it be stranger if you didn’t recognize it?)*”

“The Hero? That sword? I don’t remember that... Actually, to be perfectly frank, I can’t even remember the Hero’s face, so my memories of that event are hazy...”

“Mine, too. The Hero is one thing, but I wonder why I can’t remember the Demon Lord’s face. I’m *certain* I must have held them in very high esteem, but I can’t even recall their voice...”

The two of them sink into thought.

“Arwf? *(Well, no point thinking about that anymore, is there? Just give up on the Demon Lord reviving and have a fun life with the humans.)*”

“I refuse! Who would want to live with filthy *humans?!*”

“That’s right. We are purely of the demon tribes. Carmilla is the pinnacle of all vampires, as I am of the dead. We have no intention of disobeying you, but neither do we intend to bow before the humans!”

“Arwf? *(Is that right? Even so, it seems to me you’re really enjoying life here.)*”

“That is *not* true!”

“That’s right! What she said!”

Both of them firmly deny it.

Well, if you’re that insistent about it, then I must be wrong.

“Arwf. (Anyway, the maids all went back. Should you be lingering here?)”

“What?! That’s right! We’re still not finished making all the beds! I have to pull some sheets taut and fluff up some pillows! I can’t get enough of the sense of accomplishment when I’m all done!”

“Oh, dear me. I must prepare tea for our guest! I am told new tea leaves have arrived on the airship! I must search for the perfect way to steep them and adjust them before serving it! I, Richmond, am about to head up the greatest tea party ever seen!”

“Let’s hurry, Uncle!”

“Yes, let’s, Mircalla!”

The pair eagerly rush back into the mansion.

“...Arwf. (...They’re in full-on servitude mode now. Seems like they’re really enjoying it, too.)”

That leaves me alone in the courtyard. In any case, the Hero has entered the forest as planned. But the operation is already underway. Still, for an “operation,” it’s pretty simple. We just have everyone evacuate while the Hero investigates the forest.

That “simple thing,” however, is a big deal. After all, the scope of it is massive. Normally it wouldn’t be possible to direct a forest this large, but the talented Fen Wolves are in charge of the operation. I should be able to rest easy knowing it’s in their hands—er, paws. Apparently, all the Fen Wolf clans will be working together again, too. How very dependable.

“Arf, arf. (It actually looks like I won’t need to do anything. That’s nice.)”

It was strange to begin with that a pet dog like me would be going on journeys like I have been. If anything happens, Nahura, who is with Garo and the others, is to use her teleportation to inform me. Which means I don’t need to panic and go check on how they’re doing.

“Arf, arf! (Which also means that I have the whole afternoon off, at least!)”

My lady had a hard time falling asleep last night, and I am feeling pretty sleep deprived. Time for me to take a nap.

Just as I make the decision, the young lady accosts me and makes me go along with their exploration.

B-but my sleeping time!

Not that I mind, because this is fun! Now that it's come to this, I'll totally play with you!



With the greater part of the mansion having been introduced to Drills during their so-called “exploration,” she and my lady are in the guest room enjoying tea.

Since they worked up a sweat walking around, Richmond prepared some cold tea for them. Not black tea, however, but a green-colored one, like Japanese tea. No ice floats in the small glass cups, either, but nevertheless, you can tell by the droplets on the glass itself that the tea poured in it is properly chilled.

“This is iced jade-dew tea. It is made from rare tea leaves procured from the East, and the leaves themselves have a strong sweetness to them, making sugar, milk, and the like unnecessary. I’ve used droplets of melted ice to dissolve its flavoring little by little. Please give it a taste.”

“Oh! I’ve never had this before!”

“Neither have I. Only the Faulks Company would be able to acquire such a rare item from abroad. The marquis certainly has wonderful foresight, having had his eye on airships before anyone else, then having his own company develop one.”

Lady Mary and Drills admire of the color of the tea. Its ingredients, slowly extracted using ice, are very clear, and holding it up to the light causes its color to shimmer brilliantly.

I’m gonna have a sip, too, of course. Wherever deliciousness is, that’s where you’ll find Routa.

“Arwf! (*This is awesome! Actually, it reminds me of home!*)”

The sweetness of the tea reminds me of Japan’s *gyokuro* green tea. I mean, I never had the chance to taste something of such high quality in my past life. I

always chose bottled tea since it was cheap, but still.

“Wow, this is really sweet!”

“And there is no sugar at all in this?”

“That is correct. What you’re tasting is what the tea leaves alone have to offer.” Richmond bows, smiling like any genial old man would. He really is taking well to his servant form.

I had no idea tea could taste this great. It has none of the bitterness so characteristic of Japanese tea. There’s only a mellow, sweet flavor. The tea leaves’ flavoring has been so perfectly isolated that even I, an amateur, realize it. This is *good*.

I hope he stays in charge of this family’s tea forever.

“By the way, did Christina not come with you?” the young lady asks Drills.

Christina? Oh, she must mean that ground dragon. An incorrigible pervert who loves absolutely disgusting pet food, admires Drills more than that, and adores getting *stepped* on by Drills out of all the pleasures in life, if I recall. It looks like she didn’t come on the airship.

“She was, of course, a little too big to ride on the airship. Also, she doesn’t like going out very much. She’s perfectly happy going on walks when I’m riding her, but aside from that, all she ever does is bask in the sun in the courtyard all day.”

That’s because the walks aren’t her goal. She just wants you to step on her.

“She looked lonely, but she’s minding the place in my absence this time.”

You were right not to bring her, considering we have a monster-massacring Hero here. In the worst case, she might have gotten attacked on board the airship.

“That’s too bad, huh, Routa?”

Not particularly, why? I already have my fair share of unfortunate dragons, like the lonely spinster sleeping in my fur.

“It’s a shame Christina couldn’t come, but let’s play as much as we can anyway, Eliza!”

“Oh? That would be fine with me, but we cannot afford to neglect our studies.”

“Wait... Huh? But my home instructor is on break right now.”

“The two of us are more than enough for self-study. I figured this might happen, so I brought along textbooks and notebooks.”

“Nrrgh...”

Drills smiles at the pouting young lady. “I think even the boring parts will be fun if we do them together. How about it? Would you like to do some studying with me, Mary?”

“...! Yes, I would!”

My lady easily acquiesces to Drills’s invitation. She runs off to get her study materials.

When I look at Drills again, she sure seems mature. She’s quite calm and ladylike, nothing like the selfish, snot-nosed kid she was when I first met her at the Royal Capital. She was originally delinquent because of her parents’ disdain for each other. She collected all kinds of pets to fill the void left by an absence of familial affection, and then they were all gone, just like that—all except for Christina. That ground dragon, plus Drills’s newfound bond of friendship with Lady Mary, seems to have rehabilitated her quite well. *This* is who Drills really is.

The young lady returns, having gotten her study materials from Toa. She sits down at the desk with Drills, and they both get to it. General education appears to be the main course, but both of them are daughters of businessmen. They’re reading books on topics like economics and management as well.

Hmm. I never want to study for anything ever again, but these two seem to be having a good time. They’re helping each other with the parts they don’t understand and scribbling down notes.

“This is wonderful, Mary. Despite how I may seem, I have some of the highest grades at the academy in the capital. And you’ve been learning things even further ahead of me.”

“Wait, really? My home teacher has never really praised me for anything...”

Isn't that because you constantly skip your studies, my lady? Still, even I didn't realize how high the young lady's grades are. I guess I'm not surprised. She's been homeschooled by her tutor her whole life. Without anyone to compare herself to, she's never known how talented she is.

“Even my upperclassmen can't read so deeply into the Maynard Problems and interpret them independently... I'm losing faith in myself.”

“Well, the stuff you taught me was really easy to understand! I was completely absorbed when you told the story about the three bricklayers, the dog, and the sheep.”

“...Please forget about that.”

My lady loves stories, after all. As long as you wrap the subject up in a children's story, you have her full attention.

Drills is pretty good at teaching, and Lady Mary appears to be the stereotypical genius. I want to say it's a pitch, and a swing, and a hit, and ka-bam. At this rate, she'll have no trouble becoming the home-run king!

...What was I talking about again?

“Mary, I want to ask you something seriously.”

“What is it?”

“Do you have any interest in studying in the capital for a while? With your level of academic ability, you could easily enroll in the academy. You could probably even skip a grade.”

“Studying abroad...”

“What do you say, Mary? I think it would be a lot of fun for the two of us to go to the academy together.”

My lady's eyes glitter at Drills's invitation, but then she gives a vague kind of smile. “...I'm sorry, Eliza. I can't.”

Drills's eyes widen; it seems she didn't expect to be turned down.

“Mother's dying request was that I never leave this place for too long,”

explains Mary. “She said that the daughters of the Faulks family have always been like that.”

Dying request? I was under the impression my lady was living out here with all the nature so that she could recuperate from her illness. I figured she could go study abroad right now since her sickness was cured. I didn’t realize there was another reason.

If I recall, Lady Mary’s mother passed away when she was little. She comes up in conversations between Papa and the old man sometimes, but this is the first time the young lady has said anything about Mama.

She can’t leave this estate for too long, huh? That’s an odd thing to request on your deathbed. Is she cursed somehow? Like, would Lady Mary’s departure bring misfortune or something?

Well, I’ve taken a liking to my life at the mansion, so I’d be worried if Lady Mary *did* want to go to school in the capital. As her pet, I would need her to bring me everywhere. I’d certainly have to go with her to school, too.

If that happened, I would dare all the students in the capital to look at me. They’d all fall over backward. I don’t expect *everyone* would be blind when it comes to me. Even my current size, smaller due to the shape-shifting technique, is still pretty monstrous. Also, if I ended up leaving the estate, Garo—among others—would come with me whether I liked it or not. Len and Nahura would naturally follow. Taking them all to a well-populated place would be way too dangerous.

“I see... In that case, there’s no point belaboring it.”

“I’m sorry. I know you really wanted me to...”

“No, there’s nothing to worry about. I only made a proposal. We can still spend plenty of time together right now, while I’m here.”

“Eliza...!” The young lady hugs Drills. “Let’s make lots and lots and lots of memories!”

“Yes, yes, but we can’t forget about our studies,” says Drills, patting her head. Then she makes a face like she suddenly remembered something. “Oh, dear me. I’ve forgotten something quite important.”

“...? Something important?”

Yeah, what’s this important thing, huh?

“Would you not allow me to greet your mother as well?”



Drills’s request was to visit Lady Mary’s mother’s grave. The grave is apparently on a small hill not too far from the mansion. To save time, we head there by carriage.

“Arwrwf. *(Fwa-ha-ha. A flower in each hand, as they say, indeed.)*”

I’m so big I take up two whole seats, so both of the young ladies are sitting across from me.

“Neigh. *(It’s all right if you get tired, old-timers. I can get us up the hilly road if I have to.)*”

“Whicker! *(What is this I hear? We aren’t going to lose to some whippersnapper just yet, Mare!)*”

“Neigh. *(Oh, dear. Don’t complain to me if you force the issue and hurt yourself.)*”

Our horses, now numbering three, engage in friendly banter as they pull the wagon up the slanted road.

It’s lively inside the wagon, too, of course. They say three’s a crowd, but these two girls have plenty to talk about among themselves, so I can just enjoy the ride.

“The other day, Routa...”

“Oh, yes, Christina, she...”

Well, they’re mostly having pet talk, but still. When I listen to them, it doesn’t sound like they’re really on the same page in their conversation, but they always arrive at the same end points. The way girls talk is kind of incredible. The wagon continues ascending the hill as they talk, until suddenly the tree cover disappears.

“We’re here, Lady Mary!”

Toa, who is used to handling horses, climbs out of the driver's seat and opens the wagon door.

“Woof, woof! (*Leave the escorting to me!*)”

I jump out first, then lift my nose up so that the young ladies can easily put their hands on it.

“Oh! Thank you!”

“Well, aren't you the gentleman?”

Heh-heh-heh. I'm not only helping you get off the wagon. I'll even lead the way for you. Even though I don't know where the grave is. The flagstone path continues from here, so it's probably that way. But if it isn't, it's going to be really embarrassing, so please, be over there.

The sunlight is still warm, but a cool breeze blows across the hill. My lady holds her blond hair down and narrows her eyes.

“...My mother had the same illness as me. She wasn't very strong physically, so she would lose stamina every time she had a fever. When I was three, she passed away in her sleep.”

“I see...” Drills looks down sadly.

“Oh, but it was a long time ago, so don't worry about it! Father and everyone else in the mansion are here for me, and Routa is here now, too. I'm really, really happy that you came to visit!”

Drills offers a smile as the young lady grabs her hands firmly. “You said your illness had been cured, right?”

“Yes. We found medicine for me, so now I'm feeling just fine!” says my lady, spinning around, her skirt fluttering.

I wonder what would have happened if Mama had had the same medicine, but Lady Mary doesn't talk about it. Probably out of consideration for her doctor, Hecate.

This is just an idea, but Hecate probably apologized to her on the day of her mother's death—apologized that she couldn't save her mom. And now, with Lady Mary's own illness cured, the young lady wouldn't be happy about

Hecate's having regrets about it.

It's too bad they couldn't save her mom, but I'm glad we made it in time for the young lady. That's a much better way of looking at it.

It means I gained something from going to get the herbs, too. Of course, if word got out that it was me, everyone would only get more suspicious that I'm a monster, so I have to let Zenobia continue standing in for me on this.

"....."

I turn around suddenly, having realized my lady is staring at me.

"Arwf? (*What's wrong, my lady?*)"

"...Hee-hee. It's nothing," she says teasingly.

Ah, your petting feels so good.

As she scratches my mane around, Lady Mary goes ahead of me.

After following the cool flagstone path for a little while, we come to a place with a lot of yellow flowers blooming. Surrounded by those flowers is a large gravestone. It's been polished well, and not a speck of ivy is on it; it must be tended regularly.

You can see the mansion clearly from this hill. They probably chose this location for the grave so it could watch over the family from here.

Lady Mary passes by my side and kneels at the gravestone.

"Mother..."

She puts her hands together in prayer.

"Mother, I've come today with something to report."

She turns back toward us. She beckons to Drills and me, and we kneel down next to her. I sit, since I'm a dog, but my lady introduces me to her late mother, stroking my back.

"This little boy is Routa. He's a new part of the family. He's really nice, even if he is a little spoiled. Now that he's here, I don't cry at night anymore."

That *is* my one job as a pet who doesn't work, after all. I'll never let Lady Mary

feel lonely. You can watch over us in peace, Mama.

“And this is my first friend.”

“My name is Elizabeth Morgan. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Lady Marianna.”

Drills offers a prayer to Mama, too.

“Mother, I’ll be okay now. I’ve graduated from the crybaby I used to be. From now on, I’ll always come to you with fun stories!”

“I vow to be Mary’s friend for life. Please watch over us.”

“Arwf, arwf! *(I’ll be right next to her, too, of course, letting her raise me for life!)*”

A gust sends ripples through the flower field, as though Mama has heard our prayers. The vivid yellow petals flutter around us as if to bless Lady Mary’s future.

"Routa... Eat more and get big..."

"Oh... How wonderful... You've grown bigger even than Christina..."

That night, sandwiched between two noble daughters, I lie on my side in bed.

They must be having the same dream, because they're saying some pretty scary things in their sleep. I'd really prefer *not* to get any bigger than this, thank you. Actually, if I removed the shape-shifting spell, my head would reach the second story, at the very least... I'll have to make sure I never turn it off.

Slowly, I wriggle out of the best friends' embraces. They end up moving together to embrace each other now that I'm not there. It's a heartwarming sight.

"Arwf. (*Oops, can't get distracted.*)"

This isn't the time to bask in the peacefulness of the *yuri*-tastic scene. It's been half a day since the Hero and Zenobia went into the forest. Nahura would contact me if anything had happened; if she hasn't gotten in touch yet, I should be able to assume the evacuation is going without an issue.

I quietly leave the room, and right after I leap over the wall, Nahura falls down from above.

"Arwf. (*Oh, you're here. How is everything going?*)"

"Mrrrow! (*Thanks to all the Fen Wolves, it's going great!*)"

Great, perfect! There might not be much for me to help with, but I can at least go visit the soldiers at the front. I swipe some preserved food from the kitchen, then teleport to where Garo and the others are.



"Arrrf. (*Heya, Garo. Good job out here.*)"

“Grwl! (Yes, my king! The evacuation is proceeding apace!)”

Garo has returned to her wolf form today; she must be in serious mode. The Fen Wolves seem to be coordinating, lining up, then chasing out the monsters as a single wave. Still, with a forest this expansive, there are sure to be stragglers, so a second wave follows the first, thoroughly dealing with individual cases.

I should have expected as much from the Fen Wolves. As always, they show no mercy.

“Arwf, arwf. (Oh, I brought a gift. Feel free to eat it on your break.)”

“Grwl. (Thank you, my king. I shall give it as a reward to those coming off shift first.)”

I accompany Garo as we walk, checking on the state of the evacuation. It looks like the Hero and Zenobia are still pretty far south of here. The Fen Wolves are having the monsters flee to the east and west to put more distance between them and the Hero.

“Arwf, arwf. (I’m surprised nobody is complaining about the sudden evacuation.)” Is the Hero really that fearsome a being?

“Grwl, grwl. (No, there were quite a few who were reluctant at first.)”

“Arwf? (Oh, really?)” How is the evacuation going this smoothly, then?

“Grwl! (It’s simple, sir. When we told them that this was a direct order from the Fen Wolf King Routa, even the most rebellious monsters began to tremble and run away!)”

“Arwrw?! (Wha?! Wait, Garo!)” Oh my God, what have you been doing?!

“Grwl, grwl. (We told them that should they disobey the king’s orders, a flash of white light would utterly destroy all of their nests. To describe their fear upon hearing that... Heh. Well, I confirmed once more that anyone would prostrate themselves before the king’s prestige.)”

Don’t bother confirming! While I’m not looking, my name is being used as a synonym for absolute terror.

During our walk, we appear to come to the very front line of the evacuation. I

can spot monsters here and there.

“Squawk, squawk! (I-it’s the king! The Fen Wolf King!)”

As soon as they meet my eyes, they give frightened jumps.

“Squawk, squawk! (R-run for it! If we disobey him, he’ll murder our entire clan!)”

Yelling at the top of their lungs, the monsters scatter like baby spiders from the nest.

“Arwf...? (Wh-what...?)”

It seems like I’m feared much more than the Demon Lord right now.

“A-arwf... (E-excuse me...)”

“Squawk! (Ahhhh! Help meeeee!)”

“A-arwf... (Hey, everyone...)”

“Squaw-squawk! (Get out of here! He’ll kill us!)”

“A-arwf... (J-just listen to me...)”

“Squawk, squawk, squawk!! (Nooooooooooooooooo!!)”

Sniffle. No sooner do they see my face than they run for their lives. How scared of me *are* they?

“Grwl, grwl. (Very, of course. You do lead the Fen Wolves, after all. And not only have you taken the dragon princess as your wife by force, you’ve also defeated ancient generals of the Demon Lord’s army one after another. Where else would you find such accounts of heroism? There isn’t a soul in these forests who does not know of their lord, Routa.)”

The misunderstandings... They’re everywhere...

“Squee, squee... (He... He took me as his wife b-by force...? How thrilling...)”

I didn’t do that, did I?! You’re the one who moved in without permission! You’ve been asleep until just a few minutes ago; you sure picked a good time to wake up!

“Grwl, grwl. (Now that you’ve graced us with your presence, the evacuation

has sped up even more. I believe our mission should be easy to accomplish now.)”

“Arww... (Yeah, yeah. Just use me however you want, why don’t you...)”

I give up. What will be, will be. I don’t care.

After that, the farther north we go, the better the evacuation is underway. Just like the Red Sea parting, the monsters split east and west in their flights.

“““Squawk, squawk, squawk!! (Run for your liiiives!! The Fen Wolf King is here!!)”””

“Arwoooo!! (The operation is going fine, but I sort of don’t like it!!)”



As Routa and the others were having the monsters evacuate in the north, the Hero and Zenobia were progressing with their investigation in the southern forest. The deep woods were dark, and it was proving difficult to go further with only the dim light of their lantern.

“Alstera, let’s set up camp here for today.”

“Should we? I could keep going.”

“I’m tired.” Zenobia put down the metal box she was carrying as if to emphasize her point. “Let’s start the investigation again tomorrow morning. No need to rush, is there?”

“Hmm. Well, I suppose this is fine. You haven’t been purposely making us walk slower, have you?”

“...Don’t confuse me with an active adventurer like you. If you have time to talk, you have time to prepare the campfire.”

“Fine.”

The Hero put her own things down and gathered some dead branches. After stacking them in an easily burnable fashion, she held out her hand.

“That which I seek is red. Become powder and burst.”

After a short incantation, the slightly moist branches easily burst into flame.

“A handy thing, that. Like always. Don’t need flint or anything.”

“It’s actually pretty hard to control the power, you know,” laughed Alstera. “I *am* still the Hero. I can use both weapons and magic. Heroes can do it all themselves. Even after you all left me, I’ve been just fine.”

“...Alstera...”

The two of them took a seat, the campfire between them. Their food was simple provisions, but roasting them over the flame made them somewhat more edible. Zenobia had brought some preserved meat that the cook, James, had made, along with some bread and cheese. Calling it “somewhat edible” would have been sinful, considering how good it was.

The Hero, meanwhile, took out some portable provisions, infamous even in the guild for how bad they were. You could tell immediately from the coloration after the wrapping was removed that they were literal nutrition supplements, nothing more, developed by the Morgan Company. As long as you had them, you wouldn’t need anything else. That was the tagline, at least, when they had first been sold in stores. The Adventurers Guild ended up buying the entire supply.

They were cheap, kept well, and needed no preparation. There were benefits aplenty, but the adventurers who ate them held the supplements in the lowest possible regard. Despite their perfect nutritional value, they tasted so bad that one had to wonder if they were even human food. According to the adventurers, the stuff was basically clay, cooked with sludge and old-man toenails, hardened, and polished with a rotten rag. Truth be told, they would’ve preferred to eat literal clay. Yet as negative as their opinions were, the Hero ate the provisions without batting an eyelid.

“...I’m surprised you can eat that. I stomached it, somehow, while I was still active, but I don’t even want to *smell* it anymore.”

“Really? I figure it doesn’t matter what you eat as long as it has the nutrients you need.”

The Hero chewed without hesitation, as though she couldn’t taste the provisions at all, and swallowed them.

Zenobia sighed at her indifference. "...Give me half."

"Huh?"

"We used to trade the food we brought all the time, remember? I'll give you half of mine, too," said Zenobia gruffly, putting some of the cooked, softened meat and melted cheese between slices of bread and holding it out for the Hero. "Here."

"Um, thanks." The Hero took the impromptu sandwich and glanced at Zenobia.

Zenobia was making a terrible face, about to chomp down on the portable rations. Blanching, she managed to wash them down with some grape wine.

"Haah... haah... Still tastes awful. Did the guy who made this even try tasting it?"

"Ha-ha. You don't need to force yourself."

"Shut up. You eat, too."

Prompted by Zenobia, the Hero stuffed her sandwich into her mouth. The melted cheese and the meat's fat had seeped into the stiff-baked bread, coming together to form a taste better than anything you would expect from preserved food.

Zenobia nodded, putting a piece of smoked meat in her mouth to cleanse her palate, thinking, *Sir James has done it again.*

But as the Hero ate her sandwich, her expression made no change from when she'd been eating the portable provisions before. She simply swallowed the food she'd been given without emotion.

"It's good, right?" asked Zenobia. "Our chef goes the extra mile with every single thing he makes."

"...Hmm. I can't really tell," answered the Hero, seemingly unable to tell delicious from disgusting.

Zenobia frowned. "What do you mean, you can't really tell?"

"Ummm... To tell you the truth, I can't remember the last time I tasted

anything at all,” admitted the Hero blankly.

“Wha...! You...!” Zenobia stood up.

“Yeah. It’s not like I’m sick or anything, though, so don’t worry. My body is in tip-top shape, in fact,” assured the Hero with a laugh. The pain was plain on Zenobia’s face, and she had to look away. “Anyway,” continued Alstera, surveying their surroundings, “we made it out into the forest, but there’s nothing here.”

There was no sign of any monsters, or even any animals. It was like every living creature in the forest had simply vanished.

“...Isn’t that a good thing? It would mean the last investigation had the right of it.”

“No, I mean, according to what I heard from the adventurers who came here, this forest can’t *possibly* be this safe.” The Hero shrugged. “They said they were always surrounded by piercing stares, from the moment they set foot in the forest to when they left. But now that I’m here, it’s the very image of peace. It’s so peaceful it’s eerie, at least to me. You really don’t know anything about it, Zenobia?”

“...Not really. I’ve only come here a few times myself, but I’ve never...run into any monsters.”

“Huh...” The Hero narrowed her eyes and watched Zenobia.

Zenobia didn’t bother meeting her stare; instead, she downed the rest of her grape wine. “Done chattering? I’m going to sleep first. We’ll switch off in three hours.”

She took out a blanket from her bag, then curled up, thus cutting off the conversation.

“Sheesh, I got it. Good night, Zenobia.”

“Night. You’re on watch.”

The Hero leaned against a tree, the holy sword in her arms.

As she watched the campfire, her eyes were dark, indistinct, as if they were watching nothing at all.



The campfire is burning in the distance. I watch over it from a far-off crag. Even this far away, in complete darkness, my Fenrir eyes can see all.

“Arwww. (Hmm. They seem weirdly friendly.)”

I figured they would be more at odds, but they seem like a decent duo. The Hero is being cooperative, too, though maybe it's because they haven't encountered any monsters yet.

“Arwf, arwf. (Looks like we'll get them to go home with no issues.)”

Well, that's a relief. The evacuation is going smoothly, so it looks like I can head home and get some shut-eye.

“Squee. (Something is wrong, beloved.)”

Hm? What is it? Are they not just gonna sleep until morning?

At Len's urging, I peel my gaze away from the distant campfire. If I strain like I'm gonna pop my eyeballs out, I can see really well from a great distance.

With my enhanced vision, I can see the Hero standing up. He quietly walks over to Zenobia, then unsheathes his weapon. Zenobia, sleeping with her back to him, doesn't notice. And then the Hero holds his sword high.

Hey, whoa, wait a second! He's clearly trying to attack her in her sleep! Why would he want to attack Zenobia? He seemed so friendly until just a moment ago!

But that's not important right now—

“Arwoooooo! (Violence is never the answer!)”

I give a howl in spite of myself. Off in the distance, the Hero snaps to. His eyes meet mine as I look down from the cliff, and the light returns to his vacant eyes. Then, appearing surprised that he drew his blade, he hastily returns it to its former location.

“Arwf...? (Huh...? What's that about? Does he have a sleepwalking problem or something?)”

Was he half-asleep and mistook Zenobia for a monster? Either way, it was too

dangerous to ignore. After this, I'll ask Garo to have one of the Fen Wolves watch him. At this distance, they could run away even if they got spotted.

"Grwl! (Right away, sir!)"

Hwah?! How long have *you* been behind me? Also, I didn't say anything, did I?

"Grwl, grwl. (Vassals of our king must be so swift that by the time we receive an order, it is already being carried out. A teaching of my predecessor.)"

"A-arwf. (Oh, I, uh, I see. Ever thoughtful and considerate, huh? Very well. I leave this in your capable hands.)"

Garo's education on faith in her king must have started before I arrived.

"Grwl! (Yes, my king! Watch, I will go at once, and should that accursed Hero make any strange moves, I will kill him immediately!)"

"Woof, woof! (That's not what I said! You're not being thoughtful after all!)"

She's not empathizing with my thoughts. She's interpreting them extremely liberally.

As always, none of the Fen Wolves know how to take a hint.



"Routa, get up pleeease!"

"Oh, what a sleepyhead you are."

Urgh. Morning already?

The young lady is desperately trying to wake me up as Drills draws the curtains.

The morning sun that filters through the window is too bright for me to keep my eyes open.

"Mrrn. (Which is why I'm going back to sleep now.)"

"You can't! We're going to the lake this morning! We're leaving right after we eat breakfast!"

The lake, huh? If we were going anywhere to play, it would be there. It's a nice place, well shaded and great for relaxing. The fish taste great, too. Hecate

fixed the hole in the geography, so there shouldn't be any problem if we go play there.

“Lady Mary, it's time to wake up— Oh, you're already awake?!”

Toa arrives, wheeling in a cart with morning tea on it. You can pinpoint the moment of her surprise by the way her pigtails start bouncing.

“Good morning, Toa!”

“Um, yes! Good morning, young ladies. Would you care for some tea?”

“Gladly. Mary, you should try and calm down a little. We have plenty of time; there's no need to rush.”

“Mgh...”

With Lady Mary raring to go and play right this instant, Drills elegantly puts a cup of black tea to her lips.

Well, she's drowning in study materials most of the time, and this is basically a late summer vacation for her. I can't blame her for looking forward to it. Seeing them like this makes me start to wonder which one of them is the *real* aristocrat.

“After tea, let's have some breakfast. Last night's dinner was superb, so I expect the same from our morning meal.”

“Heh-heh. Mr. James is really, really good at baking bread! Just you wait!”

Yeah, the old man's bread sure is something, isn't it? The spongy nut bread from the elf village is great, too, but the old man's bread—fluffy, and using the finest flour—is just incredible.

Oops, I started drooling. Anyway, let's get out of bed first.

Toa, tea for me, too, please!



“This... This croissant... How many layers could it possibly have?!”

I hear Drills cry out in shock through the window.

I heard the old man say it himself earlier—over a *hundred*. With croissants,

you alternate folding in the butter and the dough to create the layers, and apparently, the more of those thin layers you have, the crispier the texture becomes. In exchange, with lots of layers they're significantly hard to make, it seems.

One look at the perfectly fluffy dough baked to a golden brown is enough to tell me how skilled the old man is. There are so many layers in this croissant—but amazingly enough, you can feel every single one individually.

Soaking in the morning sun's rays, I decide to have a bite. I chomp into the bread, feeling my teeth breaking through the thin dough layers, one after another.

Then, a moment later, a thick, buttery scent wafts into my nose!

"Arwf, arwf...! (It's so crispy and fluffy...!)"

If the old man became a professional baker, he'd make it; no problem. If I'd known a baker as good in my previous life, I probably would have visited their shop enough to go bankrupt.

And... And...! That's not all there is to my croissant.

"Arrrwf! (It's stuffed with a sinful amount of chocolate!)"

A chocolate croissant—truly the food of the devil. The chocolate protruding from the dough has been baked to a crisp, and that's tasty in itself, but the real treat is the stuff trapped inside.

The instant I bite down and break through the crust, goopy chocolate floods my mouth.

"Arwf, arrrwf! (So crispy and gooey and fluffy! Amazing!!)"

"Squee-squeak. (I never partook of sweet foods before coming here, but they are certainly good.)"

"Mew! (This is really good! I thought I'd gotten bored of Lady Hecate's jam, but if I ate it with this, I'd never want to stop!)"

And today, like every other day, Len and Nahura have come to help themselves to my breakfast.

“Grmp, grmp! (*Nooo! I won’t lose! This entire croissant belongs to meeeeeee!! Oh, can you pass the jam?*)”

The facade of a peaceful breakfast quickly crumbles away to reveal the usual battlefield, transforming into an outright war, where we wash blood with blood...or not.



After filling our stomachs, we set off for the lake.

“Routa, since Zenobia is away, it is up to you to protect them. Do a good job, understand?”

“Arwf, arwf! (*Leave it to me, Papa!*)”

There isn’t a single monster around at the moment, so they don’t even need a bodyguard to begin with. They’re making me carry the sandwiches, too. I can’t wait for lunch.

“Why am I here...?” mutters Mircalla to herself. She’s manning the reins with Toa.

“Arwf, arwf. (*You’re looking after the young lady instead of doing chores. You’ve been promoted! Isn’t that great, Mircalla?*)”

I poke my head out the passenger window and compliment her. She turns away and ignores me.

Huh? Did that make her mad?

Actually, looking more closely, I see that her ears—what I can see of them through her hair, at least—are red.

“I am *not* under the assumption that my hard work has been acknowledged or anything like that. I-I’m not happy about it at all!”

Whoa. She’s a real by-the-book *tsundere*. But that suits me just fine. I wanna lick those bright-red ears of hers.

“Eliza, let’s play in the water when we get to the lake!”

“That sounds fine, but I brought some things to play with, too.”

My lady is practically glued to Drills as they talk about what games they’re

going to play at the lake. Come to think of it, something was loaded in the luggage compartment of the wagon, wasn't there? Drills brought several changes of clothes and such off the airship, so it must be something of hers.

"Oh, right! But what did you bring? I'm curious!"

"Oh-ho-ho! You'll just have to wait until we arrive to find out."

Elusive and Grace, who are pulling the wagon, walk with such confident steps that you'd never guess they were old-timers. We arrive at the crystal clear lake before we know it.

"Mgh, it's cold!"

Lady Mary, having taken her shoes off, soaks her toes in the water.

"Arwf. (*We're past the middle of summer, I guess.*)"

We have sunlight, but the water temperature is fairly low. It's pretty good for soaking your feet in anyway. If they try to play games in the water, they'll probably catch colds.

"Mary, I'm all set!"

Drills is calling to us from the suspension bridge built on the lake. She did mention she'd brought something along. I wonder what she had to get ready for?

I look and see not one but two boards, covered in white cloth, standing on simple pedestals.

"Arwf... (*If my suspicions are correct...*)"

They must be canvases. Drills is sitting in a simple chair, waving to us with a thin piece of charcoal in her hand.

"Drawing?"

"...When you say it like that, it sounds infantile. But this is a *real* art set. It even includes quick-drying paints developed by the Morgan Company."

"Ohhh!"

Seems kinda intellectual. Drills's family must be operating on a grand scale, too. I thought all they made was terrible pet food.

“I decided to set up the canvases where we’d have a good view, but if you want to draw something other than the scenery, we can move them.”

“What should I do? What should I draw? Mgh... I don’t know!”

My lady panics when she sees that Drillizabeth has gotten a head start.

And then she sees me, and her eyes light up.

“I know! I want to draw Routa and everyone else!”

Huh? Everyone...? So not just me, then?

“Squeak. *(Heh-heh. I understand well... She wants to make a portrait of me.)*”

If you and I stood next to each other for a portrait, you’d be the size of an acorn.

“Toa, Mircalla, come here, please!”

“R-right away!”

“What? Even me?!”

Lady Mary grabs the hands of the two who were waiting behind us and has us sit on the bridge. For a while, she fusses over our poses, never quite satisfied with one thing or the other, and adjusts the position of the canvas. Until finally...

“Wh-why do I have to sit next to the King of the Fen Wolves...?”

“Ah-ha-ha...”

“Arwf, arwf! *(All right! This has some perks!)*”

I sit on the bridge with Mircalla and Toa both leaning up against me. Meanwhile, Len lies on her back with legs outstretched on the tip of my nose. Behind us all, Drills, in the middle of her own charcoal sketch, fits into the picture as well.

“All right! I’ll do my best to draw you! Just sit still for a little!”

“Arwf! *(Okay!)*” I reply to the young lady energetically.

She shuts one eye as she holds the charcoal pencil up, judging the ratios. It makes her really look like an artist.

“Oh, no, what should I do? I’m not good enough to be in my lady’s artwork...”

“Hmph. You should face this proudly and openly. I’m expecting a beautiful drawing of me, Lady Mary.”

Mircalla gets the nervous Toa’s shoulder in closer.

“Leave it to me. I’ll make a wonderful picture of you all!”

She’s brimming with confidence. She *has* drawn before, right? Her hand looks fluid and steady as it races along the canvas with the charcoal pencil, but still...

“...Hey, King. What’s that fake hero up to anyway?” whispers Mircalla, her gaze still on Lady Mary.

“Arwf, arwf. *(Happily investigating an empty forest. It’s just that something about the Hero seems off.)*”

When I recall the previous night, I remember how he suddenly unsheathed his sword at their camp. Was he even really conscious at the time? It was like he was sleepwalking. Sure, his body was moving, but he didn’t seem to be all there.



“Hmm... It must be that sword after all...”

“Arwf? (*What? Do you know something?*)”

Mircalla seems to have an idea of what’s happening. She muttered something when the Hero first arrived, too. If she has any hints, I’d really like to have them right now.

“King, how much do you know about the Demon Lord’s generals?”

How much? All I know is whatever comes up in the young lady’s books.

“Ugh, I guess it can’t be helped. I’m bored just sitting here anyway, so to pass the time, I’ll give you a quick lesson.”

Much appreciated. “Arwf, arwf. (*Are you sure? Toa is right next to you.*)” I’m not the only one who would be in trouble if my identity was revealed. Hecate might punish you or something.

“It’s fine. She’s so nervous she can’t even hear what anyone is saying.”

Oh—she’s right. Toa has a very strained smile on her face as she responds to my lady’s remarks.

“You’re good, Toa! Very cute!”

“I-I-I-I-I’m honored!”

It’s true. At the moment, she can’t pay attention to other people talking, even if they’re right next to her. Then again, even if she did notice, all that would happen is she’d decide Mircalla was a crazy person whispering to a dog. Doesn’t look like this will negatively affect *me* at all, so go for it.

“I’ll give you a simple overview first, then.”

Without realizing the collateral damage she’s taking by talking to a dog, Mircalla lists off the names of the Demon Lord’s generals, including herself. There are five in total.

The necromancer Lich, who can produce infinite armies.

The vampire princess Carmilla, feared as the primogenitor of immortals.

The war demon and king of beasts Behemoth, who rules beastkind from the

front lines.

The commander Gigas, chief among giants and responsible for the destruction of many castles.

The demon ambassador Belgor, who commands beings from the underworld to lead humans astray.

These monsters, known as the Five Demon Generals, are like kings in charge of their own races. Under their leader, the Demon Lord, they waged a terrible war against humanity one thousand years ago.

Hey, I personally know two of the people in that story.

First, there's Mircalla, the blond loli maid, who is actually an adorable *tsundere*.

Second, there's the old butler, Richmond, who is probably diligently doing his work at the mansion right now.

"Arwf, arwf. (After having encounters with a couple of them, I can't say I'm too scared of the others. How strange.)"

"Be quiet. We can't help that our powers have been stolen."

"Arwf... (Uh, I feel like you weren't all that tough even before that...)"

"Grrr! You're just on a completely different level...! What the heck *are* you anyway?!"

"Arwf, arwf? (A dog? You got a problem?)"

"No mere dog is as strong as you! ...Anyway, there's three more of us, so if you let your guard down, you'll die."

Why is she automatically assuming I'll be the one fighting? I don't get it. Personally, I'd like the Hero to take care of the other three. According to Mircalla, though, the one who came to investigate is a fake.

"Arwf, arwf? (You're saying our hottie Hero isn't a blood relation to the one a thousand years ago?)"

"No ties or connections whatsoever. This 'Hero' is a total stranger as far as I know. Besides, there's a descendant of the Hero close at ha—Wait, I wasn't

supposed to say that.”

Huh? What do you mean? Now I’m curious! Is the real Hero nearby?

Who the heck are you, Hero? If you’re around here, you’re *really* slacking off on the job. Stop making me do all the fighting and take out the Demon Lord’s army already.

Still, Zenobia is about the only one “close at hand” who can even fight. Seriously, who could it be? I have absolutely no clue.

“I was threatened I’d be turned into a toad if I told you, so I’m *never* telling you.”

Whoa. If someone said something that terrifying to Mircalla and Richmond to keep their mouths shut, it must have been Hecate.

Hecate seems to be hiding quite a few things, but to be honest, I don’t care to know any of it. I’m striving to be a pet dog, and knowing crucial information is bound to get me wrapped up in even more trouble. I already feel worn out.

“Squeak. *(I have a feeling it’s too late for that.)*”

“Arwf, arwf! *(Shut up, shut up!)*”

The Hero and the Demon Lord don’t matter to me. Please, just give me a peaceful pet life. I don’t need anything else.

“Anyway, back on topic. The aura emitted by the blade the false Hero is holding feels strikingly similar to that of one of my acquaintances.”

“Arwf?! *(Huh?! Don’t tell me it’s related to the Demon Lord’s army again!)*”

What’s going on? Why are all the people related to that army showing up only around here?

“If the false Hero seems off, it’s because of that sword. In what remains of the Demon Lord’s forces, there is one who excels at invading the minds of men: Belgor the devil.”

According to Mircalla, without something to possess, devils can’t maintain their presence in the physical world.

“The Hero defeated Belgor, as he did the rest of us, and presumably sealed

him away. I wonder if he's revived?"

"Arwf... *(Come on... Give me a break...)*"

The Hero by himself was already a pain in the butt. If some Demon Lord's general is possessing him, it's just making things worse. This might get pretty bad.

"Well, you just have to take that sword. If you do that, the false Hero should go back to normal."

If what Mircalla says is true, the reason the Hero goes around killing monsters all the time, and the reason he tried to kill Zenobia, is that sword.

Maybe I should take action as soon as possible—like *tonight*. I'll secretly slip this information to Zenobia. If we cooperate, there's no reason we wouldn't be able to steal that blade.

"Squee-squeak. *(I must ask, princess of vampires. For what reason would you tell this to my beloved? I highly doubt your nature has taken a turn for the better.)*"

"Arwf, arwf. *(Yeah, I wanted to ask that, too. Why are you being so cooperative?)*"

Hecate might have bound her, but it didn't seem like she'd given up on getting her power back.

"...I don't know myself," murmurs Mircalla, looking at the lake. "Maybe, when I lost to you, my willpower left me along with my mana. Also, maybe it's because I now know of too many things that taste better than blood. Especially that chef's tomato juice. I feel like if I had that, I could go my whole life without ever drinking blood!"

Mircalla puts a hand to her excited, reddened cheek and slurps in her drool.

Are you really okay with that? Saying you'll only drink tomato juice from now on is almost like losing your identity as a vampire. Or maybe I should be praising the old man's skill for taking even a *vampire* captive.

Still, I'm just as enthralled by his cooking as she is. I get where she's coming from. If the Demon Lord and his generals all get revived, his stock of ingredients

might run dry, and then I wouldn't be able to enjoy his food.

I must stop that from happening at all costs. I must fight to stop it. Those who don't fight don't eat. What an awful world this is. I gaze up at the sky and lament the world's unfairness.

"Routa, please don't move too much!"

"Arwf! (*Sorry!*)"

After a sandwich break, the young ladies continue working on their art.

"I did it! I finished my picture!"

"Now we must dry them until evening, and then we can unveil them."

"Heh-heh. Don't look at it until then, okay?"

"I'll be looking forward to it."

They load the canvases onto the wagon and clean up, and then we all head back to the mansion.

Then, after dinner, they invite everyone for an unveiling of their pictures.

"I suppose I'll go first."

Two curtains hang over two canvases. The one on the right seems to be by Drills.

She flicks the cloth away, revealing a picture of a beautiful lake painted mainly in blue and green.

"Ohhh, how stupendous..."

"It's as though I'm actually standing before a lake."

Papa and Miranda offer their admiration upon seeing the picture.

"Arwf, arwf. (*Yeah, that's actually good.*)"

Even I, someone who doesn't know much about art, can tell that this picture was made with a high level of skill. It even depicts the reflection of light on the lake and the intricate details of the scenery. Just looking at it makes me remember playing at that lake in vivid detail.

"Eliza, that's amazing!"

“Yes, it is, is it not? The art teacher has praised my artwork as well.”

Drills lets out an “Oh-ho-ho” laugh while sticking her nose high in the air.

“It’s your turn next, Mary.”

“Heh-heh. I did my very best, too. Feast your eyes on this!” says Lady Mary, pulling the curtain from her canvas.

I’m the first one to make a noise after seeing her art.

“Arwf?! (*Is that a Picasso?!*)”

The young lady was supposed to be drawing us, lined up with the lake behind us.

But I don’t see any of us in this picture anywhere. That monster with four eyes...is that me and Len? Wait, then the yellow-and-black fuzzy things below us are Toa and Mircalla?

Oh... Oh, yikes. This is *way* too avant-garde.

“I... I think it’s quite unique.”

“Y-yes. It does certainly have your character in it...?”

Miranda struggles to find words, and Papa gives a dubious compliment.

They say art reflects the inner heart and soul of its creator. The picture forces me to wonder what this world looks like through my lady’s eyes. Am I the crazy one, or is she? Or is it the world that’s crazy? In lieu of a real critique, all I can do tremble in fright.

“This is b...b...!”

Drills takes a step closer. This is just a guess, but the thing in the upper right of this picture must be her. At least, that’s what I *assume* that goblin-looking thing is, separated into seventeen pieces, flattened out, and then connected again.

But showing that to someone is sure to completely ruin a friendship! Oh no! Should I “accidentally” destroy the picture while trying to make it seem like I’m playing? That sounds preferable to having their friendship destroyed... I’m prepared to sacrifice my own stomach and gobble it up if I really have to. This is *me* we’re talking about. In my past life, before payday, I’d soak tissue paper in

soy sauce and eat it. Eating a canvas is nothing!

“B...b...!”

Drills walks by me as I resolve myself and draws closer to the picture.

“B...b...!”

At a loss for words, she grips the canvas in her hands. Is she going to destroy the abomination herself?

She holds it high overhead, and then—

“Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeautiful!!”

—praises it to the heavens.

“A-arwf? (*H-huh?*)”

“I’ve never seen such novel work of art before! It completely ignores perspective and shading, and yet it has so much depth of field! How is it *doing* that?! It seems to follow rules, but it doesn’t at all. It’s unstable, yet stable at the same time... This is nothing short of a masterpiece!”

Drills, in an excited state, extols the beauty of the image.

We, who honestly don’t know how good it is, can’t do much except tilt our heads in confusion. Is there something in it that only an accomplished artist would understand?

“Mary, would you be willing to let me have this?! The world must know!!”

“It’s okay. I’ll trade, Eliza!”

“I feel a little embarrassed to give mine to you after seeing this work of art, but this is yet another proof of our friendship. Let us trade!”

Personally, I think Drills’s picture is better any way you slice it. Can you really call this a fair trade?

Well, they both seem happy about it, so I guess it’s fine. I join in as they whirl around in their little dance. The rest of the mansion-dwellers watch over us and the heartwarming scene.

...Somewhere down the line, Lady Mary’s picture will be seen by a famous

painter and whip up a tempest in the art world, but that's a story for another day.

Well, then. Tonight I need to go and settle the score. The plan was originally to have the Hero return home without incident, but if there's a possibility that the holy sword is controlling him, we can't ignore it. To do so would be to put Zenobia in danger.

"Grwl! (My king!)"

As soon as I arrive near the camp with spatial magic, Garo is there to welcome me. I was having her keep watch on the Hero while I was gone, but she seems somewhat panicked.

"Woof, woof? (What's the matter?)"

"Grwl. (I apologize. Things have taken a turn for the worse.)"

The monster evacuation is finished, and as far as I can tell, there haven't been any issues in the forest. What could have happened?

"Grwl... (Well...)"

Garo and the others have, at my request, been surreptitiously observing the Hero. In order to stay out of range of the SS-Rank adventurers' senses, they've been doing so from a great distance...but that seems to have backfired.

"Grwl, grwl. (A labyrinth has appeared in the direction they are heading, my king.)"

A labyrinth: a naturally occurring dungeon, created when a large quantity of mana coalesces at a single location. They spread their roots over the land, absorb mana, birth and raise monsters within themselves, and gain sustenance from the intruders that venture inside and perish. They also produce aromas at their entrances, similar to pheromones, that attract monsters. These beasts are often lured inside, allowing the labyrinth to control their minds.

"Arwf, arwf... (I guess it's too late for me to go over there and destroy it"

myself...)”

“Grwl... (Yes, my king. I am solely to blame for our lateness in discovering it. Please do with me as you wish...)”

I could never criticize you or the others. Normally, the Fen Wolves report to me the moment they find a labyrinth, and I just shoot a beam at it to obliterate it—a simple job, all things considered. This time, though, the entire Fen Wolf species has been busy with the evacuation, which explains why the forest patrols have been neglected.

What would the Hero and Zenobia do if they found the labyrinth? Turn back and report it to the guild? Probably not, considering how cavalier the Hero is when it comes to monsters. He’d go straight in to clear it. If the two of them enter, I won’t be able to destroy it from outside anymore.

“Arwf, arwf. (No need to apologize. You’ve actually done very good work here. Thanks for that—not only you, but the rest of the Fen Wolves, too.)”

If a labyrinth is nearby, it must be difficult for the Fen Wolves to remain here. It doesn’t mean anything to me, but I hear the scent that labyrinths exude is difficult for even the Fen Wolves to resist. They’ve been working for days now on evacuation and observation, so they’re probably all exhausted. They’ve done enough work.

“Woof, woof. (Shiro and Kuro might be lonely, minding the place on their own. Go back and be with them.)”

“Grwl...?! (Not only would you forgive our transgression, you would grant such words of kindness to me...?!)”

“““Grwl! Grwl! Grwl! (Our king! Our king! Our deeply magnanimous king!)”””

“Arwf! (Shh! Quiet! They’ll spot us!)”

“““Grwl...! Grwl...! Grwl...! (Our king...! Our king...! Our deeply magnanimous king...!)”””

I didn’t mean say it softer. It looks like they didn’t consider the option of *not* chanting. After showering me with their cheers, the Fen Wolves scatter deeper into the forest.



“Arwf, arwf. (I guess we should hurry and catch up to them for now. According to Garo and the others, they’re almost at the labyrinth.)”

“Mew? (I should have put an anchor on the Hero, huh?)”

“Squeak, squeak. (There is no use regretting it now. Since our goal is to steal the sword without being spotted, we wouldn’t have been able to teleport too closely to them anyway.)”

With Len and Nahura on my back, I run, following the labyrinth’s distant scent.

“Woof, woof? (By the way, is the labyrinth’s scent not bothering either of you?)”

“Squeak, squeak. (Just who do you think I am? If it thinks to control me with such a mild aroma, it is one thousand years too late.)”

Should have expected as much from the thousand-year-old kid-sized-cradle-robbing-furry-muscle-for-brains-spinster-dragon. So reliable.

“Mew, meow... (I’m a homunculus to begin with, so, y’know, I’m not actually a monster at all...)”

Nahura, I’ve seen your head pop off to reveal tentacles wriggling around inside your body. That was pretty monstrous, if you ask me...

“Arwf, arwf. (In that case, we should be fine.)”

As I continue along the forested path, muting my footsteps as much as possible, I begin to sense Zenobia’s and the Hero’s presences mixed in with the labyrinth’s scent.

“Arf. (Looks like we caught up.)”

The two of them, however, have already arrived at the entrance.

“It’s enormous...!”

*“Yeah. Even I’ve never seen a labyrinth *this* big.”*

Wait, really? They’ve been popping up all over the place recently, and this is just another of the kind I destroy regularly. From their point of view, it must be

a pretty terrific labyrinth, though I've never gone inside to explore one, so I don't know what kind of monsters are inside. It's easy enough just to nuke the core with my beam; maybe it's more of a chore than I thought to actually clear one.

Labyrinths that show up on the ground look like anthills at a glance—just raised craggy areas. At first glance, they appear to be caves that don't go very far. Get down inside one, however, and you'll find a labyrinth sprawling like tree roots underneath.

"It's dangerous to go in without preparation. I'd like to go back and report this to the guild first, but..."

"We don't have that luxury, do we? Monsters that spill out of labyrinths are more dangerous than the ones in the wild. You know just as well as anyone that they'll attack any human on sight, don't you? And if the labyrinth has grown this much, I think it's only a matter of time before the monsters flood to the outside."

"Ugh. And if that happens, the first to be attacked will be those at the mansion..."

Zenobia clenches her teeth in frustration, setting down her metal case, opening it, and producing the large black blade from way back when. The separate handle and blade give off sparks as they combine, forming a huge sword that's longer than she is tall.

"Finally up for using it, I see! I'm glad, Zenobia!"

"It's to protect the mansion. I don't intend to go back to being an adventurer."

"That's fine. I still get to fight alongside you... And with the labyrinth being this large, if she is cut down and her power stolen, my seal will be completely..."

"...Alstera?"

"Hm? What's up, Zenobia?"

When Zenobia speaks up, the Hero, who was muttering, eyes wavering and unfocused, returns a confused look.

“Nothing...”

“Anyway, let’s get moving! We can kill as many monsters inside the labyrinth as we want and no one will complain, right?”

“Uh, right.”

After the Hero takes out the holy sword and starts running, Zenobia follows, plunging into the labyrinth herself.

“Arwf... *(Hmm... Yeah, definitely being controlled.)*”

Given what Mircalla told me, there’s little doubt the Demon Lord’s general Belgor-whomever is possessing that sword. I’ll have to wait for an opportunity during their labyrinth exploration and steal it.

“Arwf! *(All right, we’re going in after them!)*”

I’ll leave the monsters inside to you two. My beam stands out too much, and I could never possibly fight at point-blank range.

“Squeak, squeak. *(My, my. Using a great dragon like myself as an outrider... Well, it is the duty of the male to defeat the main target, I suppose.)*”

Huh? Wait, no, I was gonna leave the entire playthrough to you.

Len, nodding to herself, convinced, jumps onto my head and swings her tail. Once we descend into the labyrinth, she’ll probably change it into that steel whip of a dragon tail.

I follow behind, my entrance into the labyrinth coming last, in pursuit of Zenobia and the Hero.



After falling down several meters from the entrance, we make landfall. The interior is a fairly large space with a bunch of tunnels leading in all directions.

“Arwrw... *(Ugh, that reeks...)*”

The scent is apparently too good for monsters to resist, but for me, it’s no better than a smelly rafflesia.

“Squeak, squeak. *(I don’t think that’s the only reason for the stench.)*”

When I look more closely in the dimly lit labyrinth, I see the corpses of monsters littering the place.

“Arwf?! (Urgh?! Explicit imagery?!)”

It’s not an image—the corpses are really there, right in front of me—but it definitely doesn’t feel real. At all.

“Meow. (I heard adventurers collect materials after slaying monsters, but these ones have been neglected, huh?)”

It seems the Hero really is only after the slaughter of monsters.

“Squeak. (If we leave them be, the labyrinth will just reabsorb the corpses and use them to birth new monsters.)”

That seems like a well-designed cycle.

Labyrinths absorb the life force of monsters and adventurers, cultivating them as much as possible, and when their source of nutrition is exhausted, they naturally collapse. As they do, they apparently spew large quantities of rampaging monsters to the outside.

“Arwf. (That’s more trouble than I ever want to deal with.)”

The Fen Wolves can’t do anything to the labyrinths, either, so they’ve probably been hunting the vicious monsters that escape them. The forest cannot be peaceful without the Fen Wolves’ presence. They are such hard workers.

As the king of those hard workers, I feel guilty for being the paragon of lazy bums. Not that I have even the slightest intention of working, of course.

“Squeak. (That, in essence, is how labyrinths work.)”

“Arwf. (Huh. Len, you’re pretty smart.)”

“Squeak, squeak. (I am, aren’t I? I’m the perfect wife, with both beauty and brains.)”

I mean, I didn’t say all that.

We proceed through the labyrinth, the air thick with the stench of blood, as I listen to Len’s lecture.

“Arwf, arwf. *(We shouldn't have much trouble with directions, at least.)*”

After all, they're leaving a trail of monster corpses in their wake. This looks less like an exploration and more like they're going wherever they want, killing monsters as soon as they find them. We haven't run into a single live one this entire time. I'm grateful we won't have to do any fighting, but still, the Hero's utter lack of mercy is striking.

We keep running for a few minutes, following them. Finally, we start hearing sounds from up ahead. They're all dangerous ones, like *kzzing* and *shpsshhh*, but mixed in with them I can hear the Hero whooping and laughing.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That all you got?! I'll take you all on at once!!”

In front of the Hero stand three large men sporting giant horns. Their faces and legs resemble those of bulls, and they grip giant battle-axes in their hands.

“Squeak. *(Those are minotaurs. They're very high-level monsters...)*”

With physiques large enough to scrape their heads against the high ceiling of the labyrinth, they swing their battle-axes, attacking the Hero from three directions at once.

“Ha-ha-ha! You're so slow!”

The Hero ducks, dodging the axes, before jumping right up close to the minotaur in front of him and slashing his holy sword through its knees.

“*Bhmmooooo!!*”

I can't tell what the minotaur is saying; its reason has been stolen by the labyrinth's miasma. Even with its legs cut off, though, it hasn't lost its will to fight. It swings its battle-ax again, its eyes filled with rage.

But it can't even graze the Hero. Evading a second ax swipe, the Hero dashes up the minotaur's collapsed body, then slashes up at its jaw. Its face splits in half vertically, and then it falls over, faceup.

“Ah-ha!”

The Hero, landing a moment later, uses his falling momentum to drive his sword into the creature's head again. Brains splatter, but only after confirming

the ax has fallen from the minotaur's hand does the Hero finally decide he's finished it off.

““Bhhmmooooo!!””

Their friend has been killed, but the other minotaurs are still raring to fight, and they still challenge him. They deliver strikes vertically and horizontally, as if aiming to cut a cross through the Hero. But to the Hero, they might as well be standing still; he laughs and deals with both of them in the blink of an eye.

“A-arwrw... *(I feel like they're in a different world over there...)*”

My spirit might break if I keep witnessing this explicit content.

“This is dredging up memories from the good old days, huh, Zenobia? How nostalgic!” cries the Hero gleefully, wiping the blood spatter from his cheek.

Zenobia, her face dark, meets his gaze. Her sword is clean. Maybe the Hero has been defeating all the enemies by himself.

“Can't believe *three* minotaurs showed up, though. Normal labyrinths would have just *one* of those protecting the core. Like I thought, this is a really high-difficulty one! Still, with you and me here, we should clear it pretty easily!”

The Hero sounds really excited. Is he drunk on the bloodshed?

“...Alstera, have you forgotten what happened between us? It was...major. We can't just go back to the way we were before.”

The Hero and Zenobia tried to kill each other in the past, right? The Hero doesn't harbor any of the ill feelings Zenobia does. It's almost as though he doesn't remember the past at all.

“Hm? Major...? What was it that happened again?” The Hero tilts his head, lending credence to my theory. “You just disappeared on me one day, and I looked for you for a really long time. How come you left me behind like that, all of a sudden?”

“You...” Zenobia doesn't seem to have thought he'd have forgotten about nearly killing her, either. Speechless, she tries to say something, then just shakes her head. “...Never mind. Do you still plan on continuing all this?”

“Continuing what?”

“Monster slaying.”

As Zenobia’s voice lowers, the Hero’s eyes start to sparkle with pride, like a little kid’s. “Of course! That’s our job as adventurers, isn’t it?”

“No!” Zenobia waves a hand in disagreement. “Killing monsters isn’t the only job adventurers have. If you kill too much, you’ll ruin entire ecosystems. Part of our duty is to protect the environment, remember? Is it necessary to wipe out the monsters who aren’t even hurting anyone?”

“Yeah, it is. Monsters are evil. There’s no guarantee they won’t harm people in the future.” In contrast to his high-pitched state earlier, the Hero answers Zenobia with an impassive voice.

“...There *are* some monsters with good hearts. I’ve learned not all monsters are evil,” confesses Zenobia, holding back the heat hidden in her breast.

“Are you talking about that white monster that was at the mansion?”

Zenobia brings her face up, startled at the Hero’s pointing that out.

“That was an incredible one. I’ve never seen a monster that strong, even though it was trying to hide its true ability. And it even looked like it was hiding its full power. How amazing—if I kill that, I’ll gain even more strength... Much greater heights as the Hero...”

The Hero is acting weird again. He has a tiny smile, and it’s like his eyes aren’t looking at anything.

“Alstera—,” starts Zenobia in worry.

“Oh, that’s right,” interrupts the Hero, stopping her with a hand. “Yeah, I remember now. You said that before, too, didn’t you? And then we... Wait, what happened after that...? I... Did I do something to you...? Ahh, my head hurts so much...”

“Alstera, are you...”

“Hm? What is it, Zenobia?”

One moment he’s holding his head in pain, the next he’s suddenly back to his energetic self. Emotional instability only accounts for so much, you know. If this is that holy sword’s fault, we have to confiscate it as soon as possible.

“I’m not going to stop hunting monsters. I’m the descendant of the great Hero, after all. That’s what everyone always told me when I was growing up. I have to meet their expectations.”

“.....”

“This is the right thing to do, Zenobia. Even after you left, I’ve slain thousands of monsters. And I’ll go on to slay ten thousand more...because I’m the Hero.”

The Hero answers with a smile, divinely sparkling holy sword in hand.

Zenobia, dumbstruck, simply stands there.



“Arwf! (*Crap!*)”

He’s even more insane than I thought. It’s enough to make even an edgy middle-schooler go pale. No matter how I look at it, leaving Zenobia with him like this is too dangerous.

Still, I’ll complicate things even more if I go out now. I’ll just have to wait for an opportune moment when they’re separated. We’ll track them for a little bit longer. I don’t want them to notice us, so I don’t get too close.

As we pursue them, the sounds we hear are horrifying. It’s background music to make you go mad, playing on repeat: the Hero’s high-pitched laughter and the dying screams of monsters, alternating constantly.

Wow. What a warmonger.

Zenobia addresses the Hero again; maybe the wave of monsters has pulled back for the time being.

“Alstera, how did you get that strength...? You’re far stronger than when we were in a party together.”

“Hey, you know why. I have this holy sword. Your sword is a fine one in its own right, but the power of a Hero is prodigious, right? The more monsters the Hero kills, the sharper it gets, and the stronger I become.”

“...After we parted, how many monsters did you slay?”

“Didn’t I mention? Thousands, at least. I killed and killed and killed. Thanks to

that, there's nobody who can stand against me now.

"Not even you," he adds, heading even deeper into the labyrinth.



"Arwf... (They're gonna be here on the return trip, too...)"

Thinking about having to pass all these corpses on the way back is bumming me out.

"Squeak. (You needn't worry. Labyrinths birth monsters, but they also consume them. The dead monsters will be absorbed into the ground momentarily.)"

"Meow. (Oh, she's right, Routa. Look behind us!)"

I follow Nahura's direction and turn around just as a pig-faced monster, sliced neatly in half, melts into the ground.

"Squeak, squeak. (A labyrinth is a single creature. This cycle will continue, and it will keep on growing, until the day it collapses.)"

"Arwf. (Normally, I could just wipe it out with a single beam, no sweat, though.)"

"Squeak! (No one but you could do something so overpowered!)"

"Mew! (It really is unfair, isn't it!)"

Ha-ha-ha. This cheat doesn't make me happy in the slightest, though. I'd rather have a cheat that makes me look even cuter instead of this dumb laser.

"Arwf? (Wait, aren't we at the deepest part now?)"

We're at a dead end, but Zenobia and the Hero are nowhere to be found. We haven't spotted the labyrinth's core thingy, either. And there aren't any more monster corpses to point us in the right direction; we must have taken a wrong turn while we were blabbing.

"Arwf! (Crap! We have to get back!)"

But considering how fast those corpses disappeared earlier, we wouldn't have any signs left to go on, would we?

“Squeak? (*Can you not simply follow their scents?*)”

How am I supposed to do that in this stinky toilet place?

Just then I hear a female shriek in the distance.

“Woof?! (*Zenobia?!*)”

Now it’s an emergency. We hurry back the way we came.



The lord protecting the labyrinth’s core crumpled with an earthshaking rumble. The Hero’s holy sword had easily defeated even the mightiest monster in this labyrinth.

The whole time, Zenobia hadn’t lifted her weapon once. There had been no need.

The Hero was overwhelmingly strong.

“How was that, Zenobia? With this, I’ve taken another step closer to becoming the Hero...”

Though she was unscathed, the Hero’s gait was unsteady. The boss she had killed was a treasure trove of expensive materials, but she proceeded toward the labyrinth’s core without a second thought.

“I will...become...a true Hero...”

“Stop this already, Alstera! I know you’ve always wanted to be a Hero! But when I see you, I don’t see the Hero you aspired to be!”

Zenobia raised her voice, intending to talk some sense into the Hero, but the Hero wasn’t listening.

With her holy sword held in a reverse grip, she plunged it deep into the labyrinth’s core. The rocky eye-shaped object cracked, and its color drained.

At the same time, the holy sword began to emit a dreadful, ear-piercing noise. It ravenously absorbed the mana in the labyrinth’s core.

The Hero, gripping the blade, shook, blue veins pulsing beneath white skin.

“Gah! I knew it! That sword is the reason you’ve been acting strange! Alstera,

let go of it!”

Zenobia grappled with the Hero from behind, yanking her away from the labyrinth’s core.

“Let go of me!”

The Hero flung Zenobia away.

Her holy sword, having drunk only some of the mana, emitted an eerie glow. Its radiance was so harsh, it seemed to be making a mockery of the divine itself.

The glow appeared to be urging the Hero to let it drink more.

“Zenobiaaaa...!” Drooling, the Hero glared at Zenobia with eyes full of rage. “I won’t allow anyone to get in my way! Not even you!”

Hunched over with her arms hanging at her sides, the Hero suddenly accelerated.

“Urgh?!”

Zenobia used her large sword as a shield against the heavy attack.

“S-stop this, Alstera!”

“Aaaahhhh! Why are you getting in my way?! Why does everyone leave me?! Why?! Why?! Whyyyyyyyyyy?!”

“Alstera...!”

The Hero swung the holy sword around like a young child throwing a tearful tantrum.

But the pressure from it was completely abnormal. Zenobia’s blade, a full size larger than Alstera’s weapon, was slapped away, unable to block all the momentum.

Her feet slid backward along the ground, creating grooves in the dirt, until she was slammed into the wall.

This was power that could suppress Zenobia, a front-liner. The Hero’s strength was clearly beyond human limits.

In fact, the Hero’s arm—the one clutching the sword—continued to give off

dull noises that sounded like muscles tearing.

It was only a matter of time before her body, unable to withstand the blow, gave out and collapsed.

“Why...? Why...? I...I just wanted...to prove to everyone...that I was...”

The Hero was crying. Blue blood vessels had appeared on her face, like a spiderweb, and tears of blood trickled down her cheeks.

“...I see... So that was it.”

Zenobia hoisted herself up with the help of her hefty blade.

And then, having resolved herself, she quietly readied it in front of her.

“I’m sorry, Alstera. I shouldn’t have run away back then. I should have gone to stop you after surviving—as many times as I needed to.”

The Hero clenched her teeth at the sad look in Zenobia’s eyes.

“Don’t... Don’t... Don’t you dare pity me!!” she screamed, charging straight for her.

The horizontal sweep from her holy sword would surely cut into Zenobia and kill her.

In response, Zenobia dropped her sword into a lower position.

“Zenobiaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

“Alstera...”

They clashed for an instant.

Zenobia’s sword struck out to push the Hero’s enraged attack upward. And then, from a high position, she would deliver the final falling blow.

That had been the plan anyway.

The deciding factor was the strength of their weapons. Against the holy sword, which had drunk the souls and blood of thousands of monsters and even absorbed the mana from labyrinths, Zenobia’s magic sword was outmatched.

And through the shattered fragments of her blade, the holy sword plunged.

It sank squarely into the center of Zenobia’s chest.

“Ghah...”

Zenobia coughed up blood, then fell to the ground, holding her chest.

She collapsed facedown and then stopped moving.

“.....”

The Hero looked down at her, but there was something distant and unfocused about her gaze, before a little bit of light returned to her eyes.

“...Huh? ...What was I...?”

Unable to endure the sight in front of her, she let the sword fall from her hand.

“N-no, it can't be. Why would I do this to Zenobia...?!”

She fell to her knees, then shook Zenobia, but she wouldn't wake up. The holy sword had pierced straight through her chest.

“Ah, ahhh... Ahhhh...!” she moaned, clutching her head and curling up. “... That's right... I killed you back then, too, the same way... How could I have done this...again...?!”

Who was the one she *truly* wanted to have acknowledge her? By the time she remembered what she'd felt at the very beginning, it was all too late.

As if mocking the Hero's pain, the holy sword began to vibrate. The subtle shaking changed into a twitch, a convulsion, and then finally into a voice that was actually laughing uncontrollably.

“I say, humans are such foolish creatures! Assume the right appearance and you can fool anyone.”

“Huh...?”

Before the dazed Hero, the holy sword's white color shifted into a toxic purple. The blade cracked, then parts broke off, making it look like a dead tree. It was no longer that divine weapon, but a cursed one, its appearance ultimately ominous.

The purple steel branches swayed, murmuring, and the sword laughed.

“For one thousand years, your foolish clan believed they were the sons and

daughters of the Hero. And now you, their descendant, have offered the blood and souls of countless monsters to me, allowing my resurrection to at last be fully realized. I thank you."

The Hero didn't understand the sword's words.

"I am one of the five great generals of the Demon Lord's army, Belgor. Yes, the ambassador from the underworld himself. That cause to which you so tirelessly devoted yourself was the revival of the Demon Lord's forces all along. Some Hero you are!"

The faith of an entire clan... The effort of countless devoted lives... And Belgor's words made a mockery of it all. The Hero simply could not accept it.

"Ah, ahh, aaaahhhhhh..."

Her heart broke right in two.

The sword watched as it happened, opening its three vertical eyes, narrowing them, and wiggling its body in delight.

"Ah, how long these thousand years have been. When I was left on that battlefield, I thought I would simply rot away. I shall not soon forget the stroke of luck that led to your ancestors picking me up."

Even as it spoke, the purple sword's branches continued to expand until it had grown to the size of a large tree.

"So many months and years of brainwashing my wielders was difficult work indeed. Little by little, I convinced them that I was a holy sword, and they were the descendants of the Hero. Generations of self-proclaimed heroes, all feeding me the blood of monsters. All so that I could gain enough magic power to break my seal!"

The shaking of the branches sounded like many people laughing in unison. Scornful laughter. Insulting, contemptuous laughter. A devil laughing at the farce of rendering an entire clan's history meaningless.

"....."

"Hmm. Has your heart shattered to pieces? How dull. Your despair was delicious indeed, but I won't get to savor it if you break so quickly. No matter."

My seal is almost fully broken. I will further accelerate the process with your blood and soul."

The countless splayed branches of the sword moved to skewer the frozen Hero.

"My foolish, beloved clan... You have offered yourselves to me for a millennium. And now you, the descendant, will be my sacrifice!"

The branches bent like insect legs, surrounding the Hero.

The Hero didn't resist; she simply cried herself into a stupor, in front of Zenobia, whom she had killed with her own hands.

And then...the wall exploded.



A dense cloud of dust rises.

I manage to somehow crawl through the hole I opened.

"Arhh, arhh! (Blech! There's dirt in my mouth! I demand to know what moron decided we should dig through the wall to make a shortcut!)"

"Squeak. (It was you, milord.)"

"Mew. (It was you indeed, Routa.)"

Yeah, yeah. All right. It was me.

After all that, we couldn't catch up with Zenobia no matter what path we took. And then, to round things out, we got lost.

I couldn't barf up any beams because they might have hit Zenobia and the Hero, so I've been using my front legs to dig through the walls toward the sounds I'm hearing. And now my precious nails, cared for and polished to a sheen, are thick with dirt. I'll have to take a bath when we get home. The maids are gonna be really mad when they demand to know where I was out playing.

"You're...the one from before...?"

I heard the gist of it all from the other side of the wall, but the situation is way worse than I imagined. Zenobia's down for the count, while the Hero does nothing but kneel there crying. He doesn't look like he'll be much help.

“Arwf. (Len, Nahura, you take care of them for now.)”

“Squeak. (I’m to guard them, then.)”

“Mew. (And I’ll heal her.)”

Fully understanding what I meant, the pair runs over to them. That leaves the enemy up to me to handle, but if I fight here, it’s sure to expose my identity, huh...

“Arwf, arwf. (Well, guess I can’t worry about that now.)”

With the Hero and Zenobia behind me, I stand before the holy sword—now transformed into a monster—to block it. From what I heard through the walls, this guy is the underworld’s ambassador, Belgor. It all happened just as Mircalla said it would.

“You... You’re that strange wolf from before... Excellent timing. Though my seal is mostly undone, I am still only eighty percent full! Offer unto me your blood and soul!”

The sword, stretched out and split up like branches and roots, twists, steadily coming together. The purple tree-sword then evolves into a giant with four steel limbs.

“A-arrwwwf! (Aaahhhhhh! It’s... It’s so scary!)”

It doesn’t matter how strong my Fenrir body is. Scary things are scary. My legs are trembling; I can’t take a single step from where I’m standing.

Causing the terrible noise of metal scraping against metal, the sword giant brandishes both his hands. They dismantle themselves, breaking into many pieces, before linking back together again—now holding a single giant blade.

The Hero cries out upon seeing it. “D-dodge that! That weapon even broke Zenobia’s magic sword! If it hits you, you’ll die!”

“A-arwf?! (Wait, huh?! You’re telling me this now?!)”

That ship has long since sailed. The giant sword is already being swung down.

“I’ll cleave you in two and scatter your entrails! And then I’ll slurp them all up!”

The steel giant Belgor roars with laughter as his sword, wreathed in an incredible wind, comes crashing down toward my head.

And then...it gets cleaved in two.

The sword, that is.

“Wh-whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

The sword, broken along with his arms, shatters to bits and whips through the air.

“A-arwf... (Th-that was scary...)”

I pissed myself a little, but I took zero damage. It doesn't even hurt. Just how strong *is* this coat of fur anyway?



“This cursed blade which drank the blood of countless monsters and finally gained the power to unleash the ultimate special attack... It was destroyed with such ease...?!”

The giant takes a step back in consternation. Not only has he lost both arms, but his whole body is starting to crack.

“My...! My vessel—it’s breaking...!”

“Arwf? (What? You attacked me without warning, and now you’re self-destructing without warning. Serves you right.)”

“Squeak. (Because it possesses special-attack effects toward monsters, the effect must have been deflected off the sword the moment the attack itself didn’t work on one.)”

Actually, I’m a dog, not a monster. So Len’s explanation is wrong. There’s probably just a spell on it that prevents it from harming cute doggos.

“Squeak? (Aren’t you beginning to grow tired of constantly averting your eyes from reality?)”

Sh-shaddup. As long as I don’t accept it, the possibility that I’m a dog will never disappear.

“Heh-heh-heh...”

The collapsing cursed sword begins cackling.

“Heh... Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Acting like you’ve won already, are you?!”

Ugh. He’s still not dead?

Some sort of black haze is starting to come out of the cracks of the broken blade.

“This sword was only a vessel to seal my power! You’ve just saved me the time and effort of removing the seal completely!”

The amount of haze leaking out rapidly increases, and it collects on the ceiling like a cloud.

“I am a devil—a being with no corporeal form! No matter how tough or strong

you may be, physical attacks will have no effect on my body! I'll whittle you down slowly, and then, at the very end, I'll possess you!"

The gathered haze coils around itself, spinning like a drill, then attacks me.

"Arwf! (Physical attacks won't work? That's against the rules!)"

I ignore Len quipping that I'm not one to talk.

"Fwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! It's difficult for even magic to affect demons! If there is anything that could possibly affect me now, it would only be the ultimate destruction magic of eld!"

Oh? That works.

"Woof. (I can do that.)"

"Huh?"

"Woof, woof. (I can shoot ultimate destruction magic.)"

The haze stops moving when it hears my answer.

"Huh? Wait, really?"

"Arrrwf! (Hell yeah!)" I say, preparing to barf up a beam.

I open my mouth wide, and a point of light appears inside it. Mana, veiled in lightning, coalesces at that point.

"S-stoooooooooop!!"

Who would stop just because the bad guy told them to?

"Grrrrrrrrroooooohhhhhh!! (The price of harming my licky-licky target is a heavy one, asshole!!)"

The girthy beam annihilates the entire cloud of haze as it tries to flee, then pierces through the ceiling, shooting all the way up into the sky.

The flash of light and the roaring noise fade, returning silence to my surroundings.

"Arwww... (Phew... That had to have killed him.)"

I breathe a sigh of relief.

I don't hear yet another round of laughter this time.

"Arwf! (Oops! I have to go check on Zenobia and the Hero.)"

I run over to the Hero, whose jaw is practically on the floor.

"Arwf, arwf? (How is she?)"

"Mew... (Well...)"

Nahura doesn't let up with the healing magic, but Zenobia's eyes won't open. There's a big hole in her breastplate, and she's not moving one bit.

"Arwf...? (Huh...?)"

"...It's... It's my fault... I'm so sorry, Zenobia..."

The Hero again breaks down into tears, which fall onto Zenobia's face.

"Arwf...? (This can't be, can it...? Zenobia...?)"

"Mew... (Well... I'm still using my healing magic, but...)"

It's not having any effect?

"Meow. (Nope, it's not that. She's just not wounded anywhere.)"

"Arwf? (Huh?)"

In response to my surprise, Zenobia's right hand rises, grazing the blubbering Hero.

"Don't cry, you idiot..."

"Z-Zenobia...?! How?! You're all right?!"

In front of the Hero, who is even more astonished than I am, Zenobia sits up. Her armor and clothing have been torn, but she's not even bleeding.

"Sheesh... Just look at your fur," says Zenobia, after taking out a stuffed animal whose head is hanging on by a thread. Sticking out from the seam is not cotton, but my own fur, gleaming with silvery light. "It looks like this shielded me. I'm ashamed of having lost consciousness from the impact, but I'm not injured."

"Thank goodness... Oh, thank goodness..."

“Didn’t I just tell you to stop crying?”

Zenobia is scooped up into the Hero’s arms. He bawls as he clings to her.

“Arwf, arwf. (*Ugh, damn pretty boys. I can’t allow you to have a monopoly on Zenobia’s chest!*)”

“Squeak. (*You keep saying that word ‘pri-ti-boi.’ What does that mean?*)”

“Mew. (*Who knows? This is Routa we’re talking about, so it’s probably something vulgar.*)”

“Arwf, arwf! (*It is not vulgar! It means a good-looking guy!*)”

“Squeak? (*‘Guy’? What are you talking about, beloved?*)”

“Meow? (*Who knows? But it seems like there’s a decent laugh at the end of all this, so let’s ignore it for now.*)”

Why are those two giggling like that?

Anyway, it’s great that Zenobia is safe, but now my identity is under even more suspicion.

“Arwrw... (*Haah, how depressing...*)”

I give a sigh, and Zenobia looks over here.

“Don’t look so concerned. I’m not going to do anything to you anymore. Not after I saw that incredible magic anyway. I doubt I *could* do anything to you to begin with.”

Shit, she even saw the beam? It’s over. It’s all over!

“I completely understand now. You’ll never, ever do anything bad in your entire life.”

Even convinced I’m a monster, Zenobia doesn’t seem at all hostile toward me. In fact, she comes over and pats me on the head.

“I’m alive thanks to you. You saved us...both me *and* Alstera.”

And then she gives me the warmest smile I’ve ever seen on her face.

“Thank you, Routa.”

The moonlight filters in through the hole in the ceiling, lighting up her smile.

When I see that, I...

“Arwrw... (Eh-heh-heh... You’re making me blush...)”

...I squirm, putting a paw over my face to hide it.

“Squeak. (To respond thus to the exceptional smile of a woman... It truly is unsightly of you, milord.)”

“Meow. (Ah-ha-ha. It’s something good about him, huh?)”

Len and Nahura jump onto me.

“Arwf, arwf. (It’s not like I can say anything considerate, is it?)”

I’m just glad I didn’t politely ask to lick her.

“Squeak. (More importantly, we shouldn’t stay here for very long.)”

Huh? Why’s that?

“Squee-squeak. (The Hero destroyed the labyrinth’s core earlier, right? The labyrinth should be collapsing any second now.)”

“Arwf?! (Huh?! You should have said that earlier!)”

We all gather in one spot, and Nahura uses spatial magic. The scenery fades to white, and a moment later, we’re right in front of the mansion.



“Hello—and welcome home.”

There to welcome us is Hecate, wearing her witch’s hat. She stands there almost as if she knew we’d be coming right from the beginning.

“By the looks of it, everything went smoothly.”

“Arwf. (*Yeah, pretty much.*)”

The Hero ended up being a useless crybaby, but the sword’s curse is gone, and he seems to be in his right mind again. Zenobia should be able to keep the relevant details from him once he calms down.

“Lady Hecate, were you aware of all this...?”

“Of course I was, my dear. Routa’s been proving himself to be a good boy from the very beginning, hasn’t he? Now you can stop holding back and be friends with him.”

“I’m..... No, you’re right. It would be better for us to protect the mansion together than for me to waste time being on guard around him.”

Uhhh, I don’t wanna be a guard dog. Protecting everyone is *your* job, Zenobia.

But my words don’t reach her. Damn it. Every time.

“If you don’t mind, I would love a full explanation from you later. I know now that Routa isn’t an evil beast, but with the terrible monster in the sword calling himself part of the Demon Lord’s forces, and this whole forest being full of secrets... I feel as though I understand nothing.”

“That’s fine with me... But fiiirst...”

“Arwf? (*First?*)”

“Why don’t we have a bath? You’re all covered in dirt. You look awful.”

And so we do.

Epilogue

“Arww... (Whew... Soaking in the tub when you’re exhausted is the beest.)”

It would have been even better if I hadn’t worked myself to exhaustion at all, but whatever.

I’m deep in the tub, drowning in ecstasy. I’ve never had a bath in the middle of the night like this. Hecate apparently said something to the maids to have them prepare the big bath. If she hadn’t been expecting all this in the first place, they wouldn’t have been able to get it ready. How great is the scope of her foresight, exactly? Maybe I should have expected this from the elves’ great elder.

“.....”

Hecate, perched on the edge of the tub, is gently swirling a glass of wine. Her narrowed eyes, however, are trained on me. She’s smiling, which just makes it all the more terrifying.

“Arwf! (Quit looking at me without saying anything!)” It’s scary! I didn’t even say anything out loud!

“It’s always written all over your face, Routa.”

“Arwf? (Are you serious? I guess I really am easy to understand...)”

In my past life, I was no better than livestock; I led an existence free of emotion, much less expression. Seems like ever since I got reincarnated here, I’ve gotten a lot more honest with my feelings.

Well, that’s good. It’s a good thing, so please overlook it.

“Mew! (Nooo...! I don’t like the bath!)”

Nahura, who was being washed by Hecate until a few moments ago, lies limp on the edge of the tub.

“How slovenly. Did you remember to collect it?”

“Meow. (Ah, yes, it’s right here.)”

Nahura spits something up. It’s a fragment of purple metal.

“Arwf? (Huh? Isn’t that...)”

“It’s still a secret, Routa. One day, though,” says Hecate, putting a finger to her lips and winking at me.

Well, I don’t really care what it is. And I don’t really want to know, either, since it seems like one of those things I wouldn’t be able to ignore if I did know.

“Haven’t I told you to stop crying already?”

“Uuu... I’m sorry, I’m really sorry...”

On the other side of the bathtub, Zenobia is trying to comfort the Hero.

“...Arwf? (...Wait, why’s the Hero in here?)”

This bath is for the women to relax in! I’m a dog, so I don’t count!

Is that it? Do pretty boys even get allowed in the bath?! I won’t stand for it! All of creation may tolerate it, but I will not! In the name of the moon, I will punish you!

I charge, parting the water, leaving bubbles in my wake—but something’s wrong.

There are two melons, just as big as Zenobia’s, on the Hero’s chest.

“Arwf?! (What?!)”

Wait a second, is the Hero actually...

“...Arwf, arwf? (...Post-op?)”

“They’re natural... I’m sorry... I’m sorry...”

The Hero makes an earnest apology. Well, I certainly didn’t expect her to be a girl who prefers to dress like a man.

“Squeak. (So you’ve finally realized.)”

“Mew. (I think you may be the blindest of them all, Routa.)”

They both snicker.

Grr! It looks like I'm the only one who didn't notice, so I have no argument. Actually, judging by the Hero's response, could it be she can understand me?

"I... Well, I can use magic, so..."

Oh, right. The elves said something about that, too, didn't they? Those with an affinity for magic can understand what I'm saying, or something.

Which would also mean all of my many perverted remarks have also been overheard...

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I won't tell anyone, so please forgive me..."

The Hero covers her face in embarrassment.

"You... You bastard! What did you do to Alstera?!"

"A-arwf! (I-I didn't do anything! I certainly didn't say anything about wanting to lick her!)"

"Eek!"

Even more frightened now, the Hero sinks deeper into the water.

"You... You...!"

Zenobia balls her hand into a trembling fist.

These accusations are false! False, I tell you! And shouldn't *you* be the one covering your front, Zenobia?!

"Squeak! (Always getting aroused as soon as you realize someone is female! I will not stand for it!)"

Damn it! If even Len gets involved, this could get a lot hairier!

"Hey! You're in the bath? No fair..."

And then the door to the bathroom opens, and my lady enters. She rubs her tired eyes, still half-asleep.

She made it all the way here in a sleepy daze? The young lady's ability to sniff out fun is incredible, as usual.

"Wait, Mary! Why did you suddenly run aw—? O-oh?"

Drills, chasing after her, is dumbstruck by the chaotic scene in the bath.

An elven witch with several bottles of alcohol open nearby, a red cat lying exhausted next to her, a blushing Hero recoiling in embarrassment, a swordswoman chasing down a lascivious scoundrel, and a dog running away from her.



This is awful. It's madness.

"Oh? Excellent timing. Hop in," suggests Hecate, raising her glass.

The young lady, in a flash, whips off her pajamas and dives into the bathtub.

"What's going on? What am I looking at, exactly?"

Drills can only stand and stare in utter confusion, unable to keep up with how things usually happen in the mansion.

"Eliza, come on! Hurry!"

"I—Fine! Don't blame me if you're scolded later!"

Drills enters the bathtub, too, albeit reluctantly, but she quickly gets used to it and starts playing with the young lady.

As a result, the ruckus in the bath gets even louder, and in the end, Miranda finds us all and gives us an angry lecture. Time to throw in the towel.



"Then there was no issue in the forest after all?"

"No, sir. It looks like it was my mistake."

The next day, the Hero reports everything that happened to Papa in his study.

Still, it was far from "no issue"—more like nothing *but* issues.

Last night, after talking to Hecate and Zenobia in the bath, the Hero decided to be our ally as well. She appears to be refreshed after a night's worth of crying; her mental state has completely recovered.

"Hmm. In that case, there's nothing I need to tell you, but..."

Papa strokes his full beard, then hands her a letter addressed to the guild.

Hecate is probably smoothing things over with them, but the envelope probably has the marquis's name on it to prove that the Hero did the job she was supposed to do. Papa is really good about being considerate.

"I heard you'll be leaving for the Royal Capital immediately, but why not spend a little more time relaxing here? The airship won't arrive for another month, and it will probably take just as long to get to the capital on foot."

“Arwf, arwf. (Yeah, yeah! You finally made up with Zenobia. You should just stay here.)”

“No, there’s something that’s been on my mind. I’d like to return on foot by myself.”

“I see. In that case, it would be barbaric to try and keep you here any longer.”

“Thank you so much for your hospitality. Farewell.”

The Hero bows her head under Papa’s watchful eyes and politely exits the study.

Figuring I can at least see her off, I follow her out into the hallway.

“Arwf, arwf? (Are you sure about this, Hero?)”

She must have been under that cursed holy sword’s control for a long time, and at the end, she was forced to fight beyond her limits. After the battle, Nahura used some healing magic on her, too, but can’t she rest some more first?

“Hey, Routa?”

“Arwf? (Yes, yes, whatever is it?)”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t call me Hero anymore.”

Oh? You were so fussy about being the Hero before. Are you over it now?

“I wasn’t the Hero. I’m far from one. I was just a regular person. I was shocked when I first realized that, but now I feel almost liberated. This wasn’t how I felt at the very beginning. I wanted to be a hero because I wanted to help people, that’s all—not for anyone to call me a hero. I finally remembered that.”

“Arwf. (Hmm. That’s a good look on you. In that case, I’ll stop calling you Hero and call you Alstera—well, that’s a little long. Can I call you Allie?)”

That doesn’t sound very heroic, but I guess it doesn’t matter since this is a parallel universe anyway.

“Allie... It’s kind of embarrassing, but sure.”

Without the holy sword, and with the severity in her face gone, she looks like a girl her age should. Maybe I really am clueless, to have mistaken her for a

man.

After we leave through the mansion's front entrance, Zenobia is waiting for us at the gate.

"You're going?" asks Zenobia.

"Yeah," says Allie with a firm nod.

"Stop apologizing, then."

"I won't anymore. Zenobia, won't you come—," starts Allie, reaching a hand for her before stopping and shaking her head. "This is where you belong, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I see. Okay, then I'll give it my best do-over, too. If I can hold my head up proudly not as the Hero, but as Alstera, I'll come visit again. Is that all right?"

"Of course. Come anytime. I'll be waiting."

The two bump their fists together, then part ways.

Zenobia stays in place, leaning against the gate pillar, not going after Allie; and Allie walks away, her gait confident.

These two should be fine now. Zenobia looks refreshed now, too, with a years-long burden now gone.

I gained a lot from this incident myself. Two new allies who stick with me even though they know my true identity. Plus, they're both SS-Rank adventurers. The mansion now has an even stronger combat force—Wait, what do we need that for?!

I don't need combat power for my pet life—I need days of peace! Why should I be sticking with these battle-loving children anyway? I'm going to the old man to get some food!

"Arf, arf! (*Old maaan, breakfast pleeease!*)"

I hear we got a fresh shipment of rice with the airship's last arrival. I have no problems eating fluffy, steamy rice for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Just start wheeling it out now!

As I head through the backyard toward the kitchen, I hear people talking.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, how the mighty have fallen!”

“Shut up! *You’re* the one who got made into a kitchen knife!”

“At least we got out with our lives, but it seems you’ll have to spend the rest of that life in that form, just as we will...”

Mircalla and Richmond are talking to a knife she’s holding. What’s with this weird scene? She’s been seen talking to me before, and the maids are already starting to consider her a little strange in the head.

Wait a minute. Did that knife just talk? I totally remember that voice from somewhere...

“Grrrr, that damn witch! How humiliating it is for someone such as I to be sealed away in a tiny knife like this...!”

Oh, okay. Just as I thought, that knife must be Belgor, all sealed up. Hecate must have stolen his power, same as she did with Mircalla and Richmond. That purple metal shard I glimpsed in the bath must have been a piece of Belgor.

“Just give up already. You can share the fate with the two of us.”

“And we haven’t found a single thread that would lead us to regaining our power. I believe it best to simply resign yourself to the facts.”

“How soft of you! And you still call yourselves generals?! Fine, then! I won’t rely on the likes of you! I’ll start by brainwashing the first human to pick me up, and then accumulate power again! Where are they?! Where is my first user?!”

The enraged knife shakes in Mircalla’s hand.

Then we hear the old man’s voice from the kitchen. “Heeey, Mircalla? Have you seen my knife? The one Dr. Hecate gave me. I wanted to test it out.”

“Oh, chef. It’s right here. Please, feel free to use it until it breaks,” says Mircalla, giving an evil grin and handing the blade to the old man.

Is this going to be all right? The old man isn’t like Allie. He’s a normal person. If it comes down to it, I might have to wipe out that knife, too, with another beam.

“Fwa-ha-ha. So you are to be my first sacrifice? Very well. I will violate you down to your bone marrow, and—”

As if he can't hear the voice of Belgor, who possesses the knife, the old man takes it from Mircalla and holds it up to the light, evaluating the blade.

“Hmm. This is a pretty good knife.”

“Impossible...! He's impervious...?! How much mental fortitude can this man possibly possess...?!”

“You're *such* an idiot. We just said your powers have been stolen. That includes the one you used to control humans, like before. That witch would never hand over something that could be even slightly dangerous.”

“I-impossible!! What, then?! Are you saying I must live out the rest of my life not as a monster, but as an item good for nothing but cutting food?!”

“That's right. Just give up and go dice some onions or something.”

“N... Nooooooooooooooooooooo!!”

The old man, totally oblivious to Belgor's screams, goes back to the kitchen in a jovial mood.

A moment later, I hear the soft sound of something hitting a cutting board, and then a scream of agony from Belgor.

“C-cutting food, regular food, that doesn't even have any mana in it—this is not what I am meant to do! Will this hell never end?! I will not be able to endure it!! I don't want to! Stop! Please, stooooooooop!!”

“Hmm-hmm-hmm. ♪”

Belgor's screams mix with the old man's humming to paint an incredibly surreal portrait.

“Arwf... (I wonder... Is it really going to be okay to leave them like that?)”

As I'm wondering about what I should do, a gust of wind blows through.

“It'll be fine.”

It's Hecate.

“I hold the power over life and death for those little ones. There is a zero percent chance of them performing any evil deeds.”

And now she’s saying something horrifying:

“And even if something did happen, you would fix things like you always do, wouldn’t you, Routa?”

“Arwf. *(Wait a second. Like I said before, I don’t know what you expect from me. I’m just a pet.)*”

“I suppose...all of them? I have faith that you would do something about all of them if I leave it to you.”

Whoa, that’s a heavy burden. Please don’t make me carry that. As Hecate smiles at me, I scratch an ear and look away.

My only desire is for a peaceful, lazy life as a pet. Dangerous affairs are the last things I want to stick my neck out for. I guess, though, I won’t forgive anyone who tries to get in the way of my peace. But that’s all.

“Hee-hee. I see. And that’s why I can believe in you, Routa.”

Oh, stop it. I don’t want people rating me that highly. You’re making the back of my ear itch even more.

“Oh, Routa! There you are!”

Ah, it’s my lady. She’s waving at me energetically from a second-story window.

“Eliza brought a really fun board game! Do you want to play?”

“Woof, woof! *(Seriously?! Yes, a million times yes! Even though I’ll just be watching!)*”

“What about you, Dr. Hecate?”

“Well, if you insist, I politely accept.”

“...Arwf? *(...Go easy on them, all right?)*”

I doubt Hecate would ever pull her punches when it comes to competition. She’d be the kind of person to steamroller children at games.

“Oh? That was rude. If you’re going to be like that, then I won’t give you any of the treats I brought.”

“A-arwf?! (What?! I was just kidding, I’m sorry! Forgive me! Do you want your humble servant to lick your feet?!)”

“You only say that because you *want* to...”

“Arwf...? (H-how did you know...?)”

And so, engaging in our usual banter as we head for Lady Mary, we go to enjoy the peace that has once again returned to us.

Afterword

Hello, good evening, and good night, woof! I'm honored we get to meet again!

Well, wasn't that a tumultuous story?

Who would have thought that Miranda was the seventh general of the Demon Lord's army, and that she would rip all her maid clothes to transform into her third form, then betray the Demon Lord and side with the dark god?

And then that dark god of the alternate dimension turned out to be Toa, who had been plotting for many years to invade this one!

To think the three maids were the three goddesses who created this world, and that they'd been fighting a proxy war with heroes of their own selection to gain the title of boss goddess...

With the mastermind behind it all being Papa Gandolf, who was a villainous alien the whole time, secretly in control of nations all over the galaxy.

But then, to fight against all that evil, there was a giant fusion golem that had been sealed away in the ruins of a super-ancient civilization, and the only person who had the ability to pilot it was old man James.

So many completely unforeseen, exciting developments all crammed into one volume!

I'm sorry, that was a lie. All of it was a lie.

The people at the mansion are all just normal people, and they're all blind.

Well, this volume is being published on April 1, and I wanted so much to make an April Fools' joke that I just couldn't resist doing it.

When you read it, did you think they were spoilers at first? Ha-ha, fooled you! April fool!

Okay, wait a minute.

Put that stone in your hand down and take a seat, please. Stay! Stay!

Oh, that's right! (And I know this is abrupt.)

Regarding the first volume of the manga adaptation of *Woof Woof Story*, which I announced last time—thanks to everyone's support, it will be reprinted in major quantities!

Congratulations, Kiki Koikuchi! As the original creator, I'm overjoyed! I'll do a happy little jig! Okay, I've jig! And now my family is looking at me weird!

As we look forward to the second volume, the first is still being serialized to much praise on the web comic site ComicWalker, as well as Niconico Manga!

If anyone out there still wasn't aware, please give them a visit if you have the chance!

And I won't let the novels lose, either!

I'll continue writing even more funny, fluffy, and fun stories, so please give Routa and the others your support in the future!

With that, I'll be taking my leave for today.

Let's meet again in volume six!

February 2019 Inumajin

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