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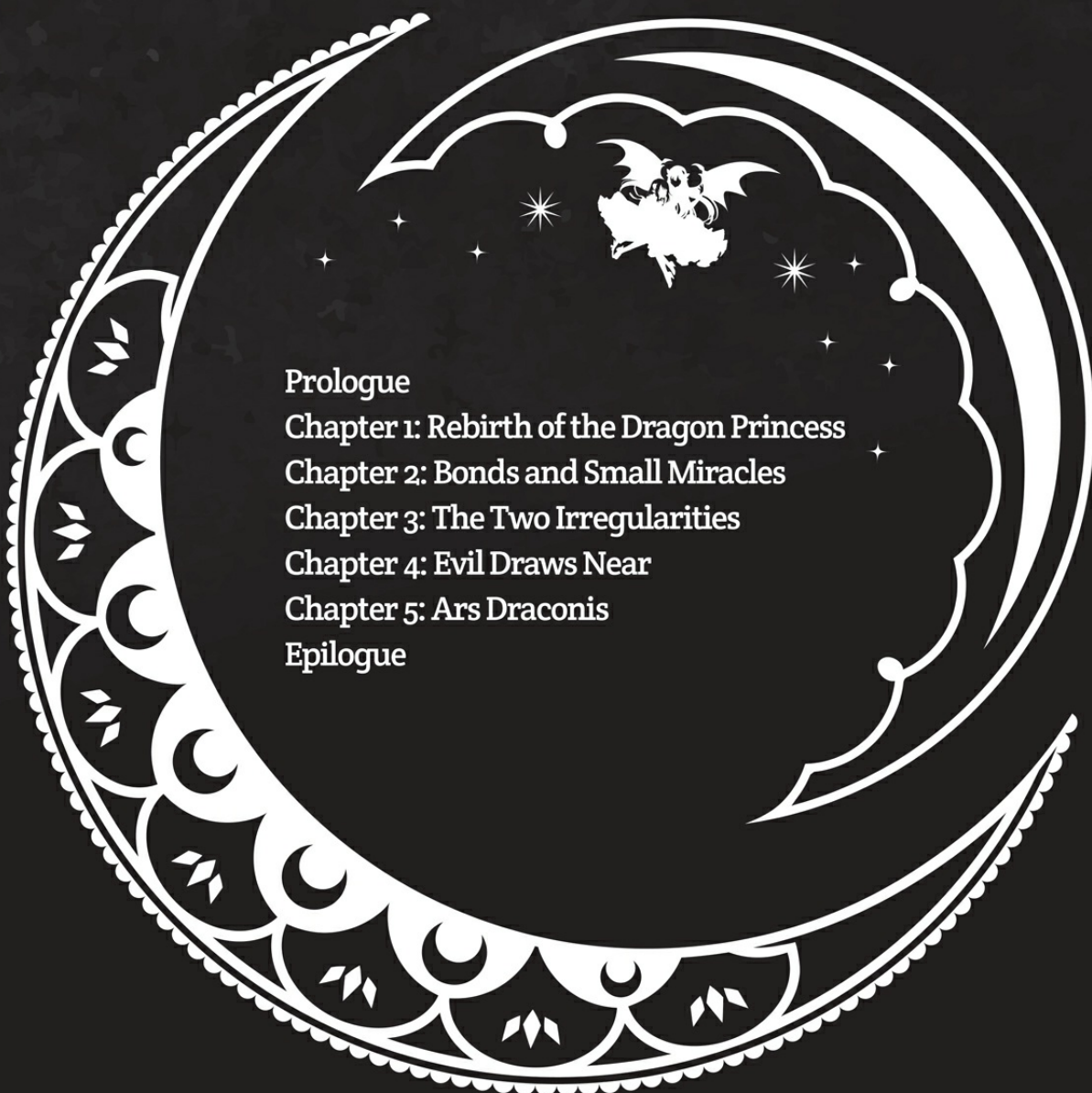


Did I Seriously Just Get Reincarnated as My Gag Character?!

“Advent of the Wurm”

By Kanade Otonashi

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Prologue

A girl trudged forward, slowly moving one foot, then the other. She was practically dragging her body along, each labored step serving as a reminder of her powerlessness. She did not know where she was headed; the only thing on her mind was survival.

In the past, whenever she had complained of being tired, her father had been there to ask if she was all right and then carry her on his back. But he was no longer in this world. Her eyes welled tears as the thought of it threatened to overwhelm her with despair. She did not know where she was headed. The only thing on her mind now was survival.

It was the second night since Aisha had been forced to leave her village. Though she had gone into the forest in search of sustenance, all she could find to live off were roots and the rainwater brought by sporadic showers. If it hadn't been for the occasional help of the spirits, whose voices she could only faintly hear, she would no doubt have already died.

Still, though, she was at her limit. Her steps were unsteady. Sometimes she would collapse against a tree, clinging to it to prop her body upright before continuing on, her legs even heavier than they had been before.

"Am I going to die?" she tried to ask, but she found that she had already lost her ability to speak. She took one more step before coming to a stop. If she was going to die, she would have at least liked to have done so alongside her dear father.

Aisha's world was pitiless. She came from a poor village where anyone who was unable to find work would starve to death. Some people hunted in the forest, but on top of the risk of getting eaten by a monster, there was always a chance that they might encounter bandits. Some people even sold their bodies to traveling merchants in exchange for the money they needed to live.

Everyone she knew was struggling desperately to survive. That was why Aisha, a child who was slow to grow up, very particular about her likes and

dislikes, and completely useless as a worker, was never really welcome. But it wasn't until after her father had died that she became aware of the extent of it. He had been the only thing keeping her alive.

On her own, she was powerless. Worthless. She felt so miserable and bitter that her heart was ready to burst and extinguish what little was left of her life. Her dry golden hair, which hung limply from her head, fluttered softly in the wind. As if the wind were guiding her gaze, she found herself looking deep into the forest.

In the light of the twin moons, the forest was dark like lacquer, overgrown and unreal. And then, from the trees, she heard the faint sound of rustling leaves.

A wild animal! she thought. *But I'm too tired to run...*

She had already pushed her body far, far past its limits. Try as she might, it simply would not obey her orders to flee. Whatever beast was coming toward her, she was sure it would devour her.

She was half-right, but she was also half-wrong. The three beings that approached her *were* beasts, in a way.

"Well, lookie what we got here!" one said. "I'd say a kid'll do just fine. Oy, girlie! Did someone leave you here to die?"

"Eee hee hee! This is our lucky day! Let's take her home and have some fun!"

"Hey, Giel! You really like the looks of this brat? She's all skin and bones! No thanks. I say we kill her and be done with it. Boss is gonna chew us out if we're late."

The group of three surrounded her. They were filthy, lecherous bandits.

"Nah, we take her with us! A hole's a hole! I don't think they'll let us use a kid since they break and all, but this brat looks like she's *riiight* on the edge."

"Eee hee hee hee hee! So you're into that stuff too! Well, your idea, so you carry her."

Aisha was shaking. The unfamiliar world outside the village was turning out to be far more merciless than she'd ever thought.

What did I do to deserve this...?

She wondered if this was punishment for the way she had lived—pampered by her doting father, spending her days in idleness.

“You suppose she’s even alive?” one of the bandits asked. “She’s not moving, she won’t say a word, and she won’t even cry! Hey, you! Are you dead?”

The bandits roared with laughter. Their voices sounded to Aisha like they were coming from somewhere far, far away.

For a long time, Aisha had kept her resentment locked up deep inside. She’d had urges to lash out at someone, anyone, but had always resisted.

Why had her father died?

Why had the village forced her out? Why had bandits attacked her?

Why had her body never grown up?

Why had she always been such a useless girl?!

Why had she not been born a human?!

Her lips, bloody from having bitten down on them, moved slightly to allow her to speak.

“Someone tell me...” she said, her emaciated vocal cords vibrating painfully. “Why?!”

She didn’t expect an answer, of course. She simply couldn’t bear to suppress her anger any longer. The only sound to be heard was the bandits’ crude snickering. And yet...

“Lovely...” came a beautiful, clear voice from on high, seemingly banishing all other sounds from the world. And then, *something* alighted in front of her. Its bottomless depths were darker than dark. Was it an angel? A demon? Perhaps a god? It defied human comprehension, yet there it was, close enough for her to reach out and touch.

Aisha had no idea what to make of the being that had appeared in front of her, but she could tell that it was far superior to the likes of an ancient elf or elder vampire. The only thing she was certain of was that it was an

abomination. The darkness inside it was so overwhelmingly powerful that she couldn't bring herself to look at it for long. Even so, given its shape and appearance, it had to be a girl.

The girl looked into Aisha's eyes, and suddenly all of her thoughts, all of her reason vanished, leaving only charmed infatuation. She would throw her very life away like a scrap of paper if she could only look into this girl's eyes for all eternity. Her hair was as black as the night sky, and her delicate features were nothing short of perfection. In her eyes, just around her pupils, were rings of golden light. Her limbs were slender and smooth. Her skin was white like snow, and her dress was jet black. There was only one word for it, drifting like a fantasy in Aisha's mind.

Gods.

Gods above.

How beautiful. How beautiful she was.

As Aisha stared into her eyes, mind empty, the girl spoke. "Do not curse your fate, girl," she said. "Smile, for you have been blessed."

And just like that, Aisha's new life had begun.

Chapter 1: Rebirth of the Dragon Princess

“I’m so bored...” Toru Aikawa muttered to himself as a salaryman left the store with dinner in hand.

Landing a part-time job at a convenience store had been both a blessing and a curse. Right now, he was at his wits’ end thanks to a couple having an interminable conversation in the dining area, but still he toiled away, handling customer after customer like an automaton.

“Hello... Will you be paying with card or cash...? Your total is seven hundred and fifteen yen... Thank you for your business...” He’d lost track of how many times he’d repeated those stock phrases today.

I’m so bored...

It was miserable work—the kind that didn’t even give you the satisfaction of feeling like a cog in the machinery of the world. It was absolutely thankless. And yet, there was a reason Toru spent so much time working. The long hours he spent in this dreamlike haze of a waking life were all for the sake of investing in one particular game.

Virtual reality technology had been advancing by the minute for years, to the point where people were beginning to whisper about “full immersion.” And then along came Real World Online, a game that made everything else on the market look obsolete. A real, honest-to-goodness other reality.

As a game, it was a magnificent flop. But the developers said that their true goal was not to create a game, but a world. It had to have been some rich person’s pet project. There was no other explanation for how they could have neglected to add a feature most games took for granted: a way to respawn.

Anyone who had ever touched a video game—anyone with common sense—found it completely absurd. If you died, it was game over. In the blink of an eye, you could lose a character you had invested dozens, hundreds, *thousands* of hours in. What part of that was appropriate for a *game*?

Reviews asked as much, at least. They said that it was a mistake. That it wasn't a game at all. They referred to it as a "death gauntlet." They called for the demonic development team to be put to a swift and merciless death. They accused management of being detached from reality. And worst of all, they called it a waste of time. It was universally panned.

On the other hand, from a certain perspective, if the game sought to emulate reality, death would have to be a component. By throwing out all common sense in favor of a game where you *couldn't* redo your deaths and overcome obstacles through trial and error, they were able to make something truly immersive. And that level of immersion had a certain attractive quality.

It also took tremendous effort to traverse the land, which was so close to being its own reality. It was possible to travel to villages, towns, cities, kingdoms, and even whole other worlds, but doing so was immensely difficult. It took literal days of traveling to get anywhere as a new character.

The AI-driven NPCs you could find around town had new dialogue every time you talked to them, and moved about for reasons of their own. The number of limited-time quests and plot elements that could change based on player actions was staggering. You could even make enemies of a particular village, town, or country. The computing power it took to run the game must have been unimaginable. Between the huge variety of classes and races available and the sheer size of the world, no one player would ever see more than a tenth of the game's content.

Moreover, a character's appearance was endlessly customizable. There were more options than a person could reasonably wrap their head around. It was easy for players to lose themselves in the character creator and spend all day making their avatars. Alternatively, they could upload a picture and the game would search for the closest available parts in its library to create the player's idealized self.

The words "Real World" in the title were anything but empty. The world awaiting players through their displays might as well have been another reality. That was the game for whose sake Toru Aikawa planned to throw away all his hard-earned convenience store money.

Well, that wasn't entirely fair. Toru had gotten into college and suddenly found himself with a lot more free time than he'd ever had before. But he didn't use it to study or spend time with friends. Even if he worked hard and applied himself in pursuit of a high-paying job, it would still be the game, not reality, where he found himself looking for meaning.

When he was small, Toru had dreamed of wielding a sword, vanquishing wicked monsters, and protecting the innocent. And as he grew up, those fantasies never went away. In class, he would fantasize about a bad guy with a gun suddenly bursting in and taking a powerless girl hostage. He spent his time somewhat delusional, imagining himself saving the day.

Now an adult, he found himself even more at odds with reality than he'd been before. Society was unjust. His friends just annoyed him. His bosses and seniors were wrong about everything. Religion was useless. While he bowed and faked a smile for his store manager, he daydreamed about telling everyone how he really felt.

Real World Online had lasted six years with the support of its core players. Surely they were no different than him—drawn to the game as a way to escape a self they detested and a life full of nothing but tedium.

Toru left through the employee exit, heading out into the night. The moon shone lonely in the sky, dimmer than the streetlamps that illuminated the people and buildings with a pale greenish light. Sometimes, people walking by would have two shadows—one cast by the lamps and the other by the moon.

He walked along the sidewalk, choking slightly on exhaust fumes as one car sped up to pass another. But today, there was a spring in his step. Today was the launch day for RWO's latest patch. There was going to be new land to explore, new materials for crafting, special limited-time loot boxes, new monsters, and, most importantly, new raid bosses. Nothing could upset him too much when he had *that* to look forward to.

Humming and swinging the bag his bento was in, he passed through a handful of crosswalks on his way to the dormitory where he lived alone, his pace increasing with every step. And then, right as he passed the intersection in front of his favorite karaoke place, something happened.

Suddenly, a bus appeared, its side mirrors broken off, driving well above the speed limit. Its body was badly dented and scraped from previous collisions with walls and cars.

“Wha—?!” He exclaimed as the bus rocketed toward a red light. “No way! Are you serious?!” The driver had to have fallen asleep. If not, why were they about to plow straight into a crowd of people crossing an intersection?

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Toru yelled as he ran as fast as his legs could carry him. Fortunately, he’d noticed the bus before it had gotten too close. As long as he trusted himself and kept running, he had plenty of time. Plenty of time to reach the girl.

She was frozen in place, tears streaming down her cheeks as her body shook. “Run!” he shouted. “Get out of there, you idiot!”

Wait, he thought. *Can I really help her? This is super dangerous!* But by the time that thought occurred to him, it was too late. His body had already acted.

“God dammit!” He leaped forward, seizing the girl by her arm. *What the hell?! What am I doing?!* The headlights of the bus were blinding in the darkness. He was out of time. *No! I won’t make it!*

This wasn’t what he’d planned, but his body was already moving. A second before the bus reached the girl, he planted his feet and grabbed her shoulders with both arms. Using his body as a pivot, he tossed her aside with enough force to send her flying through the air. And then...

“Oops...” The bus plowed into him with unimaginable force. It happened too fast for him to even feel the pain of the blow. His crushed body flew through the air.

I was...really looking forward to that patch... he thought. His dream had come to an end.

‡

From somewhere, there came a voice. “Another new character, #####? You must really like making them! I’ve never heard of someone with three active characters before.” Toru should have had no way of hearing anything, and yet...

“Oh, em, gee! She’s adorable! And your girl voice is amazing! You really went all in.”

More and more voices joined the first, all of them laughing and having fun. Some were nostalgic. Some felt like bad memories.

“How much money did you fork over *this* time?”

“Are you leveling your new character? Can I help?”

“So is this one of those femboys I keep hearing about?”

“The character is a girl. It’s the one playing her that’s a boy.”

“What do you mean, ‘playing’? Ohhh... But what if the one playing her is a femboy?! *Gulp...*”

“Shut up, creep!”

They went on and on, chatting away merrily.

This was the day of #####’s birth.

“Hey, what kind of character build is that? It looks super unbalanced!”

“I agree. I don’t think it’ll perform very well.”

“’Tis a peculiar one, methinks.”

The voices showed no signs of stopping. They were coming from all around.

“Look, what’s the big deal? He can play whatever character he likes.”

“Long live the cutie!”

“Can I buy those stockings?”

“No! Step on me while you’re wearing them!”

“There’s just *gotta* be a pervert... Sis, would you do something about them?”

“Hmm? You want me to give you a squeeze?”

“N-No thank you!”

There were always people in #####’s corner, helping her out as she continued to grow.

“Rghhh! How come I keep doing less damage than you?! I’m a pure mage!”

“Hee hee, ##### is a unique character. Don’t think too hard about it.”

“Forsooth! And that is why I shall stand ever ready to rush to thine side!”

“I’m coming to save you, Princess!”

In fact, everyone gave her their full support. The days passed like a wonderful dream, each one flowing into the next.

“They’re charging again! It’s like they’ve never heard of strategy!”

“Ready, Princess!”

That’s right. They used to call her “Princess.” She did what she wanted, said what she wanted, and caused trouble for everyone. She had an aloof, condescending way of speaking and went wherever her impulsive desires led.

It was like her consciousness was submerged somewhere deep underwater. As if she were stretching her arm out skyward, reaching...

“Run! Get out of there! Someone help!”

“Damn it! I can’t reach you!”

“I’m sorry! I’m out of MP!”

Her friends’ voices were shaking. But there was no need to worry, ##### told them. They just had to sit back and watch. She ate mooks like that for breakfast. It was all just talk, of course. There was nothing she could actually do.

“Somebody heal!”

“I still have twenty seconds on my recast!”

“Everyone, calm down. I’ll hold them off. The rest of you, run for it.”

“Guildmaster, no! Wait, is that an Ultimate-tier item?! B-But even with that —!”

“We’ll never know if I don’t try. Now go! Leave them to me!”

Yes. She had been saved. The memory flashed dimly through her foggy mind. And then, quite suddenly, her consciousness began to fade until it vanished entirely, lost in the reverberations of the screams around her. It was then that, somehow, she thought she heard a voice.

“You really are a nuisance, girl...”

‡

Suddenly, Toru regained consciousness. He’d felt the phantom sensation of being stuffed into something preposterously large, and then he was awake.

“Where...am I? Am I...alive?” His relief at finding himself alive was suddenly overshadowed by shock. Something was wrong. Namely, his voice. “Hwhah?!”

It was too high. It didn’t sound like a man’s voice at all.

What the heck?! But I’m a guy! I’m...!

Toru’s voice was, in a word, normal. He had a completely typical voice for a boy. Back in choir, he’d sung bass. Nobody would have called it particularly attractive. And yet, the voice that had just come out of his mouth was the beautiful, clear voice of a girl.

No. Don’t panic. Calm down, me.

Doing his best to quiet his frantic emotions, he checked to see if he could move his body. In doing so, he noticed his limbs—slender, fair, and unblemished. “Ahhh! Why? I look like a girl.”

Did the accident cause this somehow?

It didn’t make any sense. Far from waking up in a hospital bed, he seemed to be in a dense forest, in front of a lake. Stranger yet, he seemed to be in a girl’s body. This couldn’t be real. His mind would not accept it.

What finally broke Toru out of his confused stupor, oddly enough, was the sight of his body. Despite having never in his life gotten a manicure, his fingers ended in deep crimson nails. And then there was the dress he was wearing—majestic and as black as midnight. He recognized it.

“Is this...my third passive skill, Red Dragon Claw? And I’m pretty sure this outfit is Night’s Embrace.” He was starting, deep down, to figure out what had happened. “No way,” he said. “There’s no goddamn way...”

There was a panicked voice in his head telling him to reject the idea. His brain was sounding all sorts of alarm bells. He was afraid to see what his face looked like, even if he had a pretty good guess.

In the end, he couldn't resist the urge to look and peered into the lake. The clear water was reflective like a mirror. He saw the reflection of two moons floating on its surface, as well as his own body, standing on the shore. He recognized it immediately—it was the body of the character he had been obsessed with.

“I knew it! This *is* Nacht's body!”

Nacht Schatten. The character he had made with the help of an artist he knew. He had poured all of his passion, all of his barely suppressed adolescent fantasies into her. He'd made her a fierce dragon who was at the same time the most beautiful girl he could imagine. It was a contrast that he found very appealing. It was all ironic, of course, but that was the idea behind Toru's third character in Real World Online.

He'd put no points into her defense stat and instead maxed out evasion. He'd cleared every dragon-related quest in the game and obtained the unique class Dragon Princess. He'd given her every weird fixation of his that he could think of.

“What the heck?” he asked aloud. The whole situation was indescribably strange. He had been in an accident, only to find himself alone in a forest as if he'd been deliberately placed there. And just in case he thought he might still be on Earth, he needed only look up at the twin moons in the sky overhead to correct that notion. Then there was the matter of him being in the body of his RWO character.

There was only one possible explanation. He'd been reincarnated.

He tried to refute it, but the evidence was plain. Somehow, all those web novels had been right. But that still left the question of why.

“Why did it have to be my *gag character*?!”

Sadly, there was no denying the fact that Nacht simply wasn't very strong. Toru's friends had helped him power-level her, but even though she was almost at maximum level, her Origin Skills and Class Skills had been chosen for their showiness or their cuteness over their practicality. She struggled in fights against monsters of the same level without backup and could only challenge raid or world bosses that were at least ten levels below her.

As her iconic demidragon—also sometimes called demiwurm—self, Nacht could access the highly coveted and extremely flexible dragon skills, which excelled at both physical and magic attacks. Dragon Princesses were meant to stay in the middle ranks of the party, reacting dynamically as the battle required. Without a doubt, their abilities had the potential to make them one of the strongest classes in the game. Nacht, however, had put absolutely everything into magic.

“Magic power is everything! Blast them away with a single shot! Who needs defense?!” That was the theory, anyway. In practice, Nacht was simply too fragile to take part in most battles. When asked why he had built his character that way, Toru would simply reply, “It sounded fun!” But in truth, there was another reason: the Ars Draconis.

Ars Draconis was a school of magic that sat at the very peak of the dragon skill tree. As it happened, however, most dragon players focused on physical damage over magical, so some of those spells had never even seen the light of day. It was unacceptable. Nacht would not stand for it.

They *were* endgame spells, to be sure, but the incantations were absurd and melodramatic to the point that it had become an in-joke, and the spell effects themselves were universally considered loud and obnoxious. But the complainers got on Toru’s nerves, and before he knew it, he had put all of Nacht’s points into magic.

Nacht embraced the romance of the glass cannon, dodging around battles with her high evasion and firing off blasts like a mobile weapons platform. She wasn’t very good at it, though, and needed her friends’ help to do most things. And if she ever met an enemy that resisted her magic, she had no recourse but to run away with her tail between her legs.

Toru wept. If he had known he was going to be reincarnated as her, he would have made her a more serious character. “I’m a low-powered character in an isekai!” he lamented. “I’m not gonna have cheat powers, or a harem, or *anything!*”

He certainly wouldn’t be the *main* character. The main character would probably be one of the top five fighters in the game, and charming, and, more

to the point, a man. That's right! Nacht was a girl!

The world of RWO was one without resurrection items, spells, or anything else. It was rather infamous for its lack of a way to bring back the dead. But to make up for that, its battle system was extremely fair. If one stuck to battling monsters on their own level and took adequate precautions, even a casual player was unlikely to be faced with death. There were many ways to protect oneself against suddenly dying too. But even with such a fair system, a character like Nacht, who was designed more as a joke than anything else, would need an absurd number of advantages before she could even think about reigning as a god of battle. It was very upsetting.

"Wait. Hold on." Toru took a step back. "If I'm Nacht, does that make this the RWO setting?" He looked up at the sky. The two moons he had seen reflected on the water's surface shone down on him.

"Two moons..." he said. "But I'm pretty sure there was only one moon in RWO. There's only one in the Bloodmoon Vampire illustration." It was possible that this was a world that was neither RWO *nor* Earth.

Toru looked around. The overgrown forest felt uncanny in the pale light of the moons. "I haven't seen this location either. This isn't Reanold Forest or Leineh Lake. And it *definitely* isn't the Holy Dragon Lake. It looks a little like Moonbeam Shore, but in that case, the Abyss should be right there."

Forest aside, the lake, which was shaped like a slightly twisted half-moon, probably wouldn't be big enough to have been named. Named lakes in RWO were, as a rule, big enough to take an entire week of gameplay to cross, taking it a few hours at a time. And that was *with* the Blessing of Acceleration. This lake was small enough that Toru could see the other side of it.

That being said, the world of RWO was preposterously huge. There was no way for one person to know all of it, and all Toru had to rely on was the map inside his memories.

"Oh! I know!" he exclaimed. "I should check if this is in-game." He tried a verbal command. "Open voice chat!" Nothing. "No? Okay, then... Open menu!" This, too, received no response. "Hmm. Does that mean this *isn't* in-game?"

In summary, this was clearly not Earth, and while Toru was in Nacht's body,

this didn't appear to be RWO either.

“Did I *seriously* just get isekaied?” he asked with a sigh. “There’s no sign of the god or whatever that did this... Nobody’s explained anything... I have no idea what I’m supposed to do...”

Toru sniffled. The smell of wet earth carried by the cold night wind filled his nostrils. It was far too realistic to be a dream. This was real. Toru had never believed in any kind of god, but he really had been blessed, hadn't he? He'd thought he was dead only to find himself in another world. What kind of person *wouldn't* be overjoyed by that? Here was the excitement of a virtual world! The challenge of the unknown! He had almost given up on that...

There was a cry of joy from his heart. It had been drowned out until now by the confusion and disorientation, but now it was growing louder.

Toru's life in Japan hadn't been bad. It was an unremarkable, peaceful life without any great difficulties. But he was bored and disengaged, and nothing seemed to help. He woke up in the mornings, went to school, sat at his desk, worked his part-time job, and spent every second he could playing video games. His own life didn't feel precious or important in the slightest.

That was probably why his body had acted the way it did during the accident. In his mind, it was better for someone else to survive than for him to ignore what was happening and keep living his easy life of retreating into video games. This way, he would have been useful to at least one person.

Nacht felt a great sense of elation welling up deep in her chest, threatening to burst out of her mouth in a cascade. Her mouth turned up in a twisted smile, but on Nacht's bespoke form, paid for in extravagant sums through the game's real-money store, it looked alluring and seductive.

“Hah...” she laughed. Then, turning her head skyward, she laughed some more. It was a truly diabolical laugh. “Aaah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha haaaa!” Nacht clenched her fist so tightly that it hurt. Perhaps it was her imagination, but she thought she could feel the wind welling up around her, the ground rumbling beneath her feet.

“This time...” she said, “This time, I’m going to live the way I want to!”

She stared up at the sky, cursing her former self for his uselessness. For running away from everything. Nacht Schatten would not repeat those mistakes.

Everyone had known Toru was a guy since back when he was playing his first character; it wasn't as if he'd been pretending to be a girl on the internet. RWO didn't restrict players' gender at character creation. There was nothing to stop him from having his main character be a boy and his side character be a girl.

RWO placed a lot of stock in realism, but that was exactly why he'd put in as much effort as he did. He wanted to be convincing. He'd used a voice changer while voice chatting with his friends during fights against raid bosses or other serious challenges when there wasn't enough time to type out a message. It was based on the Vocaloid Iotonore and helped him play the part of a girl. Thinking about it that way, the only thing separating him from the guys pretending to be girls online was that he was open about his identity.

Toru had a bit of an obsessive personality, leading him to get really into role-playing. His friends were tolerant of that, and had even started calling him Princess. But he'd also faced an endless slew of perverts hitting on him, openly drooling over the "femboy." They apparently didn't mind either, albeit for different reasons.

It occurred to Toru that he should properly inspect the body he'd been reborn in. He reached toward himself with trembling hands and first touched Nacht's hair. It was long and black, softer than silk, and pleasantly fragrant. For a moment, he lost himself in stroking it.

Then he inspected her face. It was oval-shaped, which he had always said was ideal for a girl. She had golden rings in her eyes, and small red scales beneath them, shining like jewels. He could hardly believe that it was his own face he was touching.

And then his hands drifted lower. "I made the chest pretty small..." he said. "But ooh! It's kind of soft! Wait! What am I—?!" Seized by a sudden base desire, he had inadvertently begun groping his own breasts! Panicked, he pulled

his hands away.

“N-No,” he told himself. “There’s nothing wrong with it.” He *needed* to inspect them! There was nothing to feel guilty about! He had no reason at all to be ashamed of his own body!

“Wait.” Suddenly, there was a sinking feeling in his gut. “This is a girl’s body...”

Toru was right, and it turned him deathly pale. “It’s gone! It’s not there! But I never even got to use it!” Then he sighed. “Well, Nacht *is* a girl. It only makes sense.” After all, this was more than just an isekai story. Yes, it was a legendary *genderbent* isekai, spoken of only in legend!

Suddenly, Toru’s awareness of Nacht’s body’s femininity hit him like a truck. He could feel the wind blowing between her bare legs from under the skirt of her dress. He felt strong and full of energy, but somehow, in a woman’s body, he couldn’t seem to relax.

“Well,” he said, “no use crying over spilled milk. I need to figure out what I’m going to do next!” He needed to learn what this body of hers could do or else he’d never survive on his own in the forest.

Nacht was almost max level and had a great number of ability points invested in agility. Running away was the one thing she could beat almost anyone at. Toru shook off the dread pressing down on his chest, put his loneliness aside, and opened his mouth. “All right. Let’s start with the physical.”

With her evasive prowess, Nacht was probably one of the nimblest characters in the entire player base. Of course, with her completely neglected defense, taking damage would be sure to hurt. Toru wanted to avoid getting hit whenever possible, and to do that, he would need a thorough understanding of his new body’s speed.

Toru sprinted forward as fast as he could. It only lasted a moment, though, before he came to a realization.

“Huh—?!” he began, but his voice was drowned out by the horrible boom of the sound barrier being broken. Powerful shock waves spread as he ran, felling the surrounding trees, and the ground he had kicked off burst apart like it had been struck by a meteor, leaving behind a giant crater. Of course, he’d had no

time to notice any of that.

Stop! he thought. *Stooooop!*

His body seemed to be moving on its own, speeding up against his will. When he reached the lake, he found himself running on top of the water, but still he couldn't stop. Not until he collided with the face of a cliff.

"Owwwwwwwww..."

He was stuck dangling upside down from a hole he had punched in the rock. Fortunately, the Night's Embrace dress Nacht had been wearing sufficed to hide her shame.

The test had gone terribly wrong. Toru tried with all his might to get to his feet, causing Nacht's body to leap high into the air and perform a single flip before landing back on the ground. It was a superhuman leap—far beyond anything Toru had ever been able to do in the game—but somehow, he'd known he could do it.

"What...?" he said. His mouth hung open in astonishment at the impossible feats he was performing. "What is this? Am I a monster? Is this even my body?"

He had only meant to do a simple dash, yet the damage he had wrought was nothing short of cataclysmic. He looked far into the distance, toward the crater that marked his starting line. The area around it had been completely ruined. Shock waves had dug out the earth, creating deep grooves where the ground had folded in on itself. Not even the lake had been spared, its waters raging.

Toru gazed out at the devastation, indescribably thankful to Night's Embrace for shielding him from the brunt of the damage. Then he remembered something.

"Oh, yeah! Items!" Toru had a truly incredible number of items in storage. He had consumables of all sorts at maximum stock, a collection of useless items, and the tools and equipment he and his friends used. Many within that treasure trove were Legendary and Ancient artifacts.

Even more important, however, was his cross-character storage. That was where he kept the items he'd bought from the real-money store. Nacht's weapons and armor were in there, as well as two of her guild's Ultimate-tier

items, of which they had only six. It was only through the cooperation of all of Nacht's friends that they'd been won.

"Open storage list," Toru instructed. All of his previous voice commands had failed, though, so he was pretty sure nothing was going to happen. "Nothing, huh — What?!" His outstretched hand plunged into a vortex that seemed to lead to some kind of pocket dimension. In his mind, he could see countless items. He was confused at first, but he poked around until he figured out how to select a potion and remove it from storage.

Placing the red liquid-filled bottle in the palm of his hand, he unconsciously touched his other hand to his chest in relief. "That's something..." he said. "I still have my personal storage." At the very least, there would be no need to worry about food. There was a veritable mountain of provisions stashed away in there.

"Wait." he said. "Do I even *need* to eat? Demiwyrmes are supposed to be half-dragon, right?"

In the game, Nacht had found the hidden Realm of Dragons and received the blessing of the eldest drakes, inheriting the Dragon Factor from them and becoming a demiwyrm. All to be able to pick from the dragon skill tree, of course. Nacht had changed her race and class four times. Half of her body was made out of pure draconic power.

Still, Nacht's appearance was that of a young woman; she looked much more like a human than she did a dragon. Her only particularly noticeable scales were the inverted ones around her thighs.

"One more thing to check..." Toru said. Items and equipment could wait, but his spell choices could not. "Magic, huh...?"

Neglecting to learn the extent of his strength in a strange world would be tantamount to suicide. But the disaster from earlier was seared into his brain. The part of him that had craved mass destruction by means of overly flashy magic was long gone.

"Let's not do anything dangerous," he said. "Something with a small area of effect. Restrained. Maybe just a little badass."

He decided to cast the lowest level *Ars Draconis* spell. There was a lake nearby—perfect to extinguish any out-of-control fires. He gulped. He probably *could* use magic. The thought excited him in spite of himself, and he focused on the mysterious power inside him.

Suddenly, Nacht struck a pose, crossing her arms dramatically. And without any conscious input on Toru's part, she began to speak.

"Hear me, O dark fire..." she began. "Consume my enemies! Burn until nothing remains! *Ars Draconis: Helldrake Eruption!*"

Huh?! What the heck am I saying?!

Toru was taken aback. That would have been embarrassing for a middle schooler, let alone a university student. Toru wished he could vanish on the spot. And worse, nothing had even happened.

Stupid Nacht! Toru thought. Dumb, stupid *Nacht!*

He had been so careful, even thinking to aim the spell toward the lake, but in the end, all he had managed to do was make some kind of bizarre pose. He gave up. Clearly, the magic wasn't going to do anything. And then, he felt a strange sensation, like energy leaving his body.

Immediately, the lake caught fire. Its once-placid surface was consumed by pillars of black flame—not just one, but six, stretching up toward the heavens.

"What?!" There was steam everywhere, and the six pillars had merged into one.

"What...?" Toru repeated. What on earth was happening?

No! No, no, no, no, no! This isn't possible! Was that Ars Draconis? The school that only has spells from the four main elements? The consummate eyesore? The thing everyone told me not to bother to use, no matter how I got my magic? This is just...way too absurd...

His mind felt like it was full of fog. "Am I...overpowered?"

There wasn't a drop of water where the lake had once been. Jet-black embers fluttered through the air. He had tried to hold back this time, but once again, it had ended in catastrophe. He was profoundly sorry.

“I-I didn’t do it!” Toru blurted out, then ran. He never found out what became of the lake.

‡

“Jeez... I’ve really gone and done it, haven’t I?”

It may not have been on purpose, but Toru had reduced an entire lakefront, once teeming with life, to ash. It was deeply regrettable. Then why couldn’t he bring himself to care? If his usual self—Toru from Japan—had done something like that, the guilt would have absolutely crushed him. And yet here he was, utterly unconcerned. He shook. This sudden change in attitude disturbed him.

“What’s happening to me?”

There was only one thing he could think of. The body he had been reincarnated into was Nacht’s. Right now, the part of him that thought of himself as Toru Aikawa was out in front, but his sense of self was being absorbed by the body’s memories of being Nacht. Even at that moment, Nacht, the character he had made, might have actively been in the process of overwriting his identity.

That must have been why he’d been relatively unbothered by the destruction they’d wreaked. His mind was no longer his own. Nacht’s memories must have been influencing his own thoughts. He could feel it deep in his psyche.

This wasn’t baseless conjecture either. There was, for example, the absurd bit of dialogue they’d said. “*Hear me, O dark fire...*” Toru the university student would never say something like that—and even that was ignoring the humiliating pose they’d struck. He had left that adolescent nonsense back in high school.

But Nacht, on the other hand...

In character in the game, using Iotonore’s voice, she very well might have said something like that. After all, she was created from Toru’s obsessions—the parts of himself he’d left behind out of shame. Yes, *Nacht* was liable to say something that cringey.

It struck Toru that he no longer felt bothered by what was happening. Having a girl’s body, superhuman speed, and unimaginable magic power had all

become perfectly natural. “Maybe I should just come to terms with it...” he said. “Just accept that I’m Nacht now...”

An ordinary university boy probably wouldn’t have made peace with everything—the reincarnation, the other world, being his game character—so quickly. But even that no longer bothered her. “Should I change how I talk?” she wondered to herself. “You know, act all bombastic and superior and haughty, like a middle schooler playing pretend?” It was one thing role-playing with her friends. As a joke, it had been fairly well received, but to act like that for real would just be cringe.

And yet, now that she had become Nacht, she understood something. Deep inside, this was how she wanted to act.

“Ugh, look at me,” she said, “standing here talking to myself. Well, I guess it’s not like there’s anyone else to talk to in the woods.”

She was alone in a dark forest, and her senses were much sharper than they used to be—sharp enough to tell her that there were no beasts within a good hundred yards. She must be lonely. Toru was used to being by himself, but Nacht had always been surrounded by people. Her friends, the members of the guild Outer Cafeteria, were never far from her side. But now, she had no idea how to get to their old base, the Un-Castle. It probably didn’t even exist in this world. She was stranded, with no way to contact her guildmates.

“I should start looking for people,” she said to herself. “Not because I’m lonely or anything! I need to figure out what I’m going to do next! Anyway, I’m pretty sure my third class had a spell for this.”

Nacht began casting a spell. “*Expand Magic Field...*” she chanted. “*Ars Anima: Soul Search!*”

If she recalled correctly, this spell would locate all self-aware beings within its range, distinguishing between hostile and friendly entities. As she finished casting, a great, complicated mess of information entered her mind.

Nacht was lonely. She began looking specifically for human souls. “There’s four right outside the forest!” Three of them were filthy. The color of their souls made her stomach churn. But the fourth...

“Beautiful...” Nacht murmured. She wondered if the other three were attacking the fourth. If they were, she had to hurry, so she took off running.

“This should be fun!” she said. Excited to meet the person with the beautiful soul, she sped up. The ground beneath her cratered from the force. She was only running, but the impacts of her footfalls were creating a terrible din and destroying the land around her. Not wanting a repeat of the incident with the lake, she activated Twilight Wings, one of her Origin Skills.

They looked like shadows or mist at first—the substance of night given solid form, wrapped around her shoulders like a cloak. Then they concentrated and solidified behind her back, shining with a dark light. In Real World Online, the distinction between dragons and wyrms wasn’t eastern-style versus western-style dragons as it was sometimes understood, but a matter of power. Wyrms were simply an advanced version of dragons. For that reason, while Nacht was considered a wyrm, her wings took the form of western-style dragon wings.

Free from the bonds of gravity, she took to the sky. “Funny,” she said. “It’s my first time flying like this, but these wings feel perfectly natural! This is fun!” As one would expect, Toru had no experience using wings, but somehow, they felt right at home on Nacht’s body.

“I should be careful, though,” Nacht mused. “I don’t want to destroy the world around me!” She equipped a dark-colored bracelet—a cursed item, the Band of Weakness. Normally, this wouldn’t be an item someone would want to equip; all it did was lower all your in-game stats by a third. There was a quest you could do to break the curse and transform it into the Band of Might, but even the Band of Might was mediocre at best. Nacht would have rather just worn one of the bracelets she’d gotten from the real-money store, and so, fortunately enough under the present circumstances, she had never done the quest.

Nacht smirked to herself as she put the bracelet on. “Tch...” she said. “Enough! The time is not yet ripe to unleash the power contained within my arm!” It was an absurd thing to say, but she found that she wasn’t ashamed in the slightest. She supposed she had to admit it—she really *was* Nacht. Her mind was no longer in turmoil. It had completely accepted her new body. Her soul, which until now had been at odds with itself, had become one.

I'm Nacht...

In that case, Nacht's thoughts should probably take precedence over Toru's.

Her body, welling with strength, streaked through the night sky at top speed. The scenery passed by like a frame-by-frame playback as the information her spell was giving her entered her mind. Her dragon eyes, surrounded by rings of gold, showed her a vision of a girl being attacked by three men with lecherous smiles. They had her surrounded. "Filthy souls," Nacht muttered to herself. "No wonder."

The girl's scrawny body was unsteady on its feet. Her soul was flickering in agony, struggling to bear the absurdity of fate and her own resentment for her powerlessness. The Soul Dragon within Nacht could see it clearly.

"Lovely..." she said.

Silence fell. Nacht's eyes met the girl's.



Beneath her starving, filthy body and mud-stained clothes, her pure white, powerful little soul was achingly beautiful. Nacht would not allow such a lovely soul to be ruined. She would not let it become stained by resentment.

“Do not curse your fate, girl.” Nacht alighted at her side. “Smile, for you have been blessed.”

The girl, leaning her weary body against a tree, did her best to smile. Nacht beamed back with her whole face. “That’s it,” she said. “You can relax now. There’s nothing to worry about anymore.”

The girl closed her eyes, and Nacht stomped a foot. That was all it took to send a shock wave rippling through the ground. The bandits were no longer brandishing their weapons or leering. They were trembling in their boots.

“Now then,” Nacht said, “what have we here? The three of you weren’t thinking of abducting this defenseless girl, were you? Or was this perhaps a rape? Not that it makes a difference; either way, you were tormenting the weak! I hope you’re prepared to be tormented in turn!”

Torment hadn’t really been Nacht’s plan at first. She was going to grant the men swift, merciless deaths. But then, with a trembling voice, one of the thugs spoke up.

“H-Heh! Y-Y-You’re just my type, c-cutie! I-I’ll h-have my way with *you* too!”

Empty words. Nacht’s Dragon Aura completely prevented low-level monsters from acting. The man was clearly fighting just to stay conscious. But his words were enough to enrage Nacht.

“What’s that?” she asked. “You want a taste? Well, if you think you can take me, then by all means, help yourself!”

When Nacht had become a demiwyrm, she’d chosen Soul Dragon as her Dragon Factor. Her reasoning at the time was simple: it was awesome, it was super cool, and it fit her image perfectly! But now, she reflected, it may have been the best possible choice. After all, it gave her the ability to see a person’s nature. Every stagnation and impurity marring a person’s soul was a reflection of their deeds in life. Someone with as filthy a soul as these bandits must have committed a horrifying number of sins. Hardly surprising, considering they had

been attacking a young girl. The fools would get what was coming to them.

“This is the end of your worthless lives,” Nacht said. “*Ars Anima...*” As a Soul Dragon demiwyrm, *Ars Anima* was one of Nacht’s specialty magic schools. According to the game, it was higher-dimensional magic that could bind, judge, or guide the soul—the very core of a living being. In this case, the effect would be judge. “...*Negative Gate!*”

A hole opened in the sky. There was an eerie sound like a key being turned, and then a dark light began to spill forth. The gate had been opened. Countless grasping hands issued forth. They could hear the pitiable wails of the dead.

“Ee—!” the bandit cried, desperately trying to fight off the arms. “S-Stop! Please! Spare me!”

“Spare you?” Nacht regarded the man coldly. “As if you would spare someone begging *you* for mercy?” A derivative line, perhaps, but Nacht meant it.

“Noooo!” The man cried. “Help! Someone help me! I don’t care who! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to— G-Ghk!” A dead hand pierced his chest. He couldn’t speak or even breathe as the arms’ embrace dragged him silently to the very depths of hell.

“The dead will hold your funeral,” Nacht said. “Perhaps your soul may even be purified. Try to live a better life next time around.” The golden light of her eyes fell on the other bandits. “And now, it’s your turn.”

The two surviving bandits had no idea what was happening. They had gone so far beyond pale with fear that it looked like their hearts had stopped. They were drenched in sweat and gasping for breath, terrified of what would happen to them. They could hardly believe that Nacht was real.

“W-Wait!” One of them said, pleading for his life. “I’m not like them! I’m no serial killer or sex maniac! I’m just your everyday farmer! But the lord’s taxes were too high for us simple folk to make a living and I had to turn to banditry! I didn’t have a choice! But I’ve never killed anyone, honest!” The bandit pleaded desperately, hoping beyond hope to be shown mercy. But it all amounted to mere excuses.

It might have worked on Toru, but now that she was Nacht, she had lost all

patience for empty talk.

“Truly?” she asked. “How sad.” She halted her Dragon Aura just when the bandit felt like he was about to break, releasing the pressure for a second.

“Y-Yes! I knew you’d understand!”

Nacht affected an understanding, friendly smile. “But I have to ask,” she said, “how did it feel the first time you raped a girl?”

“Oh!” the man exclaimed. “Well, of course I felt—” he stopped himself, but to no avail.

“I see!” Nacht could see the shape of the man’s soul as clearly as his body. “Your soul is telling me you had so much fun you couldn’t help it!”

“Gh—!”

“Everyone faces unhappiness and misfortune in their life. Some souls rise above. Others fall from the path and become twisted.” Nacht held the girl gently in her arms. She was scrawny and filthy and smelled like she hadn’t bathed in weeks. And yet her soul was pristine. “This is the result of the choices you made,” Nacht told the bandit. “I will hear no complaints.”

The wind blew. Nacht laughed wickedly, not even sparing a glance for the bandits. All she had eyes for was the girl. “To quote a friend of mine,” she muttered, “perhaps this was fate.”

The girl’s outfit had to have once been quite pretty, but it was filthy with grime and mud. Her unkempt golden hair shone dimly in the light of the moons. Her eyes were closed, but they had been large and bright when they were open, and they had filled Nacht with a strong desire to protect her. Her body was still beautiful despite all the weight she had lost. Her ears were slightly pointed too, marking her as a denizen of a fantasy world. But more than anything, it was her beautiful, strong soul that had enchanted Nacht.

“It’s over,” she told the girl. “You’re safe.” But the girl didn’t respond. “Hey! Wake up!” This was the first person Nacht had met since coming to this world. She had been so elated. But the girl seemed terribly ill. She wasn’t moving at all.

“Oh no...” Nacht said. “Is this actually really bad?!”

It was obvious that the girl was weak, but unlike in RWO, Nacht had no display showing her the girl's stats. She had no idea what her HP or MP was, let alone her hunger, stamina, or any other status effect. Her dragon eyes had shown her that the girl had lost much of her life force, but that was all she knew.

"She's struggling to breathe... Hey, you! You're not going to die on me, are you?!" She listened to the girl's heart. It was still beating, but it sounded like it might stop at any moment.

What should I do? she wondered. *Should I use a special potion? Or if she's sick, maybe a Yggdrasil Leaf? Or a Spirit Elixir for enervation? I could give her a Hermit Peach to restore her hunger...* Nacht was shaking silently. This was hitting her harder than she'd thought it would.

"No!" Nacht cried. "I won't let it end like this!" She would not let their meeting be in vain. There *was* a way to save her, something that was guaranteed to work. It was something she could only use twice—an ability she had never ended up using in-game.

Nacht hesitated, but only for a second. She held the girl tight and brought her face close to her own. Her heart was pounding. It felt like it might burst. Her face was bright red, and it only got redder the more she thought about what she was doing.

She touched her lips to the girl's and kissed her, sighing softly. This was the trigger to activate her Dragon-Bound Servant Origin Skill. Her very soul began to release its power like a gust of wind, tracing light-green patterns of magic that spread out in an intricate geometric design—a magic circle. The girl's body began to glow. And as the power of her pure white soul became Nacht's, Nacht saw into her dreams.

‡

When did she first notice that she was different?

Aisha was turning twenty this year, but her body and face were those of a child. It was as if she had simply stopped aging. She looked like she was ten years old.

She was a weak girl, unsurprisingly, and her memory was terrible. On top of

that, she slept long hours every day, sometimes giggling like a child as she dreamed. For some reason, she could understand the words of spirits, but if she told her friends that, they would just give her dirty looks. So Aisha learned to stay quiet and keep her head down.

The truth was that Aisha was half-elf. Elves were said to live for thousands of years. Their sense of time was fundamentally different from that of humans. Early on in an elf's development, they spent much of their time asleep, heightening their sensitivity to the natural world and slowly building their tremendous magic power. It was a stage of growth that lasted an average of forty to fifty years. Only then would they begin to physically mature—a process that took another forty to fifty years before they reached the level of development of a twenty-year-old human. After that, their aging seemed to completely stop. Elves barely grew old, remaining youthful in body until the moment of their death. Or so Aisha's father had told her. The only people in the pioneer village who had known Aisha's mother Floria were her father and the previous mayor.

Things had been well enough when Aisha's peers were still young, but once she had reached ten years of age, the gap had started to become more and more obvious. By fifteen, everyone had become an adult while Aisha was still a child.

People spat heartless invective at her. They called her a useless failure, an unlucky child, and even a monster. It shouldn't have taken the adults any special knowledge to understand that this was just the result of Aisha's ancestry, but in such a small village, the people had no experience with other races. They were in no mood to look after a nominal adult who couldn't do any useful work.

But Aisha had another problem—her diet. This was another reason the people of the village treated her so cruelly. She couldn't stand the smell of beasts. No matter how hard she tried, she simply couldn't stomach the meat they ate at the harvest festival. Milk didn't suit her palate, nor was she a fan of eggs. All she would touch were grains, beans, and greens. The only thing she enjoyed eating was the fruit her father brought back from his hunting trips.

She was slow to mature, a picky eater, unable to work, and slept all day. She

was a burden and a nuisance. That was how she considered her life in that village, yet live she did.

“Don’t worry, Aisha,” her father told her. “Take your time and grow up at your own pace. I’ll watch over you until you do. I promise.” He supported her well, and she was able to reach nineteen years of age thanks to him.

Aisha’s father had once been an adventurer. He was an invaluable asset to the village—the guard, the best hunter, and the best pioneer. As long as he took care of her, she had a place to live.

One day, without warning, a plague struck the town, and her father grew terribly ill. The fate of a family that lost its breadwinner was cruel. They ran quickly through their meager stores. Aisha kept looking after her father while he struggled with the illness, but it was only a matter of time. When they ran out of food, his condition worsened, and nobody offered any assistance. Nobody would help them.

Aisha bowed and groveled, begging again and again for them to please, *please* help her father. But it seemed that the gossip around town was that she, the unlucky child, was the cause of the disease.

That was what finally made her understand. They wouldn’t help because they hated her. Because she was a useless girl.

On his deathbed, her father spoke to her. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I won’t be able to protect you any longer... I wasn’t able to keep my promises. Not to you, and not to Floria. I love you, Aisha. Forgive me...”

When he was gone, Aisha no longer had a place in the village. She was cast out, and so she fled into the woods. She walked on and on just to survive, trying to find it in herself to curse all of it. The villagers, the disease, her mother, the bandits, the world...

But she couldn’t. Aisha couldn’t bring herself to hate them. The only one she managed to hate, the only person at whom she directed all her anger and resentment, was herself. What *should* she curse if not her own pitiful weakness? And soon, she would be with her father.

And then a god descended from the heavens and saved her from her fate at

the hands of the bandits. All that was left, Aisha thought, was for her to be punished for her foolishness.

Her mind was hazy. She was all but dead. But now, she could feel herself being wrapped in a warm light. She felt like something unimaginably vast was being poured into her. Her lips touched something warm. It felt good. So good that she wished it would last forever. But all too suddenly, it was over.

‡

The girl's soul consolidated and stabilized. Her body, too, was affected by the spell, and flesh returned to her scrawny bones. Her skin and cheeks regained their color. A glance was all it took to tell that she was in much better condition. The filth caking her clothes and body vanished in the light, displaying her true beauty. Nacht could feel her happiness as their lips touched. And then the girl opened her eyes.

Ahhh...

Their lips were still almost touching—they were close enough that Nacht could feel the girl's breath on her skin. Nacht felt something stir inside her, and the girl seemed to feel the same. Neither one of them moved. The night breeze was warm against their cheeks.

Suddenly, Nacht regained her wits and quickly pulled away. "Ah!" The girl made a sad little sound, but Nacht wasn't paying attention at all. What she had just done was sexual harassment! She was sure to be banned from RWO!

"Oh no!" Nacht said. "This isn't— This wasn't— I was just— That was first aid!" she lied. "Artificial respiration! It wasn't because I wanted to kiss those sweet lips of yours! No! I mean—!" That was *certainly* the wrong thing to say. But the girl just squirmed bashfully, staring mutely at Nacht. It didn't look like she was at all upset.

It *was* true that she had used Dragon-Bound Servant for something like first aid, but it was undeniable that there had been some personal enjoyment in the mix as well.

"Ehe..." the girl giggled. "I, um... No, I mean, who...who are you?"

"There was nothing I could do!" Nacht continued to protest. "I mean, it was

necessary! I mean... Huh?" It dawned on her that the girl did not, in fact, seem angry. She was staring at her, bewildered. "Me?" Nacht said. "The name's— No, sorry... A pleasure to make your acquaintance!" She tried to speak as amiably as she could to give the girl as little reason to be afraid as possible. "My... My name is Nacht Schatten. Go ahead and call me Nacht if you like! I'm sorry to suddenly kiss you like that..."

"N-No," the girl said. "I'm glad." Then she stopped herself. "I-I-I-I mean, no! I'm...um... I'm glad you saved my life? Th-Thank you... M-M-My name i-is— Ouch! I bip by tonk..."

"Yes, that'll happen if you're too tense..."

"I-I'b bot! I'b bot tenze!" the girl insisted, but it was obvious given how loudly her teeth were chattering. She couldn't even give her own name. Maybe Nacht had come on too strong; she had to get the girl to calm down first.

Nacht gently held the girl's hand and pulled her to her feet. Then she stomped her foot twice. A claylike blob of earth rose up from the ground, shaping itself into two chairs a second later. "Here," Nacht said. "Have a seat." She led the girl daintily by the hand like a knight escorting a princess.

"Whaaat?!" the girl exclaimed, but she sat down obediently. Nacht then snapped her fingers and a table appeared between the two of them. This was just an application of her Golemcraft ability, which turned out to be surprisingly versatile. Once she had gotten the hang of it, she could make anything from life-sized figures to massage chairs.

"Now then," Nacht said, "let's take things nice and easy. Why don't you tell me your name?"

"O-Okay..." she said. "My name is Aisha."

"Hey, relax! I want us to be comfortable around each other! I mean, you're the first person I've met in this world, and now you're bound to me as my servant..."

"Ah?!" Aisha trembled. "What do you—?" She seemed like she was tensing up again.

"Don't worry," said Nacht. "I'll explain everything. But first, let's get to know

each other a bit—introduce ourselves. It's our first meeting, after all."

"O-Okay..." Aisha said. "But... Lady Nacht, you're a god, aren't you? I hardly know what to ask someone like you..."

"A god?" Nacht echoed. "I'm nothing *that* special. I'm pretty much the same as you! We're both half-human, it's just that my other half is a little bit more...wild." It looked like the girl's estimation of Nacht was a little bit too high. Nacht, of course, would have welcomed such breathless exaltation from someone else, but if Aisha was going to be her servant, things were different. As outrageous and egotistical as Nacht was, she wanted to treat Aisha as a trusted companion.

Nacht glanced at Aisha's cute pointed ears. "You're half-human and half-elf, if I'm not mistaken?"

"A-Ah! Yes, that's right. I'm a half-elf..." Aisha lowered her head. For some reason, she seemed ashamed.

Elves were one of the most attractive and popular races in gaming! Those that were played by real women were worshiped like an endangered species! Being part elven was nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, it should have been a point of pride. *Scores* of elves had been crowned Miss Real World Online in the annual beauty pageant! (Nacht herself had placed in the contest just once. It was secretly one of her proudest accomplishments.)

It suddenly struck Nacht that a real half-elf was sitting in front of her. "You have such beautiful ears!" she said. It was all she could do not to reach out and squeeze them right then and there.

"Wh-What?! 'B-Beautiful'? But they're different from everyone else's..."

"What do you mean?" Nacht said. "They're the ears of an elf! Everyone loves elves! They're super sexy! Perverts wanna lick their ears! Of *course* they're beautiful! And if you're worried about being different from everyone, well...have you ever met anyone weirder than me?" Nacht, freshly reincarnated, wasn't even from this world. She was at least a hundred times stranger than Aisha.

"You really...?" Aisha started to cry. "I... I..." she sobbed. "Waaah haa haa..."

“Wh-What’s wrong?! Why are you crying?! D-Did I say something wrong?!”

“*Sniff...* N-No...” Aisha managed to say through her tears. “It’s just... Nobody’s ever said anything nice about me before...except my father. I was just...really, really happy. I’m a stupid, dumb girl...” she said. “I can’t do anything useful at all, and my body just won’t get any bigger. My dad was always looking after me...”

Nacht thought back to the memories she had seen when she touched Aisha’s soul. As the only half-elf in her village, she blamed herself for not being able to do anything, even to the point of self-hatred. But to Nacht, that was silly. Nacht had never been able to reach the power needed for an endgame character. She’d needed her friends to accomplish anything. She didn’t see anything wrong with needing help if you couldn’t do something on your own.

“I was completely useless...” Aisha sobbed. “My father was always, always looking after me, but I couldn’t do anything to help him. But even still, he always said he loved me. He... He told me I was good...”

“I see. It sounds like he was a wonderful father.”

“Daddy!” Aisha wailed. “Waaaaaaah!” She collapsed into a mess of tears. It seemed like she was out of words. She had to have been suppressing her emotions in her struggle to survive. It was no surprise to see them all come bursting out now that she was safe. Maybe her departed father had been watching over her, keeping her safe in such cruel circumstances until she met Nacht.

“Go ahead and let it all out,” Nacht said. “I don’t have much of a chest, but you’re free to cry into it all you like.”

Nacht hugged Aisha close to her chest and gazed up at the sky. If she hadn’t been here, Aisha would no doubt have died. She felt an odd connection to the girl, almost like she was someone Nacht had known in her previous life. She held Aisha tight, doing her best to soothe her noble soul from the weariness of facing a cold reality, comforting and praising her as best she could. The moons vanished behind a cloud and emerged again, only to pass behind yet another cloud. Eventually, Aisha stopped crying.

“Hey, Aisha?” Nacht asked when the girl returned to her senses. “Would you

like to come with me?”

“B-But Lady Nacht...” Aisha protested, “I won’t be any use to you! I’m not strong, and my memory’s bad, and I’m picky about what I eat... I’m sure to cause you nothing but trouble...”

Nacht laughed. “That’s not a problem at all! I’m not looking for more battle strength, and I’m reasonably confident in my memory. And as for your pickiness, we’ll just stock up on the stuff *you* like to eat!”

“B-But... Why would you want to travel with someone like me?” Aisha seemed a little cautious, but much more confused. She looked at Nacht with big, misty eyes.

Nacht decided to give her a straightforward, honest answer. “Because I want to be with you,” she said. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Eee...” Aisha squeaked. “N-No, that’s enough...” she said. “Thank you...”

“Besides,” Nacht went on, “I had to make you my soulbound servant to save your life. That means my own power might influence how you develop from here on. I hope you don’t mind.”

She looked genuinely anxious. Dragon-Bound Servant was an ability a player could use to bring recruitable NPCs into their service. It had also granted Aisha the power of the Dragon Priestess.

“I don’t mind!” Aisha squeaked, hastily reassuring Nacht. “In fact, I’m honored! But...still... I’m just...”

“I’d be in trouble without you!” Nacht objected. “I get lonely really easily! I would much rather travel with a companion! Especially a girl as pretty as you...”

“‘P-Pretty’?! Ah ha...”

Aisha’s concerns would be resolved in time anyway. In just a few decades, her body would finish developing its magic power, and then she would get stronger and stronger.

“No, that’s a little dishonest of me, actually,” Nacht said. She lowered her gaze, suddenly looking sheepish. Then, she looked straight at Aisha. “I said I wanted a companion, but that isn’t quite right,” she said. “I want *you*, Aisha.”

Aisha's face turned bright red. Nacht was certain that hers had become a similar color, but she hadn't lied. She was so convinced of the value of the girl in front of her that she had shared with her the power of a dragon.

"Come with me," Nacht said. "I need you." She held out her hand, inviting Aisha to walk by her side.

Aisha looked at her feet and trembled. She was clearly struggling to keep her emotions in check. Finally, after a long pause, she knelt down and lowered her head in reverence. Before Nacht knew what was happening, Aisha took her hand in both of hers and, of all possible things she could have done, gently kissed it.

"My Mistress..." she breathed. "I swear to serve you faithfully until the end of time." She beamed up at Nacht with a look of pure happiness on her face.

Nacht could only stare in astonishment.

‡

That day, the world shook. The four great dragons—ancient, legendary beings of equivalent stature to the gods—vanished. Even the Dragon Priestess, who had received their blessing, did not know where they had gone or what they intended. The Holy Church of the Ancient Dragons was thrown into turmoil.

The water dragon, guardian of Aquellion, was gone without a trace. The earth dragon, who dwelled within the sacred mountain of Airenberg, suddenly rent the earth with a terrible roar and vanished into its depths. The wind dragon and fire dragons, who did not have permanent dwellings, flew off to places unknown.

Dragons were extradimensional beings who lived alongside humanity. Their tremendous magic power gave them influence over the forces of nature, which they used benevolently for the sake of the people. The lake Aquellion, where the water dragon lived, was perhaps the most famous example of their blessings. It was the largest freshwater lake in the world, an unending source of pure water.

The dragons were wise. They would not have left without reason. But why would they vanish after living alongside humanity for hundreds, or perhaps

thousands of years?

“What could possibly be happening...?” the priestess wondered in vain.

Afterward, this day would come to be known as the Calamity of the Dragons—a sign of a great disturbance to the natural order. The world did not yet know that the dragons’ vanishing would also portend the advent of a new being entirely.

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In fact, the disturbance to the natural order was not far off. Beneath the dried-out lake bed, something began to stir.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha...” a woman laughed, her voice tinged with deep hatred. “At last... At long last, I have arisen!”

She regarded her surroundings—still alight with embers—with contempt. “But who could have done this, I wonder,” she said. “Perhaps they meant to kill me?” The displeasure in her voice was enough to strike terror into anyone’s heart. Even the fiercest monsters would flee before her.

“Well, no matter,” she declared, and her horn began to shine red. “Soon, my wounds will be healed, and then I will have my revenge!”

Chapter 2: Bonds and Small Miracles

Second Avenue of Free Market City, one of the great roads leading to the center of the city, was colloquially known as Food Alley. True to its name, in the evenings it would fill up with busy voices and mouthwatering scents. There were delicious things to eat as far as the eye could see—skewers sizzling in iron pans, toasted ham and cheese sandwiches with tomato, stalls that squeezed fresh fruit into juice right in front of you. Here was where the fresh ingredients that had been carried into the city were transformed into food. It was always a busy place and, much like the food, the people had also come from far and wide.

A group eyed the assembled crowd.

“Goodness, they’re busy today. What would you like to eat, Krista?”

“Anything’s fine. But if I had to pick, I’d go with something sweet.”

“Hey, come on! Dinner’s gotta be meat! Ain’t that right, Cap’n A’lu?”

“If it smells good, it’s fine by me!”

These were the members of Rose of Ice, the greatest adventuring party in the city. As they made their way through the street, the crowds silently parted before them. They weren’t forcing anyone aside, though; this was merely the silent power of their presence. They bore themselves with the distinctive air of those who had seen combat. Sasha, who was a friendly girl, bowed apologetically at the people as they passed through.

“All right, to start with, how about ten of those skewers, and—”

“Hold on, Garen! Take care not to buy more than we can eat!”

“I’ll eat any extra!” Garen said. “Or Krista will.”

“I’m not looking to gorge myself,” Krista responded. “I’ll just eat what I can.”

“Krista’s lucky. No matter how much she eats, her figure is absolutely perfect...”



There would be nothing left of the ten skewers, of course. Adventuring was hard physical labor. It just made sense for them to load up on the calories when they could. They went on to buy everything tasty they happened to set eyes on and stuffed themselves until their stomachs were full. Then, after they passed through Food Alley and arrived at their inn in the Central District, Krista ate a large crepe for dessert. She insisted it went into a separate stomach she had just for sweets.

“So whaddya think of the job this time?” Garen asked.

“For a bounty, it’s not bad. Pretty good reward too,” replied A’lu.

The job in question was a request from the nobility of the Free Market City to exterminate the large-scale bandit group Black Fang. Most of them were peasants who had turned to banditry to escape a life of poverty, but some within their ranks were skilled enough fighters to handle most mercenaries. There were said to be somewhere around a hundred of them in total. For years, they had been expanding their influence, and now they were the largest group of bandits in the area. They were big enough that they’d begun attacking the wagons in which the nobility shipped their goods. That was why they had a bounty on their heads—one large enough to attract the likes of the Rose of Ice.

“In other words, our proud nobility finally deigned to get off their fat asses and do something for a change. Not that I’m complaining, I suppose.” Sasha hated nobles. Her words dripped with venomous sarcasm.

“Yeah,” said Garen. “Even a couple hundred bandits would be no match for us.” It was a boast, but Garen was not a foolish man. What he said was the truth. The four of them had proved themselves to be some of the strongest the world had to offer. No B-rank adventurer could stand against them, let alone a force composed of peasants and mercenary killers.

“Then is everyone in favor of taking this request?” Krista asked. She didn’t raise her voice at all, but her words were clear and precise, cutting through the air like a sharp sword. Krista’s face rarely showed any emotion. It was kind of like she was forcing herself whenever she spoke. Her companions had been with her for a long time, however, so they knew that this peculiarity of hers was the result of her vast magic power. But with whipped cream from the crepe still

smears on her cheeks, she looked like a child.

“I’m in.”

“Me too.”

“Me three.”

Krista nodded.

Krista Niese Branrichter, also known by her sobriquet the Ice Queen, was a young A-rank adventurer. Young as she was, her power was already far beyond human limits. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind about her ability to clear out an army of bandits, even on her own. At least, not until she met *him*...

“To think I would meet you here, of all places...Dulan the Sword Fiend.”

Her companions had fallen. Krista alone stood, facing her opponent with her rapier drawn.

“Make this good...” the man replied almost silently.

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At that moment, Aisha was pattering along after Nacht, who had slowed her pace to match Aisha’s, and was so clearly overjoyed that she looked like she might burst into song any moment. Aisha had called her “Mistress” and sworn to serve her until the end of time. Nacht didn’t know if this was some change affecting Aisha or a sign that her will had been consumed entirely, but she didn’t care. She was just happy to have Aisha traveling at her side.

“Mistress,” “the end of time”... It all sounded so portentous and dramatic. It *was* technically true given that Aisha had become her soulbound servant, but all Nacht had wanted was a companion on the road. Still, Aisha had said those words, and Nacht had accepted her role. If it was what Aisha wanted, she would be the perfect mistress.

“Waah!” Aisha tripped on a root sticking out of the ground and almost fell on her face, but she didn’t. Nacht’s reflexes were lightning fast. She was holding Aisha up before she could figure out what had happened.

“Are you okay, Aisha?”

“I-I’m sorry, Mistress! I’m okay! I’m healthy again thanks to you, and I’m ready to walk and walk!” For some reason, Aisha beamed happily, screwing up her cheeks in a big smile. Nacht had no idea what was making her so giddy.

“Well, I’m glad you’re not hurt,” she said. “I can carry you if you’re getting tired, you know.”

“Whew?! I-I dunno...” Aisha blushed and mumbled to herself, lost in her own happy little world.

Nacht cleared her throat, quite deliberately changing the subject. “Well, regardless!” she said. “I’m glad you were lucky enough to run into me in the forest, Aisha, but how come you didn’t go to a larger town or another village?”

“W-Well, I... I’d hardly ever been outside the village before,” Aisha explained. “I don’t know how to get to Free Market City, and...I didn’t want to go to another village...”

“I see...” Nacht said. “Sorry to bring up those memories. I swear, it boggles my mind that nobody was willing to help a cutie like you. So you went to the forest looking for food?”

“Y-Yes. I can hear the voices of the spirits sometimes near the forest, you know. I’m sure it was the spirits that guided me to you, Mistress. I’m grateful to them...” Aisha giggled. And then, distracted by their conversation, she tripped once again. “Wah!”

“Are you okay? The road’s a bit tricky here. Do you need to hold my hand?” Nacht held out her hand, but Aisha just reacted with panic and confusion. It was honestly a little funny.

“Wh-Wh-What?!” she said “But that would be so inappropriate...”

Despite her words, her hand drew toward Nacht’s. It flitted in and out of Nacht’s grasp until she took Aisha’s hand herself.

“We might technically be mistress and servant,” Nacht told her, “but I would rather treat each other as equals. There’s no need to worry about whether or not something’s inappropriate. That doesn’t sound like it would be fun at all.”

“O-Oh!” Aisha exclaimed. “I’m so moved! It’s an honor!”

Nacht had shared her soul with Aisha. In her mind, that made them family. There was nothing wrong with them holding hands at all! Or so Nacht told herself, but the truth of the matter was that between the awkward silence and the feeling of Aisha's body heat on her hand, she was quite embarrassed herself. Maybe some vestigial memories from her time as Toru were making Nacht more bashful than she would have been otherwise.

Once, back when Toru was still playing his first character, he had jokingly pantomimed a kiss to a friendly guildmate only for her to respond, "Ew, gross!" in a voice that made him want to vanish on the spot. Women were frightening creatures, both in the game and in reality. Toru had handed over one of his Legendary-tier items as an apology and narrowly avoided becoming universally known as a creep.

In fact, Toru had had no real experience with women at all. Even Nacht, who had a number of close friends, had never been in love.

Nacht glanced over at Aisha. She was a small, pretty half-elf who stood more than a head shorter than Nacht. Her figure, however, already had subtle but distinctly feminine curves. Nacht was quite confident in her own beauty, but Aisha was every bit as lovely. Now that she was no longer coated in grime and her circulation had gotten better, her skin was soft and smooth. Her hair, once filthy, had been cleaned and was now a brilliant gold. It caught the stray rays of sunlight and shone like a moon in the dark forest.

Nacht remembered sharing a kiss with the girl whose hand she was now holding and suddenly blushed, averting her gaze. She wished that happy moment could have gone on forever. But just then, the pair was rudely interrupted by the sound of beating wings.

"Hm? What the—?" Nacht said. It was almost too loud to be the sound of wings. Nacht was able to use her superhuman demiwyrm hearing to estimate that it was coming from around six miles away, but scarcely ten seconds later, the source of it was flying directly overhead.

"Wh-What...?" Aisha stammered. "N-No way..."

Was it the mighty wingbeats or the blue-green vortex of magic enveloping its body that held the creature in the air? Either way, it came to a stop above

them, blocking out the sun. Its four limbs, covered in dark green scales, terminated in wicked claws, each as large as a person. It was impossible to guess its full height or wingspan, but it was as if a mountain had come to a stop in midair. It had intelligent jade eyes and eight horns that seemingly bent the wind around them, and its serpentine tail rounded out the picture rather forcefully.

“So there are dragons in this world too, are there?” This wasn’t a variety Nacht recognized from the game, but it was unmistakably a dragon. Humans have a feeling of recognition when looking at other humans. Perhaps dragons were the same.

At a glance, the dragon seemed like a massive, overpowering, terrible creature. Aisha, for one, fell flat on her butt, squeezing Nacht’s hand for dear life. Nacht, however, was coolly observing the dragon, using her soul and wyrm eyes to try to guess which of them had greater strength.

“Don’t worry,” she said gently to Aisha, who seemed to have given up any hope of survival before the dragon’s terrible bloodlust. “It’s just a dragon. It’s no match for me.”

The dragon’s eyes lacked the telltale golden rings. In RWO, this would mean that it was not a wyrm, but one of their lesser cousins: a common dragon, ranging in level from 50 to 100. Nacht wasn’t quite max level, but she was quite high nonetheless at level 147. She should have no trouble winning in a fight. Even if the dragon was as strong as a dragon could possibly be without becoming a wyrm—a level 100 raid boss—she had no doubt in her ability to protect Aisha and escape with their lives, if nothing else. No big deal.

That being said, those thoughts were all based on the game. Nacht wasn’t certain how powerful that would make her compared to creatures of this other world. She couldn’t let her guard down...but it probably wasn’t necessary to remove her Band of Weakness.

“It’s just trying to intimidate us,” Nacht went on. “But I’m way stronger. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Aisha nodded just slightly, but stayed sitting where she had fallen.

“Now then...” Nacht said, turning her attention to the newcomer. “What

business do you have with me, cute little dragon?"

"So you are the outsider born into our world," the dragon said, speaking directly into Nacht's mind. Dragons could understand human speech and were very intelligent. *"What vast power..."*

"I'm guessing that means you aren't the one who brought me here," Nacht replied. "Oh well. So, what, you're just here to welcome me to the neighborhood? In that case, I suggest you quiet that bloodlust of yours. I would hate to have to kill my own kin." "Stop bothering my servant!" was the message she was trying to send. Aisha was a young girl. She needed to be handled with care!

"Indeed..." the dragon intoned, and its bloodlust, which had been bearing down on them with palpable force, vanished. *"As an observer, it is my duty to expel outsiders from this world, but it is clear that your strength is far beyond mine. I am one of the four great dragons, the Storm Dragon Alhazred. To the children of men, I am known as the god of wind, travel, and hospitality. But to you, I suppose I am nothing more than a 'cute little dragon'..."* Alhazred seemed to be oddly melancholic about it. He sulked in disappointment, lowering his guard.

"Ah ha ha," Nacht laughed. "Don't let it get you down! I'm just happy to meet another dragon in this world! My name's Nacht Schatten. You can call me your bestie Nacht if you like. I don't bite!"

"I apologize for my earlier rudeness," Alhazred said. *"I have no desire to do battle with you. Perhaps you would like me to beg for my life?"* He was completely deadpan. It must have been at least partially a joke.

"Seriously, don't worry about it!" said Nacht. "But do you always try to expel outsiders the moment you notice them? That seems a bit excessive."

"If we allow outsiders to act as they please, they might harm our world. It is my task as an observer to preserve its normalcy."

"I see..." Nacht nodded her head. "Well, as long as you don't come after me, I don't have a problem with that. Now, care to answer a few questions of mine? To make up for being so rude to me."

Alhazred thought for a moment and then said, *“I will answer what I am able.”*

“Do you know the world of Real World Online?” Nacht was eager to hear the answer. This dragon was an observer with special powers of some kind. He might be able to tell Nacht more about the unknown world she found herself in.

“I have heard those words before, but that is all,” Alhazred said. *“I know nothing of other worlds.”* That settled it. Despite being reincarnated as Nacht, this world was not one she was familiar with.

“In that case, do you know what brought me here?” Nacht asked. She had been wondering on and off if all of this—being reborn, realizing that she was really, truly Nacht—was a dream. After all, why was she here? She didn’t seem to have been called here by a god, she hadn’t been given any indication that this was a reward for her virtuous deeds, nor had she been summoned to be a hero or even a demon lord! Having been given no explanation whatsoever, Nacht desperately wanted to know why she was here.

“I do not know,” Alhazred said. *“Our only power is to detect abnormalities, and yet it is maddeningly imprecise. All I know is that you were born into this world with extraordinary power.”*

Nacht couldn’t hide her disappointment at that answer. It seemed even Alhazred, who was worshiped by humanity as a god, didn’t know why she was here. It was possible that he was concealing the information, but after admitting he had come here to kill her, and with her holding his life in her hands, it was hard to imagine that he would lie.

“So...” Nacht said, desperate to get any information out of this dragon at all. “Is there anyone else like me that you know of? Extradimensional beings, or humans from other worlds, or people getting summoned? Anyone at all?” In books, there were all kinds of people who ended up in other worlds. They would be summoned to perform this role or that, or sometimes they would simply get lost and wander their way in. There was at least a chance that Alhazred knew of someone with circumstances similar to Nacht’s.

“It was some time ago now, but the Lord of Calamity was one such case. Another is the hero summoning once practiced in the Holy Kingdom. But that is all I know of. Abnormalities such as you appear once every thousand years or

so.”

“I see!” said Nacht. “That’s good to know. Thanks so much, cute little dragon!”

“That again...” the dragon said. *“Only the Great Mother has called me a ‘little dragon’ before. But as for my purpose in coming here...”* His voice suddenly filled with great respect. *“Permit me to ask you a question, O great wyrm. What is your objective?”*

Nacht could feel Alhazred regarding her seriously, trying to assess her as a threat. But Nacht had only just arrived in this world. Without having a clear sense of her position, it was hard to come up with any kind of goal.

She *had* decided earlier that she was going to live the best life she could, to wring every last bit of enjoyment she could get from this world. She wanted to see all sorts of sights and lands and peoples and girls—things she had only ever seen before in games. Perhaps that could be her purpose? But after some thought, Nacht shook her head. She had something even more important to do.

“To travel with Aisha, I guess?” Nacht replied. She gently patted the girl’s head. Aisha was the first person she had met in this world; she couldn’t think of anything or anyone that was more important to her right now. “Don’t worry,” she added. “I’m not planning on conquering the world or massacring people to raise my level or anything like that.”

Alhazred closed his eyes, thought for a moment, and opened them again. *“Do you mean to deceive me?”* he asked.

“Ha ha ha ha!” laughed Nacht. “Nacht Schatten tells no lies!”

“Then I will trust your words for now.” Alhazred, who had appeared like a sudden storm, again took to the sky. Just as quickly as he’d come, he vanished into the clouds.

With the dragon gone, Aisha let out a sigh of relief, but her legs were shaking too much to properly support her weight. Nacht held out a hand to help her up, but Aisha pulled her own hand away and refused to move.

“Aisha?” Nacht asked. “Oh! Oh no... I see...”

Aisha hung her head in shame.

“Well, I guess we’d better get you into a bath, huh!”

Aisha looked up at Nacht, her face bright red. “Mistress, you dummy!” she sobbed. “Pervert! Don’t... Don’t look at me right now...”

For the first time, Nacht felt a vague sense of anger at the dragon.

‡

The Yolno Forest was a vast woodland region around Free Market City and the source of much of its prosperity. The forest gave the city an abundance of lumber, of course, but it was also full of priceless medicinal herbs, monsters of all sorts, and even, it was said, ancient ruins. And yet, despite that bounty, Free Market City was the only large settlement in the region. Other than that, there was nothing more than small towns and villages. After all, Yolno Forest was perilous.

Known as the Forest of Sleeping Demons, its depths were full of powerful monsters like griffins and manticores, and there were rumors that legendary ancient demons slept somewhere in the woods. It was full of dark and wild places that humans didn’t dare draw near.

There was a cave in this forest—the product of years of erosion from the wind and rain—filled with peculiar scents. The scent of food waste and fresh ingredients. The scent of sweat. The scent of blood. Even the scent of women. The ground was level, and the area was surrounded by traps. It was clear at a glance that it was inhabited by intelligent beings. Improvements of all kinds had been made by human hands to make for a more comfortable living environment.

Of course, a cave was still a cave. There was a limit to how comfortable it was likely to be. Still, the earth elemental magic that had gone into setting this place up was at least somewhat impressive.

Two men were sitting at a simple table, on chairs made of segments of trees. There was a bottle of high-quality wine on the table in front of them—the only valuable-looking thing in the place—as well as the cups they had been drinking out of.

“Gwa ha ha ha ha!” one of the men laughed. “Another successful hunt, all thanks to our Sir Dulan! I knew that Ice Queen lady had no chance against a legendary mercenary like you. Now, speaking of, I know it’ll lower the price, but I don’t mind letting you have your way with her if you like! She may be cold, but damn if she’s not a beauty.”

The man making this fawning proposition to the legendary Dulan was none other than Aizen, the leader of the largest group of bandits in the region, the Black Fang. As the man in charge of a group of more than a hundred bandits, he was certainly a formidable fighter himself.

Aizen had once been a knight for a now-fallen noble house. After that, he had seen years of combat as a mercenary, and now he was the head of an organization of bandits. He was the strongest of the crew by far—an experienced soldier intimately familiar with the battlefield. But compared to the man in front of him, he may as well have been any other bandit.

Dulan was a legend. He had been sent here by one of Black Fang’s contacts in Free Market City to offer them his services as a swordsman.

“Pah!” Dulan spat. “Not interested. But what a battle...”

Dulan had no interest in women or wine. It was actually causing a bit of a problem for Aizen. As Dulan was the only one of the bandits who was stronger than him, Aizen found himself keenly interested in keeping him happy.

Just being reminded of Dulan’s fight with the Ice Queen sent a shiver down Aizen’s spine. The Rose of Ice was a party composed of three B-rank adventurers and one A-rank adventurer, but Dulan had faced them alone. In a split second, he had defeated their scout, a beastman, and cut down their warrior with the backswing. Both of them had been at least as strong as Aizen, but they hadn’t even lasted a moment against Dulan. Aizen had thought he was being foolish in insisting on fighting alone, but watching him fight had made the reason clear. Anyone trying to help would have just gotten in his way.

The Ice Queen had attacked with her magic, but Dulan countered with some technique Aizen had never seen before, sending the party’s cleric flying because she had been slow to protect herself. Left to face Dulan alone, the Ice Queen had dodged his lethal greatsword by a hair’s breadth and countered with her

rapier. For a second, it had looked like they were equally matched, but in the end, the Ice Queen had been no match for Dulan at close range. She'd dealt him a number of minor wounds with her rapid sword attacks, but not enough to have so much as slowed him down. The Ice Queen's face had been contorted with grim determination, but Dulan had been grinning with delight. He'd seemed to be having fun.

Desperate, the Ice Queen had thrown her two rapiers at him—one metal and one conjured from ice—and jumped back, trying to cast some spell to turn the fight around as she put distance between them. But Dulan had used a technique to quickly chase after her and cut her down before she could finish casting.

It was terrible in the fullest sense of the world. A fight between superhumans.

"With a face like hers, I bet that lady will sell for a fine price. I'll give you a generous cut, of course, Sir Dulan." Aizen watched Dulan carefully for any change in his expression, but Dulan seemed completely uninterested. He was still grinning fiercely to himself at the memory of the fight.

"Well, I'm off," Dulan said abruptly. "Call if you need something." And just like that, he left.

Now alone, Aizen clicked his tongue in irritation. "No interest in booze, girls, or even money..." he muttered. "Guess that's the fiend of the battlefield for you. Doesn't care about anything but fighting."

Aizen would do just about anything to curry Dulan's favor. With Dulan at his side, even Free Market City would have to take him seriously. It could be his ticket to moving up in the world. Aizen had no intention of spending his whole life as a bandit; he was certain that a man of his resourcefulness should be able to achieve something more.

"Maybe if I wanna make him happy, what I need is something for him to fight..." Aizen mused. Just then, he heard one of his underlings calling for him.

"Boss!" the man said, hurriedly entering through the cloth draped over the passage into the room. "Boss! There's trouble!"

"What is it?!" Aizen snapped. "Out with it!" The anger in his voice made the

man quiver with fear.

Aizen was a realist. He had given his men strict orders not to worry about etiquette and to come straight to him if they had something to report, so he didn't usually snap at his underlings for bothering him. The only exception was when he had his thoughts interrupted.

"I-I..." the man stammered. "One of our patrols hasn't made it back!"

"Whose?" Aizen asked.

"Gheer and his men."

Aizen made sure that his men patrolled in groups of at least three. Given the laymen who made up the bulk of his force, he considered that to be the smallest possible group he could expect to actually make it back to him with information. One person in each group had the job of messenger and was supposed to flee if battle broke out and return to headquarters at once. Accurate intelligence, after all, was a matter of life or death on the battlefield. That was why he'd sent out so many scouts.

"None of them made it back?"

"Not even one..." the man confirmed.

The most likely possibility was that they were all killed in a monster attack, but the part of the woods they were in was relatively tame. There shouldn't have been any monsters out there strong enough to kill all the men. Betrayal didn't sound very likely either, as Aizen was generous with rewards for underlings who did what they were told. As long as they kept their heads down, they could enjoy food, drink, and occasionally women. They had no reason to betray him.

Perhaps they had been captured by adventurers. It was certainly possible, but theirs wasn't a group that was likely to seek out danger. It was hard to imagine that not one of them would manage to escape. More to the point, they were very unlikely to have been attacked by adventurers when the Rose of Ice was working in the area. Adventurers would assume that with *them* on the case, the bandits would be done for in no time.

"Strange..." he said. "Fine. I'll put my subordinates on it. You can stand

down.”

“Yes, sir!”

There was nothing more important than information when it came to survival. Aizen wasn't the type to overlook something that could portend danger.

“Hebrai,” he said. “Gladd. You lot hear that? The group you're looking for went north. Get on it!”

Hebrai and Gladd were Aizen's companions from his days as a mercenary. They were bona fide battlefield scouts, proficient in many techniques that let them hide their presence or sense traps or other dangers. They weren't like the riffraff. They were Aizen's trusted subordinates.

“Yeah, I heard,” said Hebrai.

“Tch,” said Gladd. “But I was just about to have some fun with those women we caught!”

“Hands off!” Aizen said. “They'll be worth more money if they're virgins! Besides, that Ice Queen is a monster even without a weapon. I'll kill you myself if you take off the magic lock!”

“Tch!” Gladd repeated. “You better have some women ready for us when this is over, boss.”

“When we get some money, you can use it to buy a harlot or something.”

“Hah! All right, I getcha. Back in a minute, then.”

Aizen was silent. He no longer had cause to worry—he trusted his men to address the problem. This was something he had learned from his long years as a soldier.

But in this case, it wouldn't end so simply. Aizen would have no idea what he had done wrong, but the truth was quite simple. He had picked a fight with the wrong girl. That was all.

‡

“Aisha, isn't it time you stopped pouting?”

“Hmph!” Aisha said, flatly rejecting Nacht's suggestion.

Clearly, it was Alhazred who was in the wrong here, not Nacht. Nonetheless, Aisha was still a child. Anyone, even an adult or adventurer, was liable to lose control of their bladder when confronted with the full wrath of a dragon. It was nothing to be ashamed of.

“How about this...” Nacht said, withdrawing an apple-like fruit from her storage. “Fruit from the Celestial Plane. You want it?” These fruits were dropped by monsters in the level range of 100 to 120. They could be found easily in the Celestial Plane, and eating one would cause a player to continually recover food points over time for a short period. They were one of the most prized foods in the game.

RWO had a food stat that represented how well-fed a character was. If it fell below a certain level, it would apply a penalty to their abilities that got more severe the hungrier they became. At very low levels, characters could be inflicted with status effects like Vertigo, Famine, or Enervation, and if it completely ran out, they could even die of hunger. It was a very important stat—unless your character was one of the species that didn’t need to eat at all.

You couldn’t actually taste food in the game. Food items had ranks that supposedly reflected their flavor, but all that affected was how many food points they restored and what buffs they would give you. The Celestial Fruit was rank 6, so in theory, it ought to have tasted pretty good.

The fruit was ripe and juicy, and it filled the air with a sweet, tantalizing aroma. Aisha couldn’t stop her eyes from lighting up at the sight. “Oh...” she gasped, drooling. But then she caught herself. “N-No! You can’t trick me! You’re trying to win me over with food!”

“Hah,” Nacht laughed. “So you say, but your body can’t help being honest. You want this, don’t you, Aisha?”

“Nhhh...” Aisha moaned. “I...”

“I seeee...” said Nacht. “So you don’t want it after all. What a shame.” She made as if to put the fruit back in her storage when Aisha, trembling, opened her mouth to interrupt.

“Wannit...” she mumbled.

Nacht's hearing was good enough to make out what she was saying, but watching Aisha squirm like that was bringing out her sadistic side. "Hmm?" she said. "What was that, Aisha?"

"I... I... I want it!" she said, fidgeting as she spoke. "P-Please give it to me, Mistress!"

Nacht nodded. "Good girl!" she said. "Here's your reward. Make sure you savor it." She held out the fruit with a bewitching smile on her face, feeding Aisha by hand.

"Th-Thank you!" Aisha said. "*Mpff... Gulp!*" She took a big bite, juice dripping down her cheeks as she chewed. "Oh wow!" she declared. "This is... This is so good! It's so, so good, Mistress!"

She was surprisingly cute like that. For a while, Nacht was at a loss for words. Did the fruit really taste *that* good? Curious, she tried a bite herself. The skin was nice and crispy. It was pleasant to bite into, and the pulpy fruit felt good in her mouth. A bewildering array of flavors played in her mouth as she chewed, leaving an enjoyable aftertaste.

"Yeah!" Nacht agreed. "It's pretty good!"

"Oh my gosh..." Aisha raved. "That was amazing! If you keep giving me food that delicious, pretty soon I won't be satisfied with anything else..."

"Hah," said Nacht. "Don't be silly. You can eat that fruit every day if you like." It was a little time-consuming, but once a player reached a high enough level, it was a simple matter to get as much Celestial Fruit as they wanted. They were always in high demand in the player markets by low-level characters who couldn't obtain them themselves, so many high-level players accumulated huge stockpiles of them to sell for spending money. Toru had filled his storage box to the limit with food items and potions, to the point that he had multiple entire stacks of Celestial Fruit. Thanks to his efforts, Nacht had more of them than she could ever eat. It was the epitome of convenience.

"I'm not being silly!" Aisha said. "That was the best thing I've ever tasted! Thank you so much, Mistress!" Her face had finally burst into a big smile again, much to Nacht's relief. All she wanted was to make Aisha happy.

“Really?” Nacht asked. “But we’re just getting started. I’m gonna give you food so delicious you can’t even *imagine* it.”

“O-Oh... I don’t know...” Aisha demurred. “It seems like it would be wasted on me...”

Nacht gently shook her head. “Not at all. You’re my servant, Aisha! And my friend! You’re incredibly precious to me.”

Aisha shook silently. She pressed her hands to her face, trying to suppress the goofy smile that was spreading over it to no avail. “Yes, Mistress!” she said. “Everything that I am belongs to you!”

“Jeez...” Nacht said. “You don’t have to force it, Aisha. Just be honest!”

“Yes, Mistress!” Aisha repeated. “I freely offer you all that I am!”

“That’s...the same thing...”

Aisha just beamed.

Nacht sighed. *I’m so sorry, Aisha’s dad... she thought. I may have accidentally corrupted your daughter a little...*

The two walked on through the perilous Yolno Forest, rambling cheerfully to each other about all sorts of things. They were completely carefree. To anyone watching, they must have looked like the biggest idiots in the forest. That included the ones following them, who drew closer and closer, lulled into thinking they were hapless prey. But it was a trap.

Nacht regarded her victims, stalking her like they thought they had the upper hand. “Welcome,” she whispered. “So glad you could join us.”

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The bandits Hebrai and Gladd were both former mercenaries. They had been captains of a team of scouts and were quite confident in their abilities. As first-class scouts, they could use various techniques to hide their presence and their magic power from detection. Hebrai had nearly preternatural senses, and Gladd had a keen sense of danger that helped him avoid traps.

“What do you think?” Hebrai asked. The two had been following the girls from some hundred yards away. Aizen had asked them to investigate the area

north of the hideout, and it had taken them no time at all to notice their presence.

“Well, they’re clearly idiots,” Gladd whispered back. “The elf is just a kid, and the other one is...I don’t know, nobility? Royalty? Maybe something even fancier? Oooh, I hope she cries when I force myself on— Ow!” Gladd had let his lust for the beautiful girl get the better of him, so Hebrai had smacked him.

“Calm down,” he said. “Do you think this could be a trap? Who wears a dress in a forest like this?”

“No idea. I don’t see any. What do you think? You’re better at spotting things than me.” Gladd’s allegiances were to his job first and his lust second. He wasn’t the type to cut corners in such a dangerous line of work, nor was he disposed to unfounded optimism. He based his assessments on cold, hard facts.

“There’s no one around,” said Hebrai. “I don’t think it’s an ambush.”

“So they’re just sitting ducks. My danger sense isn’t warning me of anything either...”

“Just in case it goes wrong, I’ll draw their attention. You report what happened to base. Same as always.”

Gladd nodded. He was leering at the girl like a lustful beast. Hebrai kept a straight face, but internally, he was thinking the same thing. The girl was almost inhumanly beautiful. The two men could hardly resist her.

“Oy!” Gladd shouted. “You there!”

The girl turned to look at him, a grin on her face. “Hello!” she said. “I’ve been expecting you.”

The meaning of those words was clear. Everything had been ordained from on high. This was a trap. The girl had been aware of their presence and was waiting for them to attack.

“Hah! What can two girls do to us? Try whatever you want, but we’re gonna have our way with you!”

Even if they had been led into a trap, Gladd and Hebrai were elite scouts. Gladd’s words were rash, but his actions were calculated. He had already

turned, prepared to flee at top speed.

Hebrai knew this, of course. His job was to keep the attention on himself. “Calm down, Gladd!” he said as he stealthily palmed one of his smoke bombs. Then he shouted, “Now!” At his signal, Gladd took off running. But...

“Leaving so soon? Aww, don’t be like that. You came all this way! You should stay and play with us a little.”

He couldn’t get away.

“Wh-What in the world...?” the elf girl muttered. The bandits echoed her thoughts.

“What the hell is this?”

“Hey! Woman! What did you do?!”

They had been in a forest, hadn’t they? But in that case, what had happened to the trees? All they could see in front of them, as far as they looked, was an empty, white void. Behind them was a sheer cliff, cutting off their escape. Their perception of the world was distorted. What their senses were showing them couldn’t have possibly been reality. In this state, they had no hope of escape.

The girl smirked. “You tell me,” she said. “What do you think?”

Her beguiling smile was the last thing the two men saw.

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“Mistress, what’s going on?” asked Aisha. Before them, the two wicked-faced men who had attacked were standing stock still, as if they had been frozen in time. “These two scary men showed up out of nowhere...but why did they suddenly stop moving?”

“They’re having a bit of a dream,” said Nacht. “*Ars Phantasia: Twisted Utopia*. Still, I’m a bit surprised at how effective it was. It’s just a simple little illusion.”

“S-So it was one of your spells?” Aisha said. “You really are amazing, Mistress!”

Nacht was happy to be praised by Aisha, but in this case, her feelings on the matter were a little bit complicated. She had picked up the *Ars Phantasia* school

to fill out her spell slots, but to a glass-cannon-type like her, it was really just for messing around. She had tried it on a whim on the off chance she'd get lucky and have it work, but she hadn't expected the bandits to be so defenseless against it.

"Do you not know about illusions, Aisha?" Nacht asked.

"I've never seen them before," Aisha answered. "I've never even heard of them..."

"I see." Nacht's response was curt.

"I-I'm sorry!"

"O-Oh! No, no, no! You didn't do anything wrong, Aisha! I guess I just don't know much about what is and isn't common knowledge in this world. There's nothing wrong with not knowing things; it just means that you can learn about them in the future!"

If you wanted to stay alive for a decent length of time, it was important to have some kind of defense against status effects. Otherwise, there was a risk that you might end up instantly dead. "Anyway, Aisha," Nacht said. "You should have been granted the powers of a Dragon Priestess. That should raise your resistance to status effects. You know, stuff like Poison, Paralysis, Sleep, Silence..."

"I-I see..." Aisha said. "I couldn't tell at all... But Mistress, what's an illusion?"

Nacht smiled at her, happy to see Aisha eager to learn. "Illusions are a type of status effect—the sort of thing you want to avoid getting hit by no matter what. Depending on the illusion, you might end up unable to move, attack, or even act at all, just like these two suckers over here. Seems like they got hit with the full effect..."

In the game, illusions could have all kinds of obnoxious effects, like displaying false information on a player's UI or making them unable to distinguish between friend and foe. They were infamous for causing trouble to not only the afflicted target but their friends as well. If one ever had the misfortune to be hit by an illusion, their best option was to use an item to cure it. The second choice would be to seek help, with the last resort being to use a defensive skill to try to

break free. There was also equipment that could raise one's resistance to status effects, although the best defense of all was to level up and put points into Resistance.

"So basically..." Aisha said, "Mistress's magic is incredible!"

"I wouldn't say that," said Nacht. "This wasn't a particularly powerful spell or anything. But I guess it did kinda work wonders here. And now that they're like this, I'll make them tell us everything."

Nacht made the bandits tell her everything she wanted to know, then turned their bodies to dust.

"Illusions are scary..." said Aisha. "I'll remember that."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Aisha," Nacht responded. "Did I go a bit too far?"

"Y-You didn't! I'm all right! I've seen my father butcher animals before... Plus, if we let the bad guys go, they'd just hurt people! My father always told me not to waste my mercy on bandits." Aisha was a stronger, tougher girl than Nacht had realized. After all, she had lived in this harsh world all her life. She was used to the idea of doing whatever was necessary to survive.

"You're a strong girl, Aisha," said Nacht.

"N-Not at all! You're much stronger, Mistress! You're incredible!"

Nacht gave a melancholy smile. She still wasn't used to her sudden boost in power. In Real World Online, every bit of it had been earned through hard work. In this world, however, she sometimes found herself worrying if her power was really hers. Perhaps there was some lingering fragment of Toru's consciousness that thought of this world as a game, therefore the power it had given her was fake.

"Mistress?" Aisha said, a worried look on her face.

Nacht looked at the young girl before her and suddenly remembered where she was. She could feel her bond with Aisha. That, at least, seemed real. "Of course," she said. "I have you, Aisha!" The girl standing next to her still smelled a little, perhaps, but the power Nacht had given her, the life she had saved, was proof enough that Nacht's strength wasn't fake. "It's not like me to get all

mopey. Sorry about that! And thanks. I'm gonna live my life the best I can. I wouldn't wanna fall behind you, would I?!"

"H-Huh? Weh? U-Um... I don't really get it, but if you're smiling again, Mistress, that makes me happy."

The two held hands and smiled at each other. Even if Nacht's smile was faltering a bit, it was enough. She was happy.

"B-But, Mistress," Aisha said. "How come you asked those bandits where their hideout was and how many of them there were? Don't tell me you're..." She trailed off. It seemed like she was dreading the answer.

"We're going to attack, of course!" Nacht replied, a big smile on her face. "You said it yourself, didn't you? We shouldn't waste our mercy on bandits!"

"Wehhh..." Aisha moaned. "I-I did say that, I suppose... But there's only two of us, and those bandits said they have a hundred—"

"Ah ha ha!" Nacht laughed. "That's all the more reason! Didn't we just stare down a dragon? Why should we be scared of a bunch of bandits?"

"I-I can't! I'm just as scared of bandits as I am of dragons!"

Nacht fixed Aisha with a piercing stare. "Yeah, I guess you are..." she said. "That could be a bit of a problem. Well then..."

Because of her half-elf blood, Aisha was still a child. She had plenty of potential, both in terms of magic power and martial ability, but at present, she was nothing more than a frail little girl. Nacht didn't want a single hair on her precious, distressingly undefended head to be hurt, in which case the solution was obvious.

"Aisha," Nacht began.

"Y-Yes?" Aisha glanced up nervously.

"Unequip your clothes."

"Yes, Mistress..." Aisha began by reflex, but then she realized what Nacht had said and began blinking rapidly. "H-Hwuh...?!" Her face turned red. "I-I-I!" she began, clearly extremely flustered. "I mean...I *do* want to, but...I was hoping I'd have more time to get ready! A-And, I was hoping my first time would be a little

more...romantic... B-But if you want to take off my clothes, Mistress— No! I mean, if you want me to do it myself, I'll be happy to! But...maybe we could find somewhere with a roof first...? And a bed?" She went on and on, launching into another flurry of words before Nacht could get one in edgewise. "I-I-It's just, I'd like to wait until I've grown up more, maybe! Or at least until I've had my period... B-But I belong to you now, Mistress! If it's what you want, I'll be okay! Even if it hurts! I'll just grin and bear it!"

Nacht was at a loss for words. To think that Aisha would have misunderstood her so badly. She certainly seemed to know a lot about sex for a girl her age.

When Nacht had told her to unequip her clothes, she had been thinking in game terms. It was a relatively normal thing to say in-game if you wanted to trade for your friend's equipment or check its stats. Her actual plan, of course, had been to give Aisha some more appropriate equipment to use.

"Um...Aisha..." Nacht said. "I think you're confused? I'm gonna give you some new equipment to change into, that's all. I mean, you're just wearing hemp rags and worn-out sandals, right? I was thinking I should give you some proper defensive gear..."

"Huh?" Aisha said. "Eh? Fwah? S-So...I've just been... Oh my goodness..." She went so silent it was like her soul had left her body. It took quite a while before she was able to speak again.

"Have you calmed down, Aisha?" Nacht asked after some time had passed.

"Y-Yes, Mistress. Please forget I said all that..." Unfortunately, Aisha's request would prove to be fairly difficult.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Nacht said, avoiding the other part of what she'd said. She patted Aisha once on the head. "Anyway, I *do* want to get you some better equipment. Let's start with this, if it's all right with you..." She held out a rather tacky pair of panties designed to look like a pumpkin.

"I've never seen undergarments like that before!" Aisha said. "But...I kinda feel like you're treating me like a child..."

"Not at all! This is a perfectly respectable magic item!" The panties were the

quest reward for the Halloween event quest The First Halloween. They were a common enough item—any female character who participated in the event got a pair—but as a gag item, they had incredible value. They were even considered a Unique item in-game, with their high magic resistance and effectively useless special ability.

In the game, items were divided into tiers: Normal was the lowest, followed by Rare, Unique, Legendary, and finally Ancient. There was also a scant handful of Ultimate-tier items, but those were extremely hard to come by. There were only a few such items in the entire game. Accordingly, players thought of Ancient as the highest tier of items.

Nacht would have loved to give Aisha a full set of Ancient-tier equipment, but the Dragon Princess wasn't *that* well traveled. And besides, Aisha's stats wouldn't be high enough to equip them. Anything Legendary-tier or higher required its user to be very strong.

"And next..." Nacht started.

"Fwaah! What is this? This is amazing! It's so cute! You're giving me this to wear? Really?"

It was a maid outfit, known in-game as the Housemaid's Uniform. Naturally, this too was a Unique-tier magic item. It had been made for Nacht by one of her supporters—though "perverted hangers-on" was probably more accurate—who had some skill as a craftsman. As a joke, of course. It had high physical defense, rendered the wearer immune to low-level magic spells, and even offered resistance to the four main elements. And, of course, it was adorably frilly.

"And this, and this, and this, and this!"

The Sandals of Pegasus, which granted the power of flight. The Choker of the Hypnodemon, which raised resistance to illusions. The Otherworld Hairpin, granting resistance to the four major elements. And the Decoy Bracelet, which would save its owner from a lethal attack one time before breaking.

And last but not least... "I got this one's stat restrictions lifted in the real-money store. The Legendary-tier ring, Freyja's Tear! It's all yours."

There had been a time-limited loot box event where players could win items that lifted the minimum stat restrictions for items under level 100. Nacht had been lucky enough to win one that permanently removed restrictions for an item up to level 70. She had used it on this ring, which provided resistance to all basic status effects, vastly increased the power of magic, and had a number of other special effects. Getting it had been a godsend to Nacht's career early on.

The ring had ripples of gold etched into the band and was set with a brilliant gem that shone with all the colors of the rainbow. It was elaborately crafted and almost seemed to vibrate with magic power. A single glance was all it took to tell that this ring was extremely precious.

Perhaps that was why Aisha wanted to refuse.

"I can't take this!"

"But Aisha," Nacht protested. "This is a really useful ring! I'm sure it'll come in handy."

"But... It's just... You can't waste such a precious treasure on me!"

Freyja's Tear was clearly far superior to the rest of the equipment Nacht had given her. A ring set with such a grand gem wouldn't have looked out of place on display as the national treasure of a kingdom, but the way Nacht looked at it, the Decoy Bracelet she'd bought from the real-money shop was much more valuable. For once, though, she had the good sense not to say that.

"Well, I'm not using it," Nacht said. "It was just gathering dust in storage. What's wrong with you having it?" She went on, admitting a little bit of how she truly felt. "Besides, your life is far more precious to me than a ring. I wish you wouldn't discount yourself like that."

"That's cheating..." Aisha said, her shoulders trembling as she looked down at her feet. "But when you put it that way...I happily accept..."

"Ah ha ha! Of course! You have to do what I say, don't you, Aisha?"

"You play really dirty sometimes, Mistress..." Aisha said. "Okay, then...can I ask you for a favor?" She looked up timidly at Nacht, like a small puppy.

"Sure!" said Nacht. "Ask for all the favors you like!"

Aisha squeezed her hands together and held them close to her chest, squirming nervously. She took a deep breath before finally speaking. “W-Would you please put the ring on my finger?” She shyly held out her left hand.

“Yeah, no problem!” Nacht gently slipped the ring onto Aisha’s finger.

A huge smile blossomed on Aisha’s face. “Hee hee hee! Thank you, Mistress! I’ll treasure it as long as I live!”

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There was a commotion happening outside. Feet running in circles, metal clashing against metal, angry voices shouting commands, spells flying through the air. It was the sound of battle.

Dulan let out a breath and started to work out the tension in his body. “Finally,” he said. “The one I’ve been waiting for...”

He could feel a powerful presence. So powerful it sent a shiver down his spine.

Dulan didn’t care in the slightest about the Black Fang. The word “bandit” alone filled him with disgust. But the blessing he had been granted by the war god Giara, the Blessing of the Battle-Drunk, had told him that if he went to this place, he would meet a worthy opponent. He had offered them his services for no reason other than this promised fight, so he figured it was about time to tender his resignation. Besides, whoever the abnormally strong presence he felt belonged to, they seemed to be making quick work of the bandits. One less job for him to do.

The information Dulan had gotten from the Blessing of the Battle-Drunk was vague and imprecise. In fact, until this new person had shown up, he had been wondering whether the person he’d come here to fight was truly Krista Niese Branrichter, the Ice Queen.

“Not that she wasn’t a good fight,” he said to himself. Her dual-wielding technique was lightning fast, and her ice magic was frighteningly powerful. If their duel had gone on much longer, she might have flash frozen the forest whole. She had even broken his skin! It had been quite some time since an opponent had made him bleed. Without a doubt, she was a worthy opponent.

And yet, the opponent his blessing was driving him to fight had to have been one stronger than Dulan himself. Why else would it cry out so painfully in his mind? As strong as Krista was, she was no match for Dulan at close range, and she was held back by her youth and inexperience. Surely, she was only the beginning. The worthy opponent he was to battle to the death was still coming to meet him.

“Ha ha ha!” he cried, shaking with excitement. Moments like this were the only time Dulan felt alive. In battle, he could forget the pain of living. That was his curse, placed on him the day bandits attacked his village.

The bandits had come in the evening. They’d stabbed Dulan’s father and forced themselves on his mother. He alone had been overlooked, so he’d taken a weapon and started to fight. When he’d stabbed the bandit raping his mother in the back, he’d realized that he could kill. He’d given himself up to that ability, and the Sword Fiend was born. He’d fought and killed and killed and fought and killed and killed and killed and killed and killed, just like he would do every day from then on.

The bandits had been exterminated by a mere seven-year-old boy.

The villagers had regarded him with suspicious glares. They’d no longer thought of him as one of their own, judging him even as they’d offered words of thanks.

“Oh, uh... Th-Thank you...”

“Th-Thank you, Dulan...”

He’d been nauseous. Afraid. Angry. Miserable. It had been a nightmare. He had made a terrible mistake. But then, what should he have done? All he’d been able to do was laugh. Even thinking about it had been like torture.

And so, he’d run away. He’d sought out wars and become a fiend of battle, all to forget.

Dulan let out a breath and squeezed his fist tightly enough to draw blood. His body rippled with strength, his musculature obvious even beneath his clothes. He had never specifically trained his body—swinging his sword was all the exercise he did—and yet his muscles were as strong and hard as iron. His blade

looked like nothing more than a great cleaver, as large and heavy as the average adventurer. It had a dull metallic glint and seemed to devour life. In battle, the blood of his enemies trailed off it like it was a war banner. He had gotten it from a man he'd killed in a coup d'état at some point. The man had begged Dulan to save his princess, but they were enemies at the time, and Dulan saw no reason to help some princess for no reward.

Dulan hadn't even stuck around to see the end of the battle. He'd shaken off everyone who reached out to him and ran away, coming here. He could still hear their jeers.

"Hah! You're just running away, aren't you, boy?!"

Shut up.

"If you were a real knight, you'd stick with us till the end!"

Shut up!!!

For a second, the light reflecting off his sword made it look like he was smiling. But only for a second. "This time..." he said. "This time will be it." This was the blind faith of the Battle-Drunk: that through battle, he would quiet the emptiness within himself. That he would finally obtain something real.

"Sir Dulan!" A young man came running up in a panic. "Sir Dulan! We're under attack!"

"I know."

"O-Oh!" the man said. "Then..."

But Dulan was done associating with Aizen, the lecherous creep who wanted to use him, and was annoyed that he'd had his concentration broken.

"Wh—" the man started, only to be silenced by Dulan's sword.

‡

Aisha finished changing and shyly stepped out from behind the tree. "Th-This seems a little short..." she said. The black and white maid outfit she was wearing stopped just above her knees. Aisha squirmed and held down the hem of her skirt as she looked up at Nacht.

“Not at all!” Nacht said. “It looks good on you!”

It was an item her perverted supporters had sent her, after all. (*Good job, team*, Nacht thought.) It made for an adorable outfit that looked very fitting for Aisha. The Otherworld Hairpin rounded it out perfectly too. She was wearing long black socks and crystal shoes that looked hard to walk in. It didn’t look at all suitable for a fight.

“Um... I really like it,” she said. “But...will I really be okay in this?”

Nacht nodded reassuringly. “Hey, they’re all at least Uniquetier, yeah? Anything a bandit could do shouldn’t even scratch you!” And besides, as long as *she* was here, they weren’t gonna lay a finger on her.

“But they just look like some noble’s house servant’s clothes, and— Ah! I can’t refuse something you give me, of course, Mistress. I was just wondering if they were really...appropriate for the situation...”

Nacht laughed out loud at Aisha’s undeniably true point. “Ah ha ha ha, of course they are, Aisha! Battle maids were quite common in the world I came from.” Inappropriate or not, Nacht saw no reason why the golden-haired half-elf couldn’t also be a maid. “Now c’mon. Let’s have some fun turning these bandits into paste.”

“You make it sound so easy...” Aisha said. “But there’s a lot of them, right?”

“Don’t worry! It’s just a hundred or so!”

“That sounds like a lot to me! Oh no... We really shouldn’t be here...”

“Don’t be silly! You think I’m gonna let them get away with attacking my Aisha not once but *twice*?”

Nacht’s voice made Aisha shiver. She took a breath. “I don’t like it, but I can’t go against your will...”

“Sure seems like you can’t!” Nacht said, a smile on her face.

“O-Okay! I’m ready! I’ll go with you, Mistress!”

“Yeah, that’s the spirit!”

They came to an artificial clearing in the forest. They could see alarms and

pitfall traps, as well as some more vicious devices intended to skewer intruders with arrows or roast them with magic. Aisha gave a start and clung tight to her mistress.

“*Ars Ventis: Wind Cutter!*” Nacht created a vortex of wind, cutting down all the traps in their path. “This must be their hideout,” she said. “Looks like it goes in pretty deep.”

The deep, dimly lit hole looked to be a natural cavern the bandits had taken up residence in. It was protected by wooden barricades and, of course, the bandits themselves, who had seen Nacht coming and lay in wait to ambush her with a storm of arrows.

Nacht used to fare poorly fighting in enclosed spaces like this, where there wasn’t much room to run around. Since she preferred to blast her opponents with spells from long range, a cave served mostly as a factor limiting what magic she could use. Back in the game, she had been well aware that it was one of her weaknesses.

Nacht looked over the cramped space with disdain. “Well, that’s no fun,” she said. “Maybe I should just blow it all away with a single attack.”

“You mustn’t!” Aisha protested. “There are prisoners in there! We have to help them, don’t we?”

Nacht’s purpose in being here was to wipe out the fools who would dare harm Aisha from the face of the world. She hadn’t come here to save anyone. Still, though, Nacht *was* part human. She didn’t want to hurt the innocent on her quest for revenge, even if it made things a little more complicated.

“I-I’m not saying you should spare the bandits or anything like that!” Aisha went on. “But people always say to help out others in need. And you’re so amazing, Mistress. Don’t you think we could, maybe, try to save whoever we can?”

Charity. Those who have plenty giving to those who have none. It was its own reward in terms of self-esteem, and at times it could be a way to bolster one’s own sense of superiority. In Aisha’s case, however, it sprung from an almost reflexive impulse to help. She felt it so strongly that she was fumbling over herself to say the words. She was an incredibly kind girl, and that kindness had a

power of its own.

“What do you mean?” Nacht said, thoroughly under the influence of Aisha’s power herself. “If that’s what you wanna do, I’d love to go around helping people! Sounds like it could be *great* fun!”

“Th-Thank you so much!”

With Aisha’s smiling face so close to her own, Nacht didn’t feel like navigating the caverns sounded so bad after all. “Stay close to me, Aisha,” she said.

“O-Okay!”

This group seemed relatively disciplined as far as bandits went. There wasn’t just one squad of bandits opposing them. The group in front was a decoy, meant to lead them to a spot where the path split into three, where they would be flanked from the left and the right. It was a well-designed battle plan that took the terrain into account.

Then why did Nacht charge in full speed ahead without so much as a plan? There were two reasons. The first was that she was pretty sure none of the bandits’ attacks could make it past their defenses. As if to emphasize that point, she held Aisha close to her as she strolled in fearlessly. She took one, two, three steps before a swarm of arrows descended upon them from above.

“Eek!” Aisha screamed. But to Nacht, it looked like the world was standing still. There were ten arrows and just as many bandits behind them. But what Nacht was paying the most attention to was the variety of arrows. Skilled archers could launch magic arrows with enormous destructive power or arrows infused with elemental power in an endless barrage. And if any of them were using dragonslayer arrows, even Nacht would be struck dead if she couldn’t dodge.

There was no need for such concern, however. The arrows, every last one of them, seemed to be made of ordinary wood.

It looked like an inescapable wall of arrows. But Nacht merely yawned, albeit so quietly that only Aisha, who was still attached to her side, could hear it. “Boring!” she said, and her body began to shine with magic power.

“Aaah!” Aisha shrieked. Suddenly, a fierce wind whirled to life, catching the

hem of her skirt and making her blush. Apparently, she wasn't too afraid for her life to shoot Nacht an indignant look either.

The wind concentrated into a single point, almost as if it were being drawn in by a powerful gravitational field. The arrows were pulled in and smashed to pieces, and the ball of wind became a creature—an intelligent beast formed from gales. The Wind Cutter, under Nacht's control, flew through the air, beheading three bandits in a single second and three more in the next.

"Wh-What...?" a bandit said, but he was killed before he could so much as scream.

"Shit! She's a monster! *Martial Art: Thousand Arrows!*"

Nacht didn't recognize that skill. "Nh!" she exclaimed, momentarily alarmed. But there was no cause for concern. All it did was multiply the wooden arrows the bandit was shooting. It seemed like some tier-one Archer class or another's starting skill, like Shadow Arrow, Wild Shot, or Continual Draw. It didn't make him that much more threatening than he was before.

The wind lashed out like a whip, striking the arrows out of the sky. Broken arrowheads clattered to the ground.

"No way! Damn it! *Thousand*—" The bandit tried to use his attack again, but Nacht didn't permit it to happen twice. There was a flash like lightning. "G-Gck!" By the time the bandit noticed that Nacht had vanished, his life had already been claimed.

Nacht's agility was second to none. She took care not to damage the terrain as she moved at speeds faster than the eye could see.

"And that leaves two..." Nacht said. But as soon as she did, one of the two presences she felt vanished.

Something felt tense. She saw a pair of eyes glinting eerily, like a demon from the pit. The aura the great man gave off made it clear that he was leagues stronger than the opponents they had faced up to this point. It was enough that Aisha started shaking again.

Nacht squeezed Aisha's hand, trying to assuage her fear. "It's all right to be afraid," she told the girl. "You don't have to try to act tough all the time, you

know.”

Aisha sobbed. “I’m sorry, Mistress...”

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for! You’re just starting out! Anyway, I’m much stronger than this guy, so don’t worry. I’ll protect you.” Aisha lowered her head and nodded miserably. Nacht held her and petted her head gently as the man strode up to them.

“You’re just going to ignore me, then?” he asked. “I could cry.” He wasn’t trying to hide his presence at all. In fact, he was overflowing with fighting spirit. He was like a sword fighter in a coliseum, challenging her to battle.

Nacht saw no reason to entertain the man’s challenge, though. He didn’t have much that interested her. She would have much preferred to spend the time comforting Aisha.

“There’s no doubt that you’re a worthy opponent,” the man said, “but I can’t say I was expecting such a young lady.”

“‘Young lady’? You want me to try crying for help? Eek! Police! A bad man’s after me!” She grinned, teasing. “Who cares what gender I am? But who the hell are you?”

“The name’s Dulan.” The man pointed his sword at her. She laughed.

“Okay, Dulan,” she said. “Tell me, what are you doing here? Your soul’s in rough shape, but you’re not a rotten husk like those corpses over there were.”

“Does it matter?” Dulan asked. “One place is good as the next. You know my name; that should be enough. Now, we fight!”

Nacht sighed. “I can’t imagine what’s got you in such a hurry,” she said, “but you should learn to pick your battles if you intend to grow old.”

“Thank you for the advice. But I cannot. The Blessing of the Battle-Drunk is telling me that I must fight you!”

“And that’s why you’re playing bandit?”

Dulan gave a hacking laugh at Nacht’s barb. “I had been planning on slaughtering the lot of them after our duel, but it seems that won’t be necessary. I’ve left the boss tied up in the back room. If you beat me, you can

take his head, or free the captured girls—or take them for yourself—or whatever else you please.”

“You wanna play with me that bad, huh?” Nacht was refusing to entertain Dulan. She laughed merrily like an aristocrat at a ballroom dance.

“I want to *fight!*” Dulan said. He sounded somehow desperate. There was nothing stopping him from simply attacking without speaking to her first, but suddenly, the difference in power between him and her felt so great as to be disabling.

In the same moment, Nacht used a skill, releasing an aura of draconic bloodlust. “*Grwaaaaaah!*” she bellowed. The air seemed to boil. The force was so great that it felt like a physical object pushing Dulan to the ground.

The difference between them was obvious. As skilled as Dulan was, he was a human challenging a wyrm with nothing but a sword. The reality of the situation was finally starting to sink in.

“I’m not one to torment the weak,” said Nacht. “Leave. Oh, but you can’t move, can you?” Nacht’s Draconic Presence rendered enemies below level 45 completely unable to act. Dulan couldn’t even lift a finger. “Let’s go, Aisha.”

Nacht took Aisha’s hand to lead her onward. But then, subtly but undeniably, she saw Dulan grip his sword.

“Raaaaah!” Dulan bellowed. “I’m not giving up!” He dashed forward, his sword held low. “Wha—?!” he exclaimed. He couldn’t reach her. A vast swarm of grasping hands had reached out of his shadow to stop him from moving.

“*Ars Umbra: Treachery in the Dark,*” Nacht said, laughing in amusement. “But color me surprised! I had no idea it was possible to break out of that with willpower!”

“Gh!” spat Dulan. “This spell... When did you—?!”

“How silly,” Nacht said. “What kind of magic user would I be if I let my opponent get close? But you know what? I’ve changed my mind. I’ll play with you for a little bit. Aisha, would you mind standing back, please?” She gave Aisha a commanding glance and snapped her fingers, releasing her magic.

“Y-Yes Mistress!” Aisha said, scrambling backward.

“*Martial Art: Instant Movement!*” Dulan didn’t waste any time. He regained his posture and moved quickly, swinging his huge sword to fell his opponent. But to Nacht, he was moving so slowly that she had time to yawn before reacting.

She dodged the first attack by a hair. Master sword fighter that Dulan was, though, he didn’t stop there. He followed up with another swing, which Nacht jumped over as it came. “Too slow!” she said. Physical combat was far from her forte, but she was level 147. The gap in their power was so great that it didn’t matter. She threw a simple roundhouse kick.

“Ghwf!”

It landed with a satisfying thump. Dulan’s stomach was tough enough to stop swords, but the power behind Nacht’s kick was something else. It was enough to send even a massive greatsword-user like Dulan flying.

“I see...” Nacht said. “This is a lot easier than it was in the game.” No matter how low-level an opponent was, it wasn’t easy to send a fighter flying with a single attack like that. Nacht hadn’t even been using a skill.

Dulan smashed into the wall, forming a crater. He pulled himself to his feet and again launched himself at Nacht, his eyes bloodshot.

Nacht sent a bolt of magic power into the air. This wasn’t a spell, but simply Nacht’s own innate strength. In other words, it was possible to attack without using magic or skills. After all, this was reality. Nacht focused her senses, imbuing her attack with earth, water, wind, and fire elemental magic.

Dulan thrust his sword into the ground. “*Magic Sword Technique: Magic Wall!*” The sword glowed brightly, fending off the storm of Nacht’s magic. But it only lasted for a second. “Gwaaaaaaaah!” Nacht’s magic burst through his barrier, scorching and freezing and crushing and cutting. His sword fell from his hands, and he collapsed.

“That was pretty fun!” Nacht said. “Thanks, Dulan!” She had gotten some experience in hand-to-hand combat and broadened her perspective of what was possible in this world. She couldn’t have hoped for a better outcome.

Dulan, his body covered in wounds, looked up at Nacht from where he lay. He once again grabbed his sword, then thrust it into the ground and tried to pull himself to his feet, only to fail. “N-No!” he cried. “You still... You still aren’t fighting me seriously...!”

“You’re still trying to stand?”

Dulan coughed up a mouthful of blood. “If I can’t fight, then my life will no longer have meaning! I lost everything to battle! Everything except my life and my strength! It’s all...all I have left! So please... I just know that I need to fight you!”

The warrior wielded his sword, prepared in his heart to die.

“Are you sure?” Nacht asked. “Maybe you have more to live for than you realize.”

“Even so...”

“Even though nothing will come of it?”

“Even so.”

“This doesn’t have to end in death, you know.”

“Even so!”

Nacht had initially found Dulan’s soul boring. He was an empty shell of a man who lived simply to swing his sword. It was as if he was running away from something. She still found him boring, in fact, but... “If nothing else, I respect your resolve,” she said. “Why not? I, Nacht Schatten, accept your challenge!”

Nacht’s attitude had changed. Back in the game, she had thought of PvP as overly serious, unenjoyable, and sometimes even dangerous. She still felt that way, but she also had to acknowledge that there was a certain ecstasy to be found in the danger. It wouldn’t be fair to meet Dulan, who wanted a serious duel, as if she were merely playing around. She would give him the fight he wanted—though she insisted on fighting to first blood, not to the death.

“You have my thanks,” Dulan said. He lowered his stance and darted forward, bringing his sword down from above using his full body weight. There was no refinement to the attack whatsoever. It was simply a massive strike with all the

speed and force he could muster. But that, in a way, was what made it beautiful. There was a certain power in that. *“Martial Art: Earthbreaker!”*



Dulan was striking with his full power. It only seemed right for Nacht to meet him with her full power in return. *"Origin Skill..."* she invoked. *"...Dragon Technique: Dragon-God Flash!"*

The exchange lasted only a moment. There was a blast of wind and a horrible metallic noise. Time seemed to stand still. Dulan's sword was cut in half. Nacht's fingernails, enveloped in a red aura, were pressed against Dulan's neck. "There," she said. "Satisfied?"

"Yeah..." Dulan answered. "Thanks." He collapsed on his back, an oddly happy look on his face. "I lost. Do what you will with me."

Nacht couldn't think of any reason to take the musclemán lying spread-eagle on the floor up on his offer. She screwed up her face in disgust. "An old man?" she said. "Not interested."

"H-Hey! I'm still in my twenties!" Dulan protested.

"Really? I would've never guessed."

Between his massive body, his unkempt stubble, and his sunken face, Dulan looked to be in his thirties at the very youngest.

"I'm in the prime of my life!"

"R-Really?" Aisha asked. She seemed to feel the same way as Nacht.

"I'll kill you..." Dulan said. But despite his words, he looked much happier than he had when Nacht had been refusing to fight him.

"You know," Nacht went on, needling the now-docile Dulan, "I bet even an old guy like you might look a bit younger if you shaved that stubble."

"M-Mistress..." Aisha said. "I-I'm not sure how much good that would do."

"Well, you know! He just needs to do something about how rugged his jaw is!"

"That might just make it worse..."

"Ha ha ha..." Dulan laughed. "You rotten scoundrels. I'll seriously kill you."

Dulan wasn't by any means hideous, but every inch of him was rough and rugged. And moreover, frightening. From his face to his hair to his musculature

to his demeanor, there was nothing about him that hinted at his true age. Anyone looking at him would think he was in his late thirties.

Dulan swung playfully at Nacht with his broken sword as she went on.

“M-Mistress!” Aisha cried. “Watch out!”

“Watch out for what?” Nacht responded. “An attack like that won’t even hurt me!” Nacht held up a single finger. Somehow, Dulan’s blunt sword couldn’t even break the skin of the slender appendage. His attack power was simply too low.

“I guess my sword’s broken...” Dulan said. “Well, whatever.”

“Was it important to you?” Aisha asked.

“Just something I picked up. It fulfilled its purpose. In fact, I’m surprised it lasted this long.”

Nacht placed her hand on top of the broken sword and filled it with her magic. The raw iron changed color until it resembled a starry night sky.

“Mistress?” Aisha asked.

“I’m just giving it its last rites,” Nacht explained. “It may not have had a proper soul, but I think I can feel some faint consciousness from the weapon.” The sword was enveloped in light. It then turned to dust and scattered in the wind.

“Wow...” Aisha said. “It’s so pretty...”

Nacht smiled. “Well, I guess that leaves you down a weapon. Here, maybe I can give you a replacement.”

“Huh?”

Before Dulan could respond, Nacht’s hands went to work. She opened her storage box and retrieved a greatsword. It was an oversized, rough implement, but then, in the dim light of the cave, ripples of moonlight seemed to envelop it. The sword seemed to almost beat with a living heart, faintly undulating in the still air.

“This is Phantom Moon,” Nacht said. “A Legendary greatsword that only

shows its true form in the hands of the worthy. Right now, it looks like a beautiful illusory blade, but if I let go, the illusion will vanish. Does that remind you of a certain swordsman's heart?" Nacht grinned fiendishly.

"How did you—?"

"How do I know about your heart?" Nacht cut him off. "I'm a Soul Dragon demiwurm! Of course I know!"

"You really *are* a monster..." Dulan said.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Nacht let go of Phantom Moon, and once again, the sword became old and rusted. It was as if it was mocking them for having thought they'd seen it as a beautiful blade a moment earlier. "You can have it," Nacht said. "I'm not using it, and all my friends have better weapons anyway."

"What the hell are you talking about?!" Dulan snapped incredulously.

"What, you don't want it?" Nacht asked. "I cost you a sword, didn't I? You should just say thank you and accept the present." After all, if he didn't take it, the sword was just going to sleep in her storage forever.

"There's no way I can accept something like that!" Dulan said. "Do you have any idea how valuable that is?! And anyway, I lost, didn't I?! You should be taking something of mine, not giving me a sword!"

It was true that a sword like Phantom Moon was quite valuable. It was a boss drop from a low-level area and a fairly rare piece of equipment. But its stats were much lower than what Nacht was equipping. From her perspective, it was just a piece of junk she had no use for. Basically, its level was too low. It was really only viable as a weapon up to level 80.

"Phantom Moon is a weapon that lends its power to the weak," Nacht said. "Although as you are, you're too weak to draw out its true power."

"Hmph. Still..."

"Besides," Nacht said, "this is to my benefit as well. Think of it as a little experiment I'm performing."

"An experiment?" Dulan asked. "No... Do as you will." He had been prepared

to die, after all. He had no qualms.

“Hey, don’t get any wild ideas!” Nacht said. “I told you I’m not interested in old men!”

“I’m not an old man! I’m still young!”

“Hah!” Nacht laughed. “Not with that face. You’re not fooling anyone, old-timer!”

“Gh... Monster!” Dulan made a face like he was about to attack, but Nacht just laughed.

“Now, don’t get me wrong,” she said. “Compared to me, you’re nothing.”

“Gh...”

“But still, you’ve got a little bit of power. Enough that those bandits said you were the strongest in the world, at least. That’s a pretty lofty title to give to some random guy, so I imagine you have at least *some* potential.”

Dulan glowered silently. “Calling me the strongest right now has to be a sick joke...” his face seemed to be saying.

“Hence my experiment!” Nacht said. “To see whether or not you could successfully wield Phantom Moon. Having a concrete benchmark like that should help motivate you to keep training, right?”

Dulan had taught Nacht of a number of possibilities, from the ability to overcome skills through force of will to fighting without relying on skills, and even the simple fun of a real no-holds-barred fight. She wanted to use him as an experiment on raising the limits of her power. It seemed that her high level made her quite powerful in this world, but by the standards of Real World Online, she was still a weak character—too weak to participate in PvP. As such, she had made up her mind to look for ways to increase her strength. She was interested in the skills of this world as well. It struck her that she could use Dulan to test their power.

And also, it felt like fate.

“I’m looking forward to seeing how much stronger you get,” Nacht said. “Now take it! You lost the fight, after all. You have to do what I say.”

“That’s true, I suppose...” Dulan finally seemed to be coming around. Done thinking, he accepted Phantom Moon, the sword with no blade.

Nacht nodded, satisfied. “I suppose it’s about time for us to be going, then. Sorry to keep you waiting, Aisha.”

“O-Oh! Not at all!” Aisha said. “It was nice to meet you!”

Nacht held Aisha’s hand and took one step, then a second, and then stopped. “Oh yeah, one more thing,” she said, looking over her shoulder at Dulan. “Just a bit of advice from your elder: you need to stop running away. You won’t find the answers you’re looking for on a battlefield.”

“Nh—!” Those words provoked the largest reaction from Dulan so far. Even with her back turned, Nacht could feel his body spasm like he’d been stabbed in the heart.

“I’m not saying you need to avoid fights,” she went on. “Why do you fight? For whom? When next we meet, I will ask you for the answers to those questions.” Her list of demands and conditions finished, Nacht moved on.

The cave got colder as they continued. The only sounds were their own footfalls. Aisha screwed up her face and held her nose tight. “Mistress, it stinks in here!” she complained.

“Tell me about it,” Nacht agreed. “It’s suddenly bad enough to make me wanna turn off my sense of smell! Definitely not the sort of olfactory experience I want my beloved Aisha to have. *Create Air!*” This was an *Ars Ventis* spell designed to protect from vacuum room traps. It created a zone of fresh air, pushing out everything bad.

Aisha gasped as she surveyed the room. “This...” Nacht said, “...must be where they keep the ‘merchandise.’”

The crudely excavated space had two areas set apart by rows of iron bars. One was just a simple cell, but the other seemed well equipped to hold prisoners. In the first was a number of women lying powerless on the ground. In the other, the one with heavier-duty bars, was a group of both men and women currently regarding Nacht with suspicion.

One prisoner in particular drew Nacht’s eye—one from what Nacht surmised

was a group of adventurers. She was restrained with a pair of black metal manacles, a magic circle designed to restrict her movement, and a collar carved with runes. It would be an excessive amount of security if she were an ordinary woman.

“Well, Aisha!” Nacht exclaimed. “There are quite a number to choose from, aren’t there? Any of them catch your eye?”

“Mistress! That’s horrible!”

“I’m kidding! Jeez!” Nobody in the room seemed to be in a laughing mood, however. In fact, the whole room was suffused with an overwhelming aura of despair. The only ones here who even seemed able to speak were the adventurers, whose spirits hadn’t yet been completely broken.

“And you are...?” the beautiful woman bound with the absurd number of restraints asked. She was being held captive in nothing but her underwear, her slender body on full display. It made for quite the lurid scene, the collar and magic circle only heightening the effect.

Her hair was a near-translucent, icy blue. Her narrow eyes were menacing in spite of the situation she was in. Her body didn’t betray a hint of emotion or any sense of shame over her current circumstances, but Nacht could detect a faint sense of fear deep in her heart.

“Who am I?” Nacht repeated. “That’s kind of a long story, to tell you the truth. The name’s Nacht Schatten. You can go ahead and call me your bestie Nacht, okay?”

The prison was silent.

“Mistress...” Aisha said. “Can we stop messing around and save these people? Mister Dulan said he was going to let them go, didn’t he? And you really shouldn’t be staring...”

“I’m not messing around!” Nacht said. “And what’s wrong with looking? We’re both girls. And the blue-haired one’s kinda pretty! I need to give my eyes a break after spending so long looking at that musclehead.”

“No, Mistress!” Aisha glared. “You shouldn’t stare at girls! If you must, you should stare at me instead! Your Aisha is the only one you need!”

Nacht grinned with a strange, indescribable menace. “Oh? So it’s okay for me to stare at *you*, is it, Aisha?”

“Weh?! I-I suppose...”

“I’ll be sure to take a good, long look next time you take a bath!”

“Eeeep!!! D-Don’t embarrass me, Mistress!”

“But you’re the one who said I could! Is my soulbound servant going back on her word?”

“N-No, Mistress...” Aisha nodded, a faint smile on her bright-red face.

That sight seemed to shock one of the adventurers out of his stupor. “Hey!” he demanded. “Who the hell are you?! Are you friend or foe?!”

“Stop, Garen,” the woman chided him. “I apologize for my companion. We are the members of the Rose of Ice, an adventuring party. We came here on a request to exterminate the bandits, but you can see how that turned out. Your assistance would be very welcome. Needless to say, we will reward you however you wish.”

“Hm?” Nacht said. “However I wish, you say?”

“Mistress, *please* stop messing around and help them!” Aisha begged as politely as she could. “Pardon me,” she said, addressing the adventurers. “I am Mistress Nacht’s servant, Aisha. We’ll let you go right away!”

Between Nacht and herself, Aisha seemed much more like an adult. To that end, in an effort to stop wasting time, she started looking around for some sort of key.

“All right,” the man called Garen said, “so how did you get here? The bandits have that monster Dulan on their side!”

“Oh, are you done snapping at us?” Nacht said with no tact whatsoever. “He wasn’t a big deal. Are you sure you’re not just weak for adventurers?” She was treating the situation like a joke, poking fun at the prisoners like a bratty kid.

“Excuse me?! We’re an A-rank adventuring party! Don’t tell me you haven’t heard of Rose of Ice, led by Krista the Ice Queen?!”

Another adventurer, a girl with braided hair, shot Garen a scolding glance. “Garen!” she shouted. “I’m so sorry,” she added to Nacht. “We *are* fairly strong, however. Especially Krista.” She sounded offended.

“Sorry, sorry,” Nacht said. She had just been saying whatever came to mind. She hadn’t really meant to antagonize these people. “I wasn’t trying to make fun of you. But seriously, you lost to that guy?”

Unsurprisingly, it didn’t help. “What?! You just won’t quit, will you?!” Garen snapped back. “You got a death wish?!”

“Garen,” Krista said, “be quiet.” She didn’t raise her voice—her icy tone was commanding enough. “I apologize, Miss Nacht. My companions are very upset, given the situation. I hope you aren’t angry with them.”

“Ah ha ha!” Nacht laughed. “Don’t worry about it! Sorry if I was rude. I guess the ‘me’ I am now kinda sucks at manners and etiquette. Now, sorry to keep you waiting a bit longer, but I think I’m gonna do something about *them* first.” Nacht turned to look at the cell across from the adventurers’, where a great number of unclothed women lay collapsed.

The bars were crude and looked easy to break, but the women weren’t moving at all. Completely bereft of strength, they merely stared with dead eyes. Nacht decided she wanted to do something about that, so she stepped up to the cell and lashed out with her claws once, then twice. They cut through the metal bars like a hot knife through butter.

“Wha—?!” the adventurers exclaimed. There was a sickening, groaning metallic sound as the bars collapsed completely. “Huh?!”

Nacht ignored the cries of astonishment and stepped calmly into the prison. The place was filthy with sweat, bodily excretions, and miserable tears, and there were a dozen or so women and girls of all ages lying in a disorganized heap. The oldest looked to be nearing forty, while the youngest might have been eight years old. It looked like they had given up long ago; they were little more than corpses. Some of them seemed to be moving a little, and Nacht even thought she heard one of them mutter that they’d been saved, but the children and the older women didn’t so much as twitch.

“You can get out of here now if you’re still alive,” Nacht said. “Or if you’d

rather take the easy way out, I can give you a painless death. But first, I guess I should heal you. Fair warning, though: healing magic isn't exactly my specialty. *Ars Remedium...*" She could have just handed out potions for everyone to use, but she wanted to see how well her healing magic would work.

It worked well enough, as it turned out.

"No way... My wounds are gone!"

"It's so warm..."

"Even my butt feels better!"

"I guess there's nothing you can do about the hymen, then. That's a shame."

With everyone healed, Nacht removed a number of outfits from her storage and handed them over to the now-much-happier prisoners. The outfits had come from Nacht's perverted supporters, so many of them were fanciful costumes like nurse outfits or cheongsams.

But there was a problem. Two of the girls still wouldn't move—a child who didn't look a day older than ten and a woman in her twenties.

"Do you want to die?" Nacht asked.

The child didn't seem to. She sobbed incoherently and shook her head. She still seemed to be on guard, however, as she was looking up at Nacht with terror in her eyes. The fact that Nacht, too, was an attractive young woman didn't seem to matter.

The girl moved her mouth silently, trying desperately to speak, but her voice didn't seem to be working. No matter how hard she tried, nothing came out. It must have been a conditioned response—she would have learned quickly that words or screams only made the men violent.

"There, there..." Nacht patted the girl gently on the head. "Everything's okay. You're safe now." She dressed the girl in a polar bear costume that was unbelievably soft to the touch and hoisted her up onto her shoulders.

"Uuhhh..." the girl managed. "Th...aak..."

Nacht understood what she was trying to say—her gratitude was plain to see in her soul.

“You were really brave,” Nacht told her. “I’m here to help; you can relax now.”

Nacht was half-human, after all. She was fully inclined to save people in need and even heal their wounds if they were injured. Even if she wasn’t, she had promised Aisha that she would help the people she could help, and that certainly included these women.

“Now then,” Nacht went on. “The last girl. What do I do with you?”

The woman sat slumped against the cave wall, looking for all the world like an empty husk. Her soul, badly wounded and full of deep resentment, didn’t even react to Nacht’s words. While her body had been healed, it seemed that her heart had not. There was no light in her eyes—no indication that she was even aware of her surroundings.

There was no doubt to be had.

The world was a cruel place. Not everyone was blessed with happiness or good fortune. Even in peaceful Japan, there had been no shortage of people who chose to take their own lives. There were many for whom life was a cause of agony. If this woman, with her wounded soul, truly wished to die, it hardly seemed like Nacht’s place to judge. At the very least, as a wyrm with power over the workings of the soul, she could give the woman the mercy of being sent off to her grave in peace.

“Are you ready?” Nacht asked, and the girl slowly closed her eyes. That seemed like as good of an answer as she was going to get. “All right. I will at least grant you the peace of sleep. *Rebirth Hypno...sis?!*”

Nacht’s spell was interrupted by the girl riding on her shoulders. She pulled Nacht back with all the feeble strength she could muster. “S...Stah...”

“Stop?” Nacht asked. “Look at her.”

The girl kept trying as hard as she could to speak. “M-M...t...t t...help...you...”

She’s saying...it’s her turn to help me? Nacht didn’t know what sort of history the two girls had with each other. It was a sad story to be sure, but they had also been there for one another. They shared a real bond. Nacht might not have been able to sway the older girl’s heart, but maybe this child could do

something. And maybe Nacht could help.

“I see,” she said. “I’ll leave her to you, then. *Ars Anima: Soul Link!*”

Nacht’s spell would serve as a bridge between the souls of the girl who had lost her speech and the girl who had closed herself off to words. It was thinner than thin, but that thread of hope was all she had.

Nacht set the girl down on the ground and guided her hands to touch the older girl’s. “Go for it, my little hero,” she said. She had done all she could. The rest depended on the two of them.

“Sorry for the wait,” Nacht said. “Now it’s your turn.”

Just then, Aisha found the ring of keys. “There it is!” But she was too late. Nacht had already rent the bars on the adventurers’ cell with her claws just as easily as she had the other.

“No way!” exclaimed Garen.

“That was magically reinforced steel!”

Apparently, it had been a surprising feat, but to Nacht, the two cages hardly felt different at all. Whatever enchantment the cage bars were under, her claws cut through it with no resistance whatsoever.

“M-Mistress!” Aisha protested. “B-But I found the key...!”

“That’s not the point!!!” Garen, Sasha, and their fourth party member, A’lu, replied in tandem.

Nacht moved on to the astonished adventurers, slicing through their thick, magically reinforced restraints with a single flash of her crimson claws.

“Gah!”

“Wha—?!”

“Huh?!”

All three were set free in an instant.

“I guess we don’t need the keys after all...” Aisha pouted.

“Oh! Sorry, Aisha!” Nacht said. “I just thought it sounded like a lot of work,

checking to see which key opened which lock. But good job finding them. Thank you.”

There was only one prisoner left.

“And that brings me to you,” Nacht said. “Krista, was it? What’s with the magic circle?” It was clearly a restraint, but Nacht didn’t sense enough power from it to warrant caution.

“Wait!” Sasha cried out. “That’s a binding spell! You mustn’t—” But Nacht had already stepped inside. There was a buzzing sound like static electricity, and the circle dispersed.

“Hm?” Nacht said. “Was that thing just for show?” She had expected some resistance, or at least for the circle to have an effect on her, but instead, it had dispelled quietly the instant she stepped inside.

“I guess it can’t stop a monster who can cut through magic steel...” Garen grumbled.

“Unbelievable,” Sasha added. “It makes no sense at all...”

Nacht chose to ignore them. “Well, that saves us the trouble!” she said. “Next is that collar of yours. It looks like quite the thing...”

“Mistress!” Aisha protested. “Don’t look!”

“You want me to close my eyes?” Nacht asked. “That sounds dangerous. But this collar kind of reminds me of the ones Tamer classes use with their Dominance ability...” There were items in Real World Online that let a player temporarily take control of a character—though only monsters would be completely obedient.

“It’s a magic-sealing collar,” Krista said. “A device to restrict the flow of magic power. But with your strength, it would most likely break if you—”

Nacht didn’t wait for Krista to finish before placing her fingers against the collar.

“Nh...” Krista moaned. Nacht had tried to be gentle as she filled the unwanted accessory with her own magic, but... “Gah! Ngh! B-Be gentle!”

“Huh?” Nacht said. “But it’s almost broken! Just a bit more!”

Krista's cheeks flushed with exertion. She gritted her teeth and trembled in agony. Though she didn't let it show on her face, it was obvious that she was nearing her limit. "Ah!" she cried. "Ahhhhh... Nh... Haah... Haah..." Suddenly—and very unintentionally—the scene had started to look quite depraved.

"This is sort of lewd..." Aisha said.

Aisha! Don't say that! Nacht thought furiously.

"Coming into contact with someone else's magic like that is usually uncomfortable," Sasha explained. "It can tickle or even hurt if there's a lot of it. It looks like it's really bad this time..."

Nacht's magic power was immense. It must have hurt a lot more than either Krista or Nacht herself had anticipated.

"Just a bit more..." Nacht said. "Okay, there! Last up, your manacles—"

Krista didn't wait for Nacht to release her from her last restraints. Expressionless but clearly angry, she yanked forcefully at the manacles. The magically reinforced steel groaned and bent until finally, just when Nacht began to wonder if it would happen at all, they snapped apart.

Krista's blue hair fluttered elegantly, enveloped in the light of her magic. The room temperature seemed to drop a few degrees as well. It was a frightening sight.

"Um..." Nacht fumbled for words. "Like...sorry?"

"It's your fault for not using the key, Mistress!" said Aisha.

"Thanks for the help," Krista said with a sigh. She didn't sound particularly grateful. In fact, she didn't seem to want to look Nacht in the face at all.

"Krista!" Sasha—the girl in braids—hugged her leader tight.

"I'm sorry," Krista said, wiping the tears from the corner of Sasha's eyes. "I'm entirely to blame for this. I should have never gotten you involved in something as dangerous as—"

But before she could finish, Krista was struck on the head by three hands at once.

“Don’t be silly!”

“Yeah! Don’t be silly!”

“You’re being very silly.”

“That hurts...” Krista protested.

“We’re adventurers!” Garen declared. “We face death every day of our lives!”

“It’s high risk, high reward,” continued A’lu.

“We *want* to be involved!” said Sasha. “We aren’t strangers, are we? You don’t think we need to be protected, do you?”

“No!”

“See?! Then don’t say depressing things like that.”

“I’m sorry.” Krista seemed to settle down a bit. She hugged Sasha tight and looked up. “Thank you, everyone. Now, let’s get out of here.”

“Not quite,” Nacht said. “Feel free to keep on singing the praises of the adventuring life if you like, but someone’s still fighting for her life over there.”

“H-Hey!” Sasha protested.

“What are they doing?” Krista asked, looking over at the two girls in the other cage.

Nacht laughed. “Their souls are connected!” she said, gazing at the pair with a gentler expression than usual. “I guess you could call it a family quarrel!”

‡

Someone once said that good fortune is like a shooting star: it appears without warning, far out of reach, and while you’re trying to make a wish on that star, it vanishes. There was nothing romantic about it in the slightest.

Lana was an ordinary woman living in a village. Nobody knew how many pioneer villages there were, but Lana’s was relatively established. They had a certain amount of wealth, but that was all. A girl born into the village had her whole life arranged for her. She would do work for her family until the age of fourteen or fifteen, whereupon she would be wed to some man or another. Then, she would continue to live the same life she had before, except now it

would be to help her husband's family.

Lana wasn't dissatisfied with her lot in life. She considered it good fortune just to have enough to eat. But she had a dream as well—a fairly common dream among village women. She would meet a handsome prince who would come to inspect their village. He would be an upright man, as virtuous as the dragons, and he would fall in love with her at first sight. After that, she would be escorted to her new life in the capital by a party of brave adventurers. A very romantic dream.

She knew it was a fantasy, of course. Her world wasn't going to change any time soon. And if it did, it would likely mean danger or death. That was the realistic way to look at things.

When change came, it came suddenly. One day, well after she had given up on her dream, a man approached her from out of nowhere. "The moment I saw you, I fell in love!" he proclaimed. "Please, be my wife!"

He wasn't a very impressive man. He was neither handsome nor brave. He had a little bit of money, but nothing compared to a proper noble. He was a sweaty, passionate, straightforward man, completely unlike the prince of her dreams.

The man, Furen, was the second son of a village mayor. He had something of an education and found employment working for a merchant, traveling between the various pioneer villages for trade. He was far from Lana's ideal. She couldn't even say she loved him with a straight face. Being proposed to by a stranger, it turned out, was quite different from how she had imagined it.

"Please!" Furen begged. "You'll be happy with me, I promise! I want to live with you!"

She turned him down many times, but he was persistent. He came to her again and again every time he visited the village, and at last, she gave in. Perhaps it was his honesty—which verged on foolishness—or his goofy smile, but Lana even found herself gradually falling in love with the man. As a merchant, he was often away from the house, but when he came back, he would talk endlessly about how much he loved her. Before she knew it, she was never not smiling. She gave birth to a daughter, and the three of them

continued to live their happy life.

Eventually, Furen came to her with a proposition. “I’m thinking of finding a place in Free Market City,” he said. “I’m a respectable merchant now. I want to have my own estate so that you and Nina can live happy lives.”

Lana agreed. She would move to the city with her husband and daughter. It wasn’t all that different from the dream she’d had long ago. Surely, she thought, this must be happiness, even if it wasn’t the happiness she’d sought.

Then why? Why would the gods not allow her to have it? What sin had she committed that had been so grave?

Lana’s good fortune disappeared like a shooting star in the night sky. The trip from her hometown to Free Market City took four days by covered wagon. It happened on the night of the fourth day, a night with a strong rain. It only lasted a few minutes, but Lana would never forget it as long as she lived.

The caravan guards, noticing a group of bandits, engaged in battle. Lana was in the wagon, holding her young daughter. The wagon was shaking. Nobody told her what was happening.

The rest was in flashes, seared into her memory. Her husband with a sword sticking into his gut, coughing up blood and telling her to run. The fresh blood smeared across both Nina’s face and her own. The bandit’s sickening laughter. Her husband lying dead. It was enough to break her, but the horrors only continued.

Her young Nina began to wail at the horrific sight. The sound of a crying infant must have upset the bandits—they used their swords to slice her open right in front of her mother. Something fell to the ground. There was a terrible sound in her head, like everything was falling to pieces.

She screamed and screamed. She didn’t stop screaming as they hit and beat her, as they kicked and stabbed her, or even as they forced themselves on her. She screamed so that heaven and earth themselves would reverberate with her pain. She screamed so that her hatred would reach the ears of the gods and dragons. She knew there was no point. She knew it wouldn’t change anything. But she screamed as though her life depended on it.

And when she lost her voice and began coughing up blood, when her tears dried up and she was on the verge of death, she kept on issuing curse after curse. She cursed humanity. She cursed the world itself.

The bandits left her in a cage, where they would sometimes come to defile her body. Every day, she wondered if this would be the day she would die. But maybe death would be a relief.

But the miserable hatred deep inside her had a voice of its own, telling her that if she died, it would be over. Her hatred, her resentment, her revenge, her curses—all of it would amount to nothing. And so she couldn't die. Not before the filthy bandits who had done this to her were dead as well. That was why, even after she had stopped reacting to the world entirely, like a human-sized doll, she still clung to life.

Then one day the bandits came back with something unusual: another prisoner. She was a young, adorable blonde girl. She made Lana think of her own daughter and how she might have looked if she had been able to grow up. Perhaps it was luckier that she had died...

That was almost certainly why, even though she had long since lost the use of her voice, she spoke that day. "You sick freaks, doing things like that to a child. Am I not enough for you?"

She dried the girl's tears and taught her how to survive in her new life. They went to sleep every night curled up in each other's arms. She taught her hand and mouth techniques that would help her get through with her "duties" as quickly as possible—all sorts of things she had never imagined ever needing to teach Nina. She kept the girl's spirits up as best she could.

Then one day, the nightmare was over. A girl appeared before them. The bandits had defeated a first-rate adventuring party, but this girl made mincemeat of them. It was absolutely overwhelming. A massacre. And then she saved the prisoners—herself and the girl included. She must have been a god.

Lana didn't speak, but for some reason, she sensed that the girl could hear her thoughts. *Finally...my curses have come to fruition.*

It was nothing less than the workings of karma—and only proper that the wicked should receive death. Her life, which had come to a halt so long ago, had

finally reached its end. Lana sat before the small god in front of her and closed her eyes, but the end never came.

“Miss, you mustn’t!” a voice told her.

Lana found herself inside her soul, the root of life itself. This was where her humanity had taken shape, where she had first become self-aware. It was her origin. It should have been a brilliant white, but by now, it had grown terribly dim. There were dark shadows everywhere, and an ear-rending shriek of pain filled the air. She was deep within a fatally wounded soul on the verge of vanishing completely. Each time she heard the scream, it would come again and again, repeating ceaselessly. It threatened to drive her against the wall, to swallow up her very being. It wouldn’t end. It simply would not end. The wailing shriek would echo, and echo, and echo. But it never went silent.

The little guest in her soul spoke one more time, screwing up her face determinedly as her voice shook. “Miss, you mustn’t! Please don’t die! You’ll make me sad!”

Lana knew this girl. This was the girl who had cried in her arms so many times. Even now, right before her eyes, the girl was crying. “You...can speak?” She practically fell on her butt in surprise. Come to think of it, this wasn’t the first time she had heard the girl’s voice. Back when she had first come to the cave, she had been crying for her mother.

“That’s not important!” the girl, whose name was Emma, said. “Why, miss? Why?! After Lady Nacht rescued us and everything! Why would you decide to die?! It’s so mean! And after you helped me out so much!” Emma’s soul was connected to Lana’s right now. Lana could feel the girl’s emotions clearly, no matter how strongly she wished not to. To Emma, Lana’s gentle embraces had been beyond invaluable while trapped in that cold prison.

“Don’t worry about me,” Lana said. “My life is over. I only continued to live out of resentment, and now, it’s over.” That was all she could offer Emma as thanks and reassurance.

“I don’t get it...” Emma replied. “That doesn’t make sense...”

Lana closed her eyes, admonishing the girl. “You didn’t have to come here,” she said. “I didn’t need you. You should forget about me and live a happy

life...or at least a long one if a happy one is too hard..."

Emma stared directly into Lana's shut eyes, tears flowing messily down her face. She shook her head. "I can't do it! Not on my own! I'm... I'm broken..."

Once again, Lana could feel the girl's emotions like they were her own. There would be no ignoring her—no plugging her ears. After all, the two were now bound together. It was solely because of Lana's warmth that Emma had stayed alive even after she'd lost her voice and her mind had reached its breaking point. It was solely because of Lana's impulse to extend a hand toward her. It was solely because of Lana.

Lana opened her eyes to look at the tearful girl in front of her. "I don't have anyone left in the world!" Emma cried. "I'm all alone! Even if you let me out of this prison, I can't live on my own! The only reason I stayed alive so long is because you were here! You were like a mom to me after my real mom died! So please, don't leave me alone! Please! I don't want to be alone!"

"Emma..."

"I can feel your emotions, you know. It's like they're hitting me in the face. I know you don't think you have a reason to live, but what about me? Can't I be the reason for you to stay alive? Am I that worthless? Can't I be your daughter, even if I'm just a replacement?"

It was a childish wish, yet at the same time also completely un-childish. Emma couldn't speak properly. Her body was filthy, and her heart was in roughly the same shape. But the same was true of Lana, wasn't it? That was why Emma needed her.

"Won't you let me help you?" Emma begged. "You helped me so, so, so much, and I haven't been able to help you at all! So please, please, miss! Please don't go away..."

"Emma..."

"Can I...call you 'mom'?"

Lana stared at the small girl in front of her. Her face was messy with tears, miserable, and plainly worried. She was a strange girl who had made the mistake of imprinting on a woman who might as well have been a corpse. And

yet, what she said was true. Lana had been using Emma as a surrogate for her departed Nina. That was why she had such fond feelings toward her, why she had gone so far out of her way to help her. Because she wanted a replacement for the daughter she had lost. It was foolishness, looking for something that couldn't be found.

She had used Emma as a tool. What a depraved act of selfishness. Lana had no reason to live, nor any desire to. There was no reason for her to try to make a life for herself when she was all alone in the world. But Emma had said she wanted to be her daughter. It was pitiful. Absolutely pitiful. In her weakness, she had tried to run from her responsibilities. She had even made this sweet girl cry. If Furen was alive, he would surely have scolded her. Nina would surely have said that she was a terrible mother.

"Ha ha..." Lana laughed. "You're a weird one, Emma. You want someone like me for a mom? I'll only make you miserable..." In the end, she just wanted Emma to stop crying.

"That's not true! I don't believe it!"

"You're six years older than Nina was. I suppose that makes you my oldest."

"Y-Yes!"

"Furen always spoiled our daughter, but I can be strict, you know."

"O-Okay!" Emma was crying too much now to be able to speak. Instead, she just nodded over and over again. "Mommy!" she cried. "Mom! My mom!"

"There, there..." Lana said, pulling the girl into her arms and gently stroking her hair. "There's my sweet girl..."

At some point, the darkness lifted. Their tears shone brightly, filling Lana's soul with light, then spread out to form a pool around the two of them. There had been a bit of good fortune close at hand the whole time. This time she reached out and took it with her own hands.

I'm sorry, Nina. I'm sorry, Furen. It looks like it'll be a while before I join you. Please be patient...

She followed the light into the depths of the water, awakening back in the

prison. It somehow felt brighter than it had before. Emma was still there, sobbing in her arms. “M...Mama...” she managed.

“Yes, darling,” Lana said. “My sweet Emma.”



Chapter 3: The Two Irregularities

Free Market City, the hub of the kingdom's commerce, was an unusual place. Before it became part of the kingdom, it had been embroiled in a long period of civil war. As a result, arms merchants still held great power there. There were some humans making lives for themselves in the mountains to the north, as well as villages of dwarves, who specialized in smithing. Additionally, there was the port city of Kellebel to the east. As the kingdom's one and only point of contact with island nations, it helped make Free Market City a hub for people looking to buy and sell goods from the surrounding lands.

To the south was the Yolno Forest, an excellent place for adventurers to procure rare and valuable medicinal herbs. It was said that the Yolno Forest was the kingdom's physician. Lastly, off to the west stretched the King's Highway, a well-maintained, well-traveled road that led merchants to and from the royal capital.

Free Market City was a great metropolis that dominated the economies of the cities and towns it served as a hub for, which was a good portion of the kingdom. Within its walls, trade restrictions between different species were annulled. There were a great number of public facilities available for use in its central district, and five great avenues, each with its own purpose, led out toward the noble district. One of the avenues, called the Iron Alley, led to the Free Market City Adventurers' Guild.

The Adventurers' Guild was a large building. After all, one of its functions was to serve as a refuge in case of emergency. If you included the training grounds and other outside portions, it very well might have been the largest building in the city.

"Is that all?" a woman asked, speaking haughtily. "I'm quite busy, I'm afraid, so if we're finished, I shall take my leave." She brushed aside a loose strand of hair and strode off with a refined bearing.

"Still no, I see..." Niguld sighed as he watched her go. "Well, I suppose I can't

expect that woman to act unless there's something in it for her."

In times of emergency, the people of Free Market City met in the Guild to hold discussions. It might have been more proper to do it in a noble's house, but as the city's nobles were divided between the two so-called "Great Families," it made more sense to do it here, in neutral territory. And so, it had become the custom.

"What do we do, guildmaster?" asked Irena, a young lady with glasses serving as the guildmaster's aide. But Niguld Howl, the leader of the Adventurers' Guild, wouldn't give a clear response.

"Hmph." He lowered his head, a grim expression on his face.

"What do we do, guildmaster?" his aide repeated.

"Ghhh..." Niguld glanced over the stacks of information reports he had in front of him. He didn't have a single good idea.

"Make up your mind, you damn geezer!" Irena held the book she was carrying aloft and brought it down savagely on the guildmaster's head.

"Ouch! That hurt, Irena! I'm the guildmaster, you know! I'm a very important person! You can't just—" He cut himself short. The book in Irena's hands gleamed dangerously. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? Just relax. I mean...just relax...please?"

"Then what are we going to do?" Irena asked. "It's been an entire week since Ice Queen Krista Niese Branrichter, the A-rank adventurer, accepted the bandit extermination request. An entire week with no word. Worse, we've received report after report of a deluge of monster activity in the Yolno Forest. We've already had seven novice adventurers confirmed wounded, and high-level monsters such as ogres have been sighted. Moreover, in this time of emergency, neither noble family will agree to send soldiers. I believe that under these circumstances, it is the job of adventurers to investigate whether an evacuation notice should be sent to the neighboring villages."

Irena was scarcely eighteen years old, but she was a prodigy who had graduated at the top of her class from the capital's Academy of Magic. She applied that excellence to everything from her daily tasks to improving the

effectiveness of the organization. She certainly didn't shy away from an opportunity to demonstrate her abilities.

"All we can do is have faith in Krista," Niguld said. "Let's give her three more days. If she and her party still aren't back by then, we'll send some B-rank adventurers to investigate. But what do you think is happening in the forest?"

Irena clasped her hands together just beneath her generously proportioned bosom. "I can think of two possibilities," she said coolly. "The first is that a monster of immense power appeared in the forest, driving the other monsters out of their usual ecosystems. The second is that there has been an upsurge of magic essence due to some yet-unknown cause, sending the monsters into a frenzy."

Niguld gave the matter some thought. "Hmm..." he replied. "That shouldn't be beyond our ability to handle. And I'm sure that the nobles will put aside their differences and deploy their soldiers when it comes down to it."

"Then what is worrying you?"

"It's just a hunch," he said, his expression unreadable, "but I have a feeling something bad is coming." Emergencies rarely had only one cause. They were events through which ran many threads of fate. "What's the worst-case scenario? A phantom beast outbreak? A mutant strain of griffins?"

The Yolno Forest had a long history of monster frenzies. The strongest monsters Niguld had seen there could kill scores of soldiers and adventurers.

"No, guildmaster," Irena said. "Both of those are far from the worst-case scenario."

"Hm?" Niguld tilted his head.

"Surely even children know the legend of Yolno Forest."

"Oh, you mean the ancient demon awaiting resurrection beneath the Sealing Lake?" he asked with a smirk. "That old wives' tale?"

"It *would* be the worst-case scenario, would it not?"

"Okay, then assuming it's true and the seal is broken, what would you do?"

"Run."

Irena's blunt response made Niguld laugh. "No kidding, right? I'd run too."

"No, you have to stay. You're the guildmaster, are you not?"

"And *you're* my assistant!" he teased. In any event, Niguld hadn't been serious about running away. He would realistically assess the situation and do what needed to be done. "I guess there's no getting around it. Let's assign some adventurers to investigate the forest—C-rank and above. This isn't an extermination mission. And I hate relying on him as much as you do, but call for Hausman."

Such were the guildmaster's orders. The Adventurers' Guild hastened to put them into action.

‡

Near the riverbed in the forest was a spot of land that seemed to have been artificially leveled. It was square, twenty meters long on each side, and flat enough to build a house on. But what was most remarkable was the time it had taken to create it: barely two seconds, thanks to Nacht's earth magic.

"You are...truly exceptional," Krista said, choosing her words cautiously. "Are you truly human?"

"I'm half-human," Nacht answered. "The other half is wyrm. But hey! Humans can do stuff like this too! One of my old wizard friends was so good at Earthshaping that they could obliterate entire mountain ranges with one hand while fighting a raid boss with the other!"

"That doesn't sound like a human at all..."

The wizard Nacht mentioned was an expert in PvP and something of a tutor to her when it came to magic. They were always upset at being unable to match Nacht in terms of raw firepower, even though DPS was the one and only field in which Nacht could best all comers. She had always found them to be a bit strange.

"Anyway, is this really all that impressive? I'm sure your ice magic could freeze something about as big." As she spoke, Nacht took something out of her storage—something sold in high-end shops in RWO: Tent Construction Orbs. They had been a godsend to Nacht when she was first starting out.

“What is that?” Krista asked.

“Just a tool that lets us make some cheap lodgings!” Nacht tossed two of the orbs in the air. They fizzed and smoked, and then, suddenly, became a single large, circular tent.

“Wh-What was that?! An ancient magic artifact?!”

“Oh, nothing that special. They sell ’em in shops for 20,000 gold.”

The tent resembled the yurts used by nomadic herdsman. It was clear at a glance that it was well made. When they stepped inside, they found a room with a lavishly carpeted floor. There were two beds, seven futons, and a small table upon which stood several glasses of chilled fruit wine. As one might expect from an item meant to restore stamina and food points, it was a comfortable temperature no matter the season and came equipped with a generous pantry of food. It was the perfect setting for the adventurers to regain their strength following their ordeal.

Of course, their reactions were completely overblown.

“Whaaaat?!”

“Whoa, no way!”

“This is fancier than my house...”

“Ooh! This drink is delicious!”

“Hey, don’t just go drinking whatever you find! Oh, wait, this *is* good!”

“Is this truly all right, Miss Nacht?” Krista asked. “I’ve never stayed in such luxurious quarters before. This is like an estate in the capital.”

“Don’t be silly!” Nacht said. “It’s just a disposable item. It’s not even that expensive.”

“Mistress Nacht does all sorts of preposterous things like this, Miss Krista,” Aisha reassured her.

“So it seems...” Krista said. “I feel like my facial muscles are getting the workout of their lives.”

“You two are terrible,” Nacht objected. “I’m just a normal girl, y’know?”

“As if!” everyone shouted back at once. Nacht could only shrug.

“Well, if you say so, I suppose,” she said. “C’mon, Aisha. We’re staying over here.”

The tent was a disposable item—not at all a suitable place for Aisha to sleep. Nacht had another handy item in mind for that.

“Is that...a door?” Aisha asked.

“It’s a base-building item, a Second Home! I’ve put a lot of money into this thing, so it should be pretty comfortable.”

Any player who reached level 70 could complete a quest to acquire a Second Home. At first, it would be a single small room, but players could buy permissions in the real-money store to alter the design or decoration. Some people called the system the executives’ piggy bank.

“Come on!” Nacht repeated. “You can come in too if you’d like, Krista.”

Nacht’s Second Home was decorated with the vivid colors of a starry sky. The floor and walls were transparent, and past them, a sea of stars stretched as far as the eye could see, softly illuminating the room. The bed looked like a fluffy cloud, and the refrigerator was made of pale blue ice. It was even equipped with a shower and a wardrobe for changes of clothes, and the room’s storage was full to the limit with all sorts of recovery items and materials. Surely even the tens of thousands of yen that had been spent purchasing this space would have to agree that their sacrifice had been well worth it.

“Wow...” Aisha said. “This is beautiful...”

“What in the world...?” Krista gasped. “Is this the world of dreams?” It was as if she had stepped into outer space itself.

“My room, the world of dreams?” Nacht echoed. “That’s quite the girlish thing to hear you say, Krista!”

“Does that surprise you?” Krista said. “I’ll have you know that I like sweets and cute things as much as anyone.”

“I see! Then perhaps I should get you some dessert. Maybe something chilled.” Nacht sat down on the room’s sofa, facing Krista. Aisha sat down

beside her.

“Really, though,” Krista said. “Who are you? At this point, if you told me you were one of the greater gods, I would believe you without question.”

“Hah,” Nacht laughed. “Me, a god? That’s a good one. I told you I’m half-human, right? Same as you. You can just refer to me as your bestie, Nacht!” As Nacht spoke, Aisha looked at Krista with a modicum of suspicion, drawing closer to her mistress.

“I think I’ll pass,” Krista said. “Miss Nacht, what was your purpose in inviting me here?”

Nacht regarded the ever-icy-faced Krista with a keen eye. “It’s about the reward you owe me,” she explained. “For saving your life.” Nacht had no intention of asking for a reward from the women she had freed—they had nothing, after all—but Krista and her party were first-rate adventurers who had entered the situation as professionals. It seemed appropriate to hold her to her word.

“Naturally,” Krista agreed readily. “I’ll do anything in my power. I am an A-rank adventurer, you know. My financial resources are on par with those of the nobility.”

“I’m not gonna ask for money,” Nacht said, crossing her legs. She didn’t have any particular need for the local currency. “Although I wouldn’t mind if you covered our expenses in the city. No, there are two favors I want to ask of you. First, I want you to help the girls I freed from slavery rebuild their lives. We don’t want to rescue them from bandits only to toss them to the wolves, y’know?”

Nacht knew it wouldn’t be easy for the former prisoners to make lives for themselves. They would need support if they were to return to society, and she didn’t want their precious lives—saved because of Aisha’s kindness—to come to an ugly end.

Krista nodded. “Certainly. I’ll support them financially and help them however I can. I will do everything in my power to help them return to their old lives.”

“Second,” Nacht went on, “I’d like you to help us establish ourselves in the

city. I'm sure the name of the Ice Queen will be helpful in getting us settled without causing any trouble for my darling Aisha."

Nacht had no interest in making things hard for herself, as that would just be inviting trouble. After all, she looked from the outside like an ordinary young lady. Far from deterring would-be harassers, her appearance might actually attract them. Nacht herself might not have minded the attention, but it was something she would rather not subject Aisha to. That was why she wanted to make use of her status as a friend of the Ice Queen. As long as people knew what had happened today with the bandits, it was likely that nobody would bother them. The faster people became aware of how strong she was, the better. And Krista and her party were useful as eyewitnesses.

Nacht wasn't at all interested in making too much of herself. She would much rather live in the moment, doing and saying whatever struck her fancy at the time. Aisha, however, was an exception, and Nacht owed it to her to be considerate.

"Certainly," Krista inclined her head curiously. "But is that really all? We adventurers are obligated to report things, you know. I was already going to tell at least the guildmaster about you."

The life of an A-rank adventurer might have been worth more than Nacht realized.

"That's all from me," Nacht said. "Aisha, do you want anything?"

"B-But I didn't do anything..." Aisha said, lowering her gaze. "It hardly seems appropriate..."

Of course, Aisha *had* been useful—she was an indispensable component of Nacht's motivation! But Nacht figured that Aisha wouldn't accept that line of reasoning, so instead, she opted to ask for something on the girl's behalf.

"Well, how 'bout I ask for one more thing, then?"

"If it is in my power." Krista looked deadly serious. Nacht just smiled.

"I want information about Aisha's mother. I believe her name was Floria."

"M-Mistress!" Aisha exclaimed, hanging her head even lower.

When Nacht had seen into Aisha's soul, she'd found a great number of sharp, painful emotions directed at her mother: loss, sadness, and anger, with a hint of longing. Overall, it seemed more negative than positive, but she still knew that Aisha wanted to be by her mother's side.

"She'll be an elf woman," Nacht said, "probably beautiful like her daughter. I'm not asking you to go to the ends of the earth for this, but if there's anything you can find out, I'd really appreciate it."

"Understood. I swear on my name that I will find her."

Krista went back out to the tent, leaving Nacht and Aisha alone in the vast space of Nacht's Second Home. The stars shone silently and beautifully.

"Should I not have done that?" Nacht asked.

"N-No..." Aisha said. "It's fine..." But she was clearly upset. Aisha had almost no memory of her mother's face, only a fleeting image of long golden hair done up with a red pin. By the time of her earliest coherent memories, she was alone with her father.

"Do you hate your mother?" Nacht asked.

"I do..." Aisha admitted. She had grown up feeling like her mother had thrown her away. Her mother hadn't been there for her when she was sad or things were hard. She hadn't been there to help with the things only someone with elven ancestry could understand. It was completely understandable for Aisha to feel the way she did.

"But still," Nacht said, "she could be alive somewhere. It might be good to have an opportunity to talk to a relative of yours. I don't have parents either, y'know. I just don't want you to throw away a chance like this..."

Nacht may not have had parents, but Toru did—parents he would never see again. Perhaps it was the lingering presence of Toru's memories in her mind, but Nacht suddenly got the sense that him dying before he could pay back their generosity meant that she had let them down. That bitter feeling led a shadow to fall across her face.

"Mistress..."

Aisha might still have a living family member—the woman her father had loved, no less. Nacht couldn't imagine that she would have simply abandoned her daughter out of sheer irresponsibility.

"It's fine if you don't like her, but I think you should at least talk," Nacht said. "It can be a big shouting match if it has to. We don't always know what'll happen when we try things! I know you have plenty of reason to be angry, but we have time. There's no need to rush into anything."

"...Okay," Aisha replied.

Nacht smiled at her. Aisha was the first person she had formed a connection with in this world. Their meeting had given her the confidence to make her way through the world as herself.

"Aishaaa!" she cried, hugging her tight.

"Eep! Wh-What is it, Mistress?"

"I'll look after you in your mom's place for as long as I have to," she said. "Would you like to sleep in my bed tonight?" Nacht smiled at the flustered, blushing girl sitting next to her.

"Wow!" Aisha exclaimed. "This is amazing, Mistress! There are so many people!"

Nacht nodded in agreement. Free Market City was a metropolis worthy of its name. There were huge crowds of people everywhere they looked. The city gates had had their crowds, but the city itself was so busy that it was dizzying to watch. Fortunately, they had the A-rank adventurer Krista with them. If they hadn't, they would have had to wait in the long line at the gate and prove their identities to the guards.

"I'd rather just use magic and sneak in than wait in *that* line..." Nacht said.

"Mistress," Aisha sighed, "that would be a crime..."

Free Market City had a long history of interspecific cooperation. All kinds of humanoids had worked together to grow it ever since its start as a much smaller settlement. Even after unification with the kingdom, the people of the

city continued to place great value on diversity. The kingdom made nobles of the Valoua family, who at the time were the city's most significant arms merchants, and the city itself was declared a self-governing free trade zone. In order to foster trade, taxes and tariffs were the same for everyone, regardless of species—a practice that contradicted the teachings of the state church.

Nacht and her companions made their way down one of the city's great roads: Iron Alley. True to its name, there were shops here dealing in all sorts of metalwork, especially weapons. Even outside, it smelled like burning charcoal. The sound of ringing hammers could be heard from all over.

Many of the people walking along Iron Alley were adventurers looking for equipment. Nacht saw humans, near-humans with animal ears, short men who looked like veritable balls of tight muscle, and what could only be a carnivorous lizardman all moving around as equals.

"Mistress..." Aisha said. "People are staring at us..."

Their group certainly looked out of place. Nacht was a beautiful woman in a gorgeous dress, surrounded by adventurers in armor.

"Ah ha ha!" Nacht laughed. "They're just looking 'cause they think you're cute, Aisha!"

Nacht wasn't the only one dressed strangely. Aisha looked as cute as could be in her maid outfit, especially now that the color had returned to her cheeks. After Nacht, she was almost certainly receiving the second-greatest number of stares.

"Still," Nacht said, "it's strange..."

"What is, Mistress?" Aisha cocked her head.

"Oh, nothing, really!" Nacht said. "I'm just surprised at how nice this city is. I wasn't expecting to find so many different sorts of people living together like this."

Thinking back on her knowledge of Earth's history, from the tiny country of Japan to the planet as a whole, humans seemed to have an endless appetite for war. They would fight and kill their own kind simply because they dressed differently, had skin that was a different color, or lived in a different part of the

world. Those small differences seemed to be enough to prevent understanding. Even Toru had cut himself off from the people around him, dismissing them as normies—a memory that made Nacht laugh. The people here were from entirely different species, but they were living happily in the same space.

Nacht remembered the words of one of her beloved friends: “We can only ever see a tiny part of the world. We’ll never even see all of this game. It makes me sad to think about how very, very little we see...”

If Toru had been able to see this, might it have opened his eyes to other ways of living? Nacht thought about it for a second, then stopped herself. “No helping it now...” she muttered so quietly that the people around her didn’t hear.

As they passed through the avenue toward the city center, an especially large and solid-looking building caught Nacht’s eye—the Free Market City Adventurers’ Guild. No sooner had Nacht’s group passed through its main gate, which was large enough to accommodate huge monster specimens, than a huge clamor of voices broke out.

“Krista! You’re safe!”

“Miss Krista! I’m so glad to see you unhurt!”

“The Rose of Ice all returned safely too.”

“See? I told you not to worry. They’re famous for a reason.”

“Hey! You were the most worried of all of us!”

Adventurers crowded around them, crying with joy and breathing sighs of relief, but Krista maintained her usual expressionless demeanor as she made her way to the reception area. “Can you take a message to the guildmaster?” she requested. “I have a report to make.” It surely wasn’t her intention, and she probably wasn’t even aware of it, but the look she gave the receptionist seemed almost menacing.

“Y-Yes, ma’am! I’ll give him your message right away!” the receptionist squeaked before looking over at Nacht. “A-Are the people with you rescued captives?”

“No,” Krista shook her head. “This is Miss Nacht. We failed the request, actually. She was the one who rescued us. The captives are staying at an inn with Garen and A’lu. Please note that it was Miss Nacht who fulfilled the guild’s request this time. I’ll save the long version for the guildmaster.” She tossed Aizen’s body, wrapped in a bamboo mat and his mouth stuffed with cloth, onto the ground.

“Wh-What?” the receptionist stammered. “That can’t...”

Once again, the adventurers around them all started talking at once.

“What was that?”

“The Ice Queen lost to a bunch of bandits? No way.”

“That girl saved the Ice Queen herself? Is this a joke?”

“But hey, she’s kinda cute, isn’t she...?”

“No kidding. I wouldn’t mind having her for a wife.”

“Moron! She’d never go for a guy like you!”

“Oh? Is it my time to shine? I’m a B-rank adventurer, and good-looking to boot!”

“Look in a mirror, ugly!”

Nacht, for her part, was fond of attention, and the adventurers here seemed interesting enough. But Aisha was squeezing her hand tight, clearly in distress. She would have to quiet the crowd. Before she could say anything, though, Krista silenced them well enough. She didn’t speak; she merely regarded the onlookers with a quiet intensity that was almost murderously hostile. The adventurers withered under her icy glare. She sent such powerful chills down their spine that they seemed to have been frozen solid.

“Are you accusing me of lying?” Krista asked. “Do you think I would deliver a false report? Should I take that as an insult?”

The adventurers went silent. Krista glittered with the blue light of her magic, lowering the temperature of the room. A wind arose, cold enough to chill everyone around her to the bone. Nobody even dared to make a peep.

“E-Excuse me...” the receptionist ventured, clearly terrified. “I’ll go get the guildmaster. Come with me...”

Nacht—and only Nacht—wore a big smile on her face the whole time.

The receptionist led the group to a large, comfortably furnished room at the back of the second floor. In it was an office desk, on which they could see a great number of incident and expenditure reports stacked up in piles, as well as a table and sofa for entertaining guests.

There was one strange detail to the guildmaster’s office: there were actually *two* desks. The one in the middle of the room was eye-catching in spite of the mountain of paperwork it held. That one seemed to belong to the guildmaster. The other desk was small and neat, with a high, cushioned chair. The girl sitting there was small, but she had a truly voluptuous chest. Her breasts jiggled delightfully with every movement she made.

“Mistress?” Aisha said.

“I’mnotlooking!” Nacht shouted. Aisha shot her a sharp glare, which she pretended not to notice.

A man stepped forward. He was large, getting up there in years, and very obviously the guildmaster. His hair was white, as was his beard. He had a great scar over his left eye and a number of old wounds on his body. He looked every bit the part of a rough adventurer—it was obvious that he was good at what he did. There was only one detail that seemed out of place for a tough old man, and that was his eyes. They were round and friendly and bright, as if beneath all the toughness, he was just a kindly old man.

“Glad to see you back, Krista,” he said.

“You look like a polar bear!” Nacht blurted out. It was the first thing that had come to her mind.

“Pfft!” Aisha and Sasha did a simultaneous spit take. It seemed like they had been thinking the same thing.

“H-Hey!” Sasha protested, trying in vain to hold back her laughter. “Don’t disrespect the...pfft...guildmaster!” She might actually have been the rudest of the bunch.

“Ha ha ha ha ha!” guildmaster Niguld laughed, somehow looking even more like a bear. “I guess we know what next year’s guild mascot is gonna be!”

“Pf...Pfft...” Aisha and Sasha kept struggling valiantly not to laugh.

Niguld was a cheerful, friendly old man. He was more than happy to be made a fool of. But the antics were interrupted when Irena struck him on the back of the head with a thick book.

“Hey!” he shouted. “What was that for, Irena?!”

“We’re still at work, you know,” she shot back.

“Yeah, yeah...” he said. “Sorry. My bad.” For a guildmaster, he seemed a little spineless.



“Now, Krista,” Niguld continued, “would you care to introduce these two ladies you have with you?”

“This is Miss Nacht, and this is her servant, Miss Aisha. They rescued us from some dire straits. We owe them our lives.”

“Hmm...” Niguld gave Nacht a long, searching look, only to earn himself another thwap from his busty assistant. “Ow! What was *that* for?!”

“You were giving her a salacious look.”

“I was just inspecting her—”

“Nonetheless, you mustn’t look at a woman that way.”

Niguld’s argument trailed off. He muttered darkly to himself, and Irena shot him a backward glance. “Perhaps we should hear the report first?” she suggested. “We have quite a lot of work to do, you know.” It was honestly hard to tell which of them was the guildmaster.

Sasha obliged, telling the whole story of everything that had happened to them. The moment she finished, Niguld burst into laughter.

“Gwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! I see! So you had a run-in with Dulan the Sword Fiend! That’s some rotten luck!”

“It wasn’t luck,” Sasha said. “It was a trap. Miss Nacht tells us that the bandits approached Dulan in the city to ask for his help capturing Krista. They had magically reinforced manacles, a magic circle to prevent movement, and a magic-sealing collar. None of those are items a bandit could get their hands on easily. There must be someone pulling the strings!” Sasha didn’t seem at all relieved to have been rescued. After all, they still had no idea who was behind the trap.

“The request was from the house of Finbel,” Niguld said. “Nobles in Elenora’s camp. But who knows how far it goes. The Finbels could be getting tricked themselves. Of course, I’ll do everything I can...”

“But we don’t have resources to spare for a real investigation,” Irena objected. “And we need Lady Elenora’s cooperation in dealing with the emergency!”

“Emergency?” Krista asked in a quiet voice.

“Yes!” Irena said. “The monsters in Yolno Forest are on a rampage. A number of our adventurers have even been injured. Investigations into the cause are underway, but we need to develop an actual plan as soon as possible. Did you notice anything strange about the forest on your way back?”

Krista and Sasha both shook their heads. It was normal to be attacked by a monster or two making your way out of the Yolno Forest, but “normal” went out the window if Nacht happened to be in the area. The monsters could sense her draconic aura and thus wouldn’t come anywhere close to them.

“I believe the cause to be either a single powerful creature or else an upsurge of magic energy affecting monster behavior.” In other words, Irena suspected that the crisis was the result of natural cycles happening within the monsters’ habitat. Sometimes, in their competition for prey, a particularly large monster would start expanding its territory, driving other monsters away. The worst-case scenario was if the large monster causing the frenzy left its territory. Once, a griffin that had gotten a taste for human flesh had attacked the city. It was a tragedy that left many dead.

For a moment, Nacht wondered if the frenzy was her fault. She certainly fit the bill as a single powerful creature. She hadn’t been menacing creatures or chasing them from their lairs, though, and she was pretty sure she had only fought bandits. She had been a good girl, not having gone grinding for experience even once.

“Why did you tense up like that, Mistress?” Aisha asked.

“Ah ha ha...” Nacht laughed. “Just making sure I hadn’t done anything wrong.” Aisha gave her a confused, blank look, and Nacht patted her on the head.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Maybe it’s an omen! Maybe the seal on the lake has been released!” the guildmaster joked immediately after Nacht concluded that she wasn’t to blame.

Sasha, Krista, and Aisha all smirked in knowing amusement, but Nacht, who knew nothing of the world, was confused. “The seal on the lake?” she asked.

“He’s just being ridiculous,” Sasha told her. “I suppose it would be the worst possible situation if it were true, but the Sealing Lake is just a legend. Besides, the lake that people say holds the seal is dangerous, even for the deep forest. Even our party would have trouble getting there.”

Sasha didn’t seem too concerned, but Nacht was starting to sweat. In the back of her mind, she was remembering her past crimes: reckless use of magic.

“It’s said that the Sealing Lake was left behind by the Hero,” Krista said, picking up where Sasha left off. “It absorbs the magic of the twin moons and uses it to hold the seal fast. It wouldn’t be something that could be broken easily. Not even my magic would be enough.”

“Pfaaah!!!” Nacht spat out her drink.

An isolated lake.

Two moons.

Vast magical power.

All Nacht could think of was the image of herself making that dumb pose and firing her magic straight at the lake.

“Um...” Aisha began. “My father always told me that the forest was full of scary monsters, but...is the Sealing Lake real?”

“There certainly is a lake that’s *said* to be the Sealing Lake,” Niguld explained. “It reflects the twin moons particularly well, and its waters are full of their magic power. That said, there’s no proof that the ancient demon sleeping in the lake is anything but a myth.”

Nacht coughed and coughed. She was desperate to believe that it was all a coincidence.

“I’m just joking around anyway,” Niguld said. “Trying to make light of things, y’know? I hope I didn’t make you uncomfortable.”

“N-Not at all!” Nacht said. “It was a great joke!”

The forest was enormous. There had to be more than one lake in the entire place. And besides, the guildmaster himself said it was nothing but a legend. It was absurd to think that the lake Nacht had immolated while testing out her

magic would turn out to be so important.

Krista and Sasha gave Nacht a strange look, but they didn't seem to suspect her of anything. Aisha, however, who had been by Nacht's side the entire time, noticed that something was wrong. "Mistress?" she asked.

"It's nothing!" Nacht said. "Don't worry about it..." Nacht kept on thinking, trying to decide how she should explain things to Aisha, until the conversation was over.

As Nacht and company left the Adventurers' Guild, they were stopped by two knights in armor. "Halt!" they declared, blocking Nacht's path.

"Fine," Nacht snapped. "I'll hear you out, at least. What's up?"

"We've received reports about you," one of the knights said. "An unknown young woman and a girl from a pioneer village. Our lord has summoned you. Come with us!" It seemed that they weren't here to talk, though their attempt to detain Nacht was almost stunningly pathetic.

"What kind of invitation is *that* meant to be?" Krista demanded, stepping between Nacht and the knights. "These girls are my guests. I don't know who you serve, but you had better come back later."

"You have quite the tongue for an adventurer—"

"These girls are the guests of Krista Niese Branrichter. I won't tell you a third time. Leave."

The menace in Krista's voice was enough to make the knights go silent. Finally, they acquiesced and slunk off, clicking their tongues in irritation.

"What was *that* about?" Nacht asked.

"Servants of some noble family," Krista answered. "But that was much faster than I expected."

"We haven't done anything wrong, have we?" Aisha asked, clearly nervous. She must have been worried about getting arrested.

"Not a thing," said Krista. "You drove off Dulan and rescued us."

“All thanks to Mistress,” Aisha noted.

Krista nodded in agreement. “Miss Nacht is a very eye-catching presence. A beautiful and utterly strange young lady. It’s no surprise there are rumors. Your outfits are quite unusual as well. That ring of yours is especially stunning, Aisha. It’s a treasure the likes of which few have ever seen. I believe there are already some who have ill intentions for you.”

“Wh-Wh-What...?” Aisha stammered. “M-Maybe I should take it off?”

“It’s too late for that, I’m afraid. But more to the point...” Krista glanced over at Nacht. In the short time they had known each other, Krista had already gotten a good understanding of her personality.

“There’s no need for you to hide from rabble like that,” Nacht said. “All they have is petty greed. If the flames of disaster ever strike, I will personally slaughter anyone who would dare hurt you.”

“Yes,” Krista spoke in a resigned monotone. “What she said.”

Aisha couldn’t help smiling to herself at Krista’s tone. “Anyway,” she said, changing the subject, “you’re a noble, aren’t you, Miss Krista? I haven’t really been using your title or anything... You’re not mad about that, are you?”

“Of course not. I owe you my life. Besides, I may be a noble now, but I started out as a commoner. There’s no need to stand on ceremony with me.”

“It seems like the nobles don’t think too fondly of you, though,” Nacht said, referring to the incident with the cave. Krista smirked wryly.

“There was an incident in a duel long ago,” Krista said. “My opponent was very aggravating, and I’m afraid I went a bit too far. I froze his manhood solid so that it would never work again. I believe that may be why.”

It was a brutal account, yet it was delivered in the same composed tone that Krista always used. Aisha and Nacht winced in unison.

“Things had been getting more and more difficult for me in the capital,” Krista continued, “so I moved here, to Free Market City. But to think I would run into Dulan, of all people. It seems I still have a long way to go...”

“N-Not at all!” Aisha said. “I think you’re more than good enough!”

As they spoke, the group made their way through the crowded city streets, finally arriving at their destination. “Ah, here we are,” said Krista. “The Evening Bird.”

The Evening Bird was a high-class inn, exclusive even by the standards of Free Market City. Without an introduction, prospective guests would simply be turned away at the door. It offered privacy and security unheard of at less expensive inns. Free Market City was fairly safe, but cheap inns were full of ruffians and adventurers, so there was always a chance of running into trouble. Nacht didn’t exactly need protection, but Krista and Niguld insisted on arranging a top-quality room for her regardless.

“Thanks for the help, Krista,” said Nacht.

“Thank you so much!” Aisha added.

The corners of Krista’s lips twitched upward. It was hard to tell, but it might have been an actual smile. She turned around and left without a word.

“I bet you’re tired, Aisha,” said Nacht. “We should get a good night’s sleep.”

That night, the two of them ate dinner while watching the sun set over the city street through the large window in their room. They then spent a pleasant hour together discussing the events of the day, among other things. As the minutes wore on, the city grew darker, and Nacht and Aisha grew more relaxed. It seemed that the day was coming to an end. All that was left was to curl up happily in bed together and get some sleep.

“May I ask you something, Mistress?” Aisha asked.

Something was off. The self-deprecating, adorable, sweet Aisha was fixing Nacht with a look so intense it put Krista’s murderous aura to shame. Nacht immediately began scrambling for excuses.

“I-It was an accident! I-I mean, yes, I *did* burn up a lake, but who knows if that was even the same lake they were talking about at the guild!”

It wasn’t fair. She was supposed to be having a nice evening with Aisha, but the Adventurers’ Guild had shaken her. She was so shaken, in fact, that Aisha had asked about it. She had been very kind, asking what was wrong and

promising to be there for her Mistress. At first, Nacht refused to answer, but that just made Aisha cry.

“P-Please...” she begged, tears in her eyes. “Mistress, please talk to me...”

She looked so sad that Nacht revealed everything.

“But it *does* seem that there have been problems ever since you destroyed the lake, Mistress.” Aisha’s eyes narrowed in the form of an unspoken accusation. “There must be some connection, mustn’t there?”

Nacht was astonished to learn that Aisha could make such harsh expressions, but she currently lacked the mental capacity to properly appreciate it. After all, Aisha was furious.

Perhaps the way Nacht had broken the news had been a mistake. “*I mighta gotten carried away and destroyed a lake with magic,*” she’d said. “*Tee hee!*”

Her supporters would have loved it and probably gone to clean up the mess themselves, whereas Aisha didn’t seem pleased in the slightest.

“H-Hang on!” Nacht protested. “Even if there *is* a one-in-a-thousand—no, make that a one-in-a-million chance it’s my fault, an ancient demon whose seal can be destroyed that easily can’t be a big deal, right? Shouldn’t be a problem!”

“That’s not true at all!” Aisha rebutted, seemingly even more upset. “Ancient demons are on the same level as the dragons! They’re descendants of the Lord of Calamity, so powerful that the Hero had to seal them away! My father always told me that the ancient demons will take you away in the night if you’re naughty! Please stop acting like you don’t know how unusual you are, Mistress!” Aisha had gotten incredibly worked up.

“O-Okay. You’re right. I’m sorry, Aisha. Please don’t be angry...” In the face of Aisha’s outrage, Nacht finally admitted fault.

“No, Mistress, you don’t understand! If you have let an ancient demon free, it might destroy Free Market City itself!”

Nacht had to admit that that would be less than ideal. After all, the city was not only full of lives Aisha would want her to save, but also currently housed Krista, whom Nacht needed to look into information on Aisha’s mother.

Additionally, it would be a waste to let such a beautiful and diverse city be reduced to ash. More than anything else, though, Nacht would lose Aisha's trust if she kept acting like this had nothing to do with her. That was an outcome that had to be avoided at all costs.

"Fine, I get it," Nacht said. "I'll do something about the ancient demon or whatever. And I may as well handle the monsters while I'm at it. So can we please let it rest?"

"All right, Mistress," Aisha said. "You're half-human, remember? You keep saying so yourself. I would like it if you were a bit more responsible..."

Nacht had gotten lectured by a young girl. It was hard to tell which of the two was the adult in the room. In fact, with Nacht stubbornly ignoring Aisha's words, she seemed far and away more childish. However, as these were the results of her own actions, the least she could do was accept what she'd done and clean up after herself, even if it sounded like a pain in the butt.

"Right!" Nacht said. "Leave it to me, the bold and intrepid Nacht!"

"But it's your fault in the first place, Mistress..."

"I know, I know. Hey, let's head to sleep for the night. In the same bed, of course."

"W-Wait, Mistress! They gave us two beds. Why should we get in the same one?"

"Don't be like that! We've slept together lots of times already, haven't we?"

"Nh..." Aisha said. "Don't say it like that. You're making it sound lewd..."

"Hm? 'Lewd'? Care to explain what's so lewd about it?"

"I-I don't know..." Aisha replied as she looked away.

Nacht sighed. "Good night, Aisha."

"Right. Good night, Mistress."

‡

Even in Free Market City, nobles were a ubiquitous presence. The capital may have been the center of government, but Free Market City was the center of

commerce. Many nobles were here to engage in economic activity. There were even business academies that admitted nobles and commoners alike.

There were two noble families in particular—the Great Families—that served as the de facto rulers of the city. One of those families, the house of Valoua, had been an influential force in the city since before it became known as Free Market City. They were weapons merchants and had been instrumental in unifying the city with the wider kingdom. The other Great Family was a branch family of the house of Lenvell, the descendants of the second son of a duke from the capital.

The merchants of the city had once been self-governing, but after the unification, powerful people with ties to the royal family began showing up and seizing authority for themselves. The two Great Families were always fighting for control.

With how much time her husband spent away in the capital, Elenora Ruttie Lenvell was effectively the true head of the house of Lenvell. Today, she was in a bad mood.

“So the legendary mercenary turned out to be completely useless, then?” she spat.

The Lenvells had been the ones behind the establishment of pioneer villages in the area around Free Market City. It had been an ongoing process for two generations now, and they had created a total of twenty-four settlements, the goal being to give work to the homeless and unemployed, as well as to possibly create some new markets. But the villages were also meant to be bases for covert operations. The Lenvells were involved in all kinds of dirty dealings, even with the ever-increasing number of bandit gangs.

When she’d heard that Dulan the Sword Fiend was in town, Elenora had thought it the perfect opportunity to carry out the Royal Capital’s orders to eliminate Krista Niese Branrichter, reviled as a witch by many of the capital’s nobles. It would have ensured her position for life, but it seemed that the chance had slipped through her fingers.

“Who is this Nacht girl, I wonder...”

All the report had said was that the Ice Queen had been saved by an unknown

girl. But this girl couldn't possibly have defeated Dulan. The very suggestion that Elenora wouldn't have heard of someone with that level of strength was absurd. The most likely explanation was that this girl had shown up after the infamously fickle mercenary had wandered off in search of some new battle.

"Well, it's no great loss," Elenora mused, gazing idly at the brilliant jewels adorning her arms and smiling. "I simply have to get close to her and take advantage of the changes in the forest. And besides, that treasure her servant girl has is far more interesting. I could steal it, perhaps...or I could buy it from them once I've made their acquaintance. Regardless, I believe my next move is clear."

She rang a bell, getting the attention of her servants in the next room. "Have the girl Aisha brought to me," she ordered.

"As you command. However, the girl in question is currently staying in the Evening Bird Inn as a guest of the Ice Queen."

"And?" Elenora snapped back. "This is *my* city, is it not? Bring her to me at once! Use my name if you have to! Do I make myself clear?"

The man hastily bowed, then left.

Elenora laughed gleefully, imagining the splendid treasure that would soon be hers. However, power has a way of blinding people. She had no idea that the tail she was stepping on happened to belong to a dragon.

‡

"Miss Krista sure is amazing..." Aisha looked tired. She and Nacht had gone out sightseeing in the morning, but it seemed that the rumors about them had spread further still. Everywhere they went, people just kept staring. A shocking number of people came up to speak to them—they just looked like two harmless girls, after all. Yesterday, when Krista had been showing them around, only the two knights had called out to them on the street. Today, though, it was people of all ages and genders.

Nacht liked being seen and was happy to get the attention, but Aisha didn't enjoy it at all. She looked like she was nearing her limit.

"Should we buy a souvenir and head back to the inn?" Nacht proposed.

“Yes...” said Aisha. “Let’s do that.”

Nacht looked around at the stalls and stores. “We’ve already bought a lot, haven’t we?” Aisha asked. “Do we still need more?”

“Well, yes and no,” said Nacht. “I just thought I’d fill up on food items and stuff. I like having full stacks in my inventory, you know?”

“I don’t know what that means...”

The salespeople were a different matter entirely from the boorish men who kept talking to them. Urged on by amiable old ladies and sweet young ladies alike, Nacht ended up doing quite a bit of shopping.

“Mistress, please stop flirting with everyone...” Aisha scolded her, but Nacht’s spirits were higher than ever. After all, she was walking around a real-life fantasy town. And besides, Aisha was with her. It was simply impossible for her not to enjoy it.

“I’m not flirting!” Nacht said. “I’m just being nice!”

Back at the inn, Nacht gave Aisha one of the fruits she had bought from the stalls. She ate it happily, stuffing her cheeks like a bunny or a squirrel. The sight of it warmed Nacht’s heart.

Suddenly, there was a cacophony of knocks at the door, and before Nacht could so much as protest, it burst open violently. A man strode into the room, completely uninvited by either Nacht or Aisha, his chest puffed out importantly. Behind him were two knights with their swords at the ready. Aisha trembled in fear, dropping what was left of her fruit.

“Hmph,” the man huffed. “It seems you’re back. I am Robert, representative of Lady Elenora Ruttie Lenvell, the acting head of the house of Lenvell. Our lady has a message for you. Kneel and listen.” The man spoke confidently, sure of his position. It made Aisha tremble all the more.

“Hmph,” Robert went on. “Are you commoners going to kneel or not? Well, it matters not. You there. Girl. Your name is Aisha, correct? My lady, a noble, has called for you. We have looked into your identity and learned that you are a child from a pioneer village. That makes you a serf, and serfs are the property of

Lady Elenora. You are to accompany me to her mansion at once. And you. Nacht, I believe? You seem to have some measure of strength. You are to be put to use addressing the irregularity in the forest. Stand by and wait for further orders. That is all.”

Aisha had broken out into a cold sweat. The man’s aggressive and self-important posture seemed to be getting under her skin. It was quite understandable, and for that reason, Nacht glowered wordlessly at the man. Her eyes burned with rage, threatening to erupt at any moment.

“Impudence,” she spat. Her aura seemed to grow heavy, almost crushing the knights as they clattered helplessly to the floor, frothing miserably at the mouth. They were as terrified as it was possible for a human to be. But the man who had most offended her, Robert, would be permitted neither to collapse nor to faint.

The building shook. No, not just the building. The ground itself was shaking. Nacht’s draconic aura spread farther and farther until everyone living in Free Market City could sense the irregularity. They stopped breathing—stopped moving entirely. And then Nacht roared. It was overwhelming. Absolute. So vast as to be incomprehensible. It was the roar of a wyrm.

“H-How... Wh-What... I-I...” the man stammered, but he failed to say anything articulate. He had incurred the wrath of a dragon.

“What did you just say?” Nacht’s voice cut through the silence. Her tone brooked no debate. “*Who* do you think Aisha belongs to? Let me make things clear. She is *mine*.”

Nacht had no desire to treat Aisha like an object, of course, or to restrict her freedom in any way. But in her mind, that was so obvious that it didn’t need to be said. Aisha understood that, but even so, she had sworn to serve her until the end of time—an oath that Nacht had not refused. Aisha would belong to Nacht for as long as Aisha desired it. There was no need for her to listen to orders from anyone else. Not from a god, not from a dragon, not from a king, and certainly not from a noble. And if the noble in question didn’t see things that way, Nacht would simply have to make them understand the value of her one and only Dragon Priestess.

“Ah ha ha...” Nacht laughed. “Ah ha ha ha ha! Kneel? Before *you*?! Hilarious! I haven’t laughed so hard in ages!”

“Eeek!” Robert shrieked. “I-I-I am the representative o-of Lady Elenora, you...!” But his body was paralyzed with fear. Words were all the resistance he had to offer. Robert clutched his head, wondering desperately what he had done wrong. The truth—that he had done *everything* wrong from the very start—still seemed to elude him.

“You ignorant fool,” Nacht said. “Let me explain this in terms you will understand. Right now, you stand before a wyrm.” More than just her words, Nacht was using her skills as well. This was a palpable threat, and as Robert was not Dulan, there was no chance of him breaking out of her abilities using willpower.

“You want a wyrm to bow before you? To kneel? All while scheming to rob her of her most treasured possession? I suppose that shows courage, but tell me, do you think that was wise?”

Robert shook his head so vigorously that it looked like it might fly off. He finally understood the situation he was in. His mistake had been attempting to make demands of Nacht.

“I’m sorry!” he begged. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” He apologized over and over again as if he were a broken record. Nacht regarded him coldly, and eventually dispelled her aura. The dread that had fallen over Free Market City dissipated.

“I-I’m so sorry!” Robert said, fleeing from the room immediately. He’d left the knights who had come to protect him passed out on the floor.

“Ah,” Nacht said, stopping him. “One moment, please.”

“Wh-What is it?” he asked.

“The mansion to the northeast...” she said, glancing out the window. “The one big enough to see from here, with the gold decorations. Is that your mistress’s mansion?”

“Y-Yes, my lady! That is the one!”

“Hah. There’s no need to be so afraid. I don’t kill people for being rude to me.” Nacht smiled at the breathless man before her. It was a twisted, sadistic smile. “But you can’t expect me to let someone pick a fight with me and get away with it, can you?”

“I-I...” Robert was sweating from every pore on his body.

Nacht’s smile broadened. “Let’s have your mistress pay the price. *Ars Draconis: Falling Lightning!*”

If one were to ask anyone in Free Market city what happened that day, they would get the same answer. They would be told that a shadow fell over the city despite there not being a cloud in the sky, and that it was followed by a bolt of lightning in the shape of a dragon. They would hear of the terrible, eardrum-bursting thunderclap that accompanied that lightning as it struck the mansion of house Lenvell, obliterating an entire third of the building and leaving behind a charred crater. And yet, they would learn that not a single person had died.

Because it was a result of magic cast by Nacht, and because it happened shortly after the disappearance of the dragons, the event would later come to be known as one of the Dragon Calamities.

‡

Five humans were seated at the round table in the Adventurers’ Guild conference hall. The room was dimly illuminated by the light of glowing magic crystals hanging from the ceiling. The room’s furnishings were practical and without much ornamentation, but it was obvious that they were made out of good quality materials. The most eye-catching fixture was the table itself, carved from the blackwood trees that grew in the Obsidian Forest. The wood was a deep black color, and it had a pleasantly woody smell—a delight for the eyes and nose alike.

Niguld’s fist slammed into the gorgeous table with a *thud*, drawing the attention of the other participants in the meeting.

“Well then,” he said, “thank you all for coming today. Welcome to our emergency meeting concerning the strange events of late and what we are to do about them.”

“So why did you call *me* here?” one of the two noble participants asked. This was Forun Londo Valoua, a famous merchant reputed to have his fingers in everything that went on in Free Market City. He was a genius with a bored look in his eyes who, at the young age of thirty-four had already been made the head of the Valoua family. “I’m very busy, I’ll have you know. Please try to keep this short.”

“I am quite busy as well,” said Ranvaile, the head of the Mages’ Guild. He was an older man with a beard that would put a dwarf’s to shame, and he wore a classic wizard robe and hat. “I would much rather be spending my time on my own pursuits. But our social position comes with a certain amount of responsibility, does it not?”

There were eight seats at the table. One was occupied by Niguld, the head of the Adventurers’ Guild, and another by his assistant Irena. It would have been more proper to have had Irena standing by behind her guildmaster, but as there were plenty of empty chairs, it made more sense for her to sit at the table and speak freely with everyone. Next to her was Krista, an A-rank adventurer and member of the nobility. By rights, a conference to determine city policy during a time of emergency should involve the six guildmasters and the heads of the two Great Houses, but Niguld had invited only those he felt he could trust.

“I’ll be brief,” said Niguld. “The first order of business is the irregularity with the forest that’s been on everyone’s minds lately.”

“Do we really need to discuss that?” Forun asked. “You may use my knights if it comes to a fight. We have already more or less taken care of our supply needs, and the evacuation of the countryside is proceeding apace. Besides, *that woman*—apologies, I mean Lady Elenora—is surely making her own preparations. She’s borrowed those magic knights from the capital, no? So what’s the issue?”

His words stood to reason. Forun himself had put a lot of work into perfecting Free Market City’s defenses. From a city of over two hundred thousand, Forun alone could marshal a force of seven hundred to a thousand knights. The Adventurers’ Guild also had fighting strength worthy of a major city, while Elenora’s magic knights were the elite of the elite, each one worth dozens of ordinary soldiers. A monster frenzy shouldn’t be anything they couldn’t handle.

“Naturally, we will all do everything we can to bring this to a resolution,” Niguld intoned. “But right now, we don’t even know what’s causing this in the first place. There are too many unknowns. I would like to ask Master Ranvaile for his wisdom, if I may.”

“Well?” Forun asked the wizard. “Do you have an explanation?”

“To put it in terms an amateur such as yourself would understand, there are two main possible causes for the monster frenzy in the forest,” Ranvaile began. “A shift in monster territory, or a magic energy surge. I don’t believe the latter to be a possibility, however.”

“Why not?”

“Surges of magic energy—of mana—follow a cycle. Simply put, it has to do with the movement of the winds and the earth, particularly in a place like the Yolno Forest, which is a focal point for the mana of the twin moons. Which is to say, it is too early in the cycle for there to be a surge. According to our guild’s calculations, the next major mana surge shouldn’t happen for another ten years.” Ranvaile slumped down in his chair as he finished his explanation.

“This does not seem to be a simple case of monsters fighting over territory,” Irena countered. “Our scouts have reported groups of monsters moving in an almost military fashion. This seems to be completely unprecedented. The prudent thing to do, I think, is for us all to work together and intercept them before they can reach the city.”

In the worst-case scenario, that might mean requesting aid from the capital—something Forun wanted to avoid at all costs.

“Tell me, Master Ranvaile,” Niguld said. “Do you have any idea what could be behind this?”

Ranvaile gave the matter some thought before shaking his head. “I can imagine a number of things that might explain a frenzy, but I have no explanation for why the monsters would be moving like an army. Only very long-lived monsters who have achieved evolved forms are capable of that level of intelligence. And even then, monsters don’t often form units with monsters of other kinds. Goblins don’t take kindly to following orders from ogres and the like. Well, there is one possibility I can think of, but I hesitate to even mention

it...”

“What possibility is that?” Forun asked.

“I believe you know of them, Mister Forun,” said Ranvaile. “The ancient demons. It is said they had the power to dominate monsters and force them to obey. But I am speaking of legends. Whether such tales have any truth to them is another question entirely.”

Forun nodded. It was hard to trust such dubious accounts.

There was a break in the conversation; everyone sat in silence for a bit. Eventually, Forun removed his head from where it had been resting in his hand and opened his mouth to speak.

“I understand,” he said. “I will take every possible precaution.”

Niguld grinned. That covered the first topic. “Now,” he said, “our main order of business.”

Forun looked confused. What could be the main order of business at this meeting if not the unknown threat facing their city? Niguld glanced over at Krista, who rose to her feet.

“My name is Krista Niese Branrichter,” she said. “I am an A-rank adventurer known as the Ice Queen. I have come here today not as a noble, but as a well-known and accomplished adventurer. During a bandit extermination mission the other day, my party and I had an encounter with a peculiar young lady.” Everyone present had heard at least some of the story—that the mission had been a trap, and that Krista had encountered the legendary mercenary himself. Extremely interested in what more she had to say about it, they all fixed their eyes tightly on her.

“A young lady,” she went on, “who possesses simply unbelievable power.”

That was a rather abstract turn of phrase. Forun and Ranvaile both tilted their heads curiously. “Unbelievable, you say?” Forun asked.

“I’m afraid that, due to its sheer enormity, I cannot give you an accurate measure of her power,” Krista said. “It is far greater than anything I have ever seen. If there were a hundred of me and we all attacked her at once, we still

could not defeat her. Of that I am certain.”

“What?!” Forun and Ranvaile exclaimed in distress. After all, Krista was an A-rank adventurer, equal on her own to an entire squad of magic knights. She was a warrior worth a thousand men. If this girl could defeat a hundred of her, that would make this young lady the equivalent to an army a million strong.

“I swear on my honor that I am speaking the truth,” Krista insisted. “She would defeat all one hundred of me in no more than a single minute. The guildmaster and Miss Irena both agree with my assessment.”

“I must admit, it’s quite a lot to expect us to believe just out of the blue!” Ranvaile exclaimed. As the guildmaster of the Mages’ Guild, he was quite aware of just how good the Ice Queen was at magic. With her power, she could blow away an entire legion of knights, even ones who had taken precautions against magic. When it came to ice magic, she was simply the best in the kingdom. But there was no reason for her to lie about this, let alone stake her honor on it. She was known for being a serious-minded and trustworthy adventurer.

“The girl likes to remind us that she is half-human,” Krista continued. “Accordingly, she seems to have at least something of a sense of compassion. On the other hand, her other half seems to be that of a dragon. And though it’s hard for me to believe as well, her dragon half seems to be more powerful than even the Four Great Dragons.”

“I...see...” Forun said, still unsure what to make of Krista’s words.

“I’m not asking that you believe me immediately,” Krista said. “But at the very least, it is a fact that Miss Nacht faced Dulan in battle and won without so much as a scratch. Furthermore, she seems to be friendly toward humanity. She does not use her power to menace people, nor does she insist on deference. In fact, she seems to prefer casualness. If what I am telling you turns out to be true, I would ask that you not interfere too much in her affairs. That is the main issue at hand today.”

Her bit said, Krista returned to her seat. Forun eyed her sharply.

“What proof is there that this Miss Nacht is as friendly and benevolent as you say? What makes you so certain that she is not a threat?”

“Dulan defeated me and took me and my friends prisoner,” she replied, meeting his gaze unflinchingly like the warrior she was. “But Miss Nacht rescued us, healed the surviving low-value slaves with her magic, gave them clothes, and even used unknown magic items to help us. Not only that, but when I offered her a reward, she asked only for my assistance in reintegrating the freed slaves into society. If that is not benevolence, then what is?”

Indeed, when seen from the outside, Nacht’s actions sounded like those of a saint. The future had looked bleak for the women the bandits had captured. Rumors were sure to follow them wherever they went. It would be hard even to return to their villages. They would likely be left destitute and wandering without homes. If someone wanted to help them, they would need to do more than simply set them free from the bandits. Never before had Krista met anyone who would be so generous as to use their own reward on such a thing.

“Besides,” Krista went on, “threat or no threat, there isn’t much we can do about her.” It all came back to Nacht’s power. They had no hope of opposing her with force. In fact, doing so might be the greatest risk of all. “I believe it would be best for all of us to treat her with courtesy.”

In other words, they were playing host to someone with the power to destroy the entire city. It sounded like quite the headache.

“Right now, Miss Nacht is staying at the Evening Bird Inn,” said Niguld. “But that’s just a temporary arrangement. This is something I’d like your help with, Mister Forun.”

“Incidentally, Miss Krista,” Ranvaile interjected, “is Miss Nacht a spellcaster herself?”

“She is,” said Krista. “I’ve seen her use spells so high-level that I’ve never so much as heard of them before.”

At this, Ranvaile broke out into a grin. “Aaah ha ha ha ha!” he laughed. “I see, I see! So that’s the kind of entity who has graced us with her presence! I must go pay her my respects. And perhaps she will be so kind as to speak to me about her magic? Ooh, I can’t wait!”

“P-Please take care not to offend her...” Irena urged him.

“Of course!” Ranvaile said, nodding like a cheerful child.

“I see...” said Forun. “I admit I find this all hard to believe, but I trust you to tell me the truth. Very well. In that case, I shall—”

His words were cut off by an overwhelming sense of pressure. It felt as though a terrible beast was unleashing its rage. Everyone in the room felt the wind blow and the earth shake. Fearful, they looked down to make sure that the ground wasn’t actually shaking. Even Forun, who was in no sense a fighter, could feel the hostile presence. Niguld, Irena, Krista, and Ranvaile could feel the magical energy rise up like it would when a dragon roared.

“Miss...Nacht?” muttered Krista. There was only one person she could think of who could manifest such outlandish strength.

“Guildmaster...” said Irena. “I have a bad feeling about this...”

“First, let’s try to figure out what’s happening. We need to understand the situation we’re in,” Niguld said. But before he could do anything, the skies began to move in a most irregular way.

“What is that?!” A cloud appeared from nowhere, a long, serpentine dragon swimming through the sky inside of it. The calamitous sound of the sky itself being torn apart rang out, resounding over and over again.

“What is it?! What is it?! A spell?!” Of those assembled, only Ranvaile had a smile on his face.

The dragon seemed to find its target. It fell from the sky with a crack of thunder that threatened to rupture everyone’s ears, then silence slowly returned to the room.

Everyone was dumbfounded. It hardly seemed real that they had just seen a dragon descend from the heavens. Krista alone didn’t seem to be doubting her senses, though; she deduced that some poor fool must have incurred Nacht’s wrath.

“Do you see?” she said. “This is Miss Nacht’s power. Please, do not do anything rash. That girl sees humanity as her kin and is truly a good-hearted person.”

It seemed like a merciless act, but that was only in appearance. Krista, Ranvaile, and even Irena immediately noticed the discrepancy between the power of the spell and its effect. It was a precise, small-area attack on a single target—a testament to the caster’s superhuman magic control. If Nacht’s intentions had been different, that amount of power would have been enough to completely wipe out the city, but upon seeing the ruined mansion, the group understood exactly what had happened.

“I understand,” was all Forun could say. “I promise I will treat her with the utmost care.”

Chapter 4: Evil Draws Near

The depths of the Yolno Forest were thick with magic power. The mana of the twin moons gathered in the deepest part of the forest, collecting most densely at the lake—or rather, the place where the lake had once been. Now, it was a dry expanse without a single droplet of moisture.

A light shone in the surrounding darkness. There was a girl with flaming red hair that stood on end like it had a will of its own. She had a single horn that emitted a brilliant light as if to pierce the very heavens themselves. Even the enormous griffins, feared as the demons of the sky, could only tremble in fear before such a display of magic.

As it so happened, the girl had been asleep, resting her head against just such a griffin's fluffy wings. She opened her amethyst eyes and sleepily regarded her surroundings. For just a second, she looked relaxed, but once she roused herself, her eyes became sharp and wicked. It was as if she had been replaced by someone else entirely—it was difficult to believe that this evil-eyed girl had been sleeping so peacefully until a moment ago.

“Good morning, my lady. How is your condition, if I may ask?” A woman with long pink hair that fluttered elegantly in the breeze approached the girl as she woke. Her maid uniform covered up most of her slender body. At a glance, it would have been impossible to tell that she was not human.

“Well,” said the girl, “my wounds seem to have healed. Tell me, Sakura, how many have we assembled?”

The maid, whose hair indeed resembled falling sakura petals, bowed her head. “We have four units of ogres, two of liches, and we have recruited two wyverns to our cause. I believe one ogre in particular will be of interest to you, my lady. If you will permit him to speak to you...”

“All right,” the girl replied. “Why not.”

An ogre stepped forward, dressed in old rags. He was a fearsome demon

known by the name of Man-Eater. He had the eyes of a veteran soldier. Without a doubt, he would be a strong fighter to have.

“So you are that woman’s master,” he said, his voice thick. “If you want me to serve you, prove your strength.”

To demons, strength was everything when it came to allegiance. The ogre’s defiant eyes made the girl feel a tinge of nostalgia for ages long past.

“Hah. You’re a bold one. Sure, I’ll play with you a bit,” she said as she drew her sword. The blade was clear like a crystal and breathtakingly beautiful. The forest was filled with the sound of clashing blades until only the victor remained standing.

“I suppose that served as morning calisthenics. Thank you, Sakura,” the girl, whose name was Rinoa, said. Sakura bowed elegantly, and Rinoa continued speaking. “I’ve been asleep for a long time. Tell me, how did you find me here?”

“My father informed me of your whereabouts, my lady,” Sakura responded. She spoke like a machine, her voice detached. She gave off the impression, in both her speech and mannerisms, of an emotionless doll. That was far from the case, however. Her eyes betrayed the passionate emotions that formed the depths of her loyalty and the joy of being reunited with her master.

“And you’ve been here ever since?” Rinoa asked.

“Yes. I myself was unable to break the Hero’s seal.” When Rinoa had first awoken, Sakura had been sleeping in a cave nearby. She had slept for a long time, covered in a mound of dirt and moss.

“It’s been 2,243 years,” Rinoa said. “That’s a pretty long time to sleep. And now, it seems that the world belongs to the humans. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting so long, Sakura. I know of no greater treasure than your loyalty. Thank you.”

Sakura bowed quietly. Awaiting her master’s return had been torture that lasted nigh unto eternity, and though her eyes were dry, her emotions were very much real. Sakura was a magic automaton, a relic left behind by the Lord of Calamity. Even if she lacked expression, her heart was the genuine article, making her 2,243 years of solitude almost unbearable. What meaning had she

found in those long days waiting for her master to awaken? What was it worth?

To Sakura, there was only one thing that mattered, and it was something Rinoa knew very well. She had waited far, far too long without knowing when or even if Rinoa would ever return, but she was finally able to welcome her liege back to the world. What emotions must she have felt in her mechanical heart?

“Then let us begin. The paradise my grandfather dreamed of will come to pass, and today is when it starts.”

“As you command, my liege.”



Rinoa sat on the griffin's back. Ordinarily, griffins were proud beasts that were impossible to tame, but this one obediently allowed Rinoa to ride it.

"What shall we do?" Sakura asked. "Perhaps it is time to attack..."

"Perhaps," Rinoa agreed. "But before that, there are some unruly guests I'd like you to take care of."

A nearby thicket rustled very slightly, as whoever was hiding in it chose to flee.

"By your command," Sakura said.

The forces of evil had begun to move.

‡

Two A-rank adventurers had been born within the walls of Free Market City. One was Niguld Howl, who had mastered the art of war at a young age. The other was Lietrich Hausman, whose talent had only bloomed later in life. Hausman was not a genius like Niguld, who had rocketed his way to A-rank in the blink of an eye. After achieving B-rank at the young age of twenty-four, Hausman spent twenty years gaining experience before becoming an A-rank adventurer in his forties, finally entering the domain of the elite.

Age wasn't an issue in promoting adventurers to A-rank. Some people's talents simply developed faster than others'. Krista was one such person, having been promoted to A-rank at the age of nineteen. She had only had a scant two years of experience as an adventurer, and one year after that, she had earned her title of Ice Queen. That was the difference between an average person and a prodigy.

It was a difference of which Hausman had been well aware. Neither his battle sense nor his ability had advanced past B-rank. He could increase his strength or develop his skills, but no matter what he did, he never stood out. And yet, he continued to seek greater strength. Why? The reason was simple. Hausman loved the city of his birth. He loved his talented friends. He loved the cheeky young adventurers with bright futures ahead of them. He loved all of the many people who called that place their home. And so, he wanted to be strong. He didn't need to stand out the way Niguld did. He didn't need anyone to think he

was cool. As long as he had the power to protect his beloved city, he would be satisfied.

“There’s a lot of monsters around, sir,” the girl with him—Fuka—said. “And the air is thick with mana.” Fuka was from the far east, wearing the traditional black garb of her clan. It was perfect for blending into the darkness, making it ideal for a scout.

“I have a bad feeling about this...” Kaith, his other companion, seemed to be of the same mind.

The two were first-rate scouts themselves, but they looked up to Hausman as their teacher. They weren’t officially his apprentices, but they often accompanied him on missions.

“We’ll return to the guild as soon as we confirm the state of the lake,” Hausman said. “And no matter what you do, no magic.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hausman was here to conduct reconnaissance, not to fight. As a poor but skilled youth, he had lived as a burglar for a time, and he had many years as a scout behind him. He could cast some spells as well, and had a real talent for concealment magic. He knew Conceal Mana, which adjusted his own magic energy to match that of the nearby environment, enabling him to blend into his surroundings, and Silence from the Ars Ventis school, which masked any sounds he made. Between those spells and his polished footwork, only another A-rank adventurer would have any hope of spotting him.

As he and his party went deeper into the forest, the atmosphere began to change. They could feel some sinister magic energy ahead; it felt as though they were entering forbidden ground. Their bodies felt unnaturally heavy. When they were finally able to see what looked like the lake, they witnessed something truly horrible.

“Stop!” Hausman whispered, using magic to prevent the sound from traveling. The three then hid themselves in a nearby thicket.

“A griffin?!” Fuka exclaimed, fearful of the enormous beast ahead of them.

Griffins were high-level monsters with traits taken from both an eagle and a

lion. They were rarely seen near human settlements and rarely attacked humans, but they were well known as the proud rulers of the sky. It was said to take multiple parties of A-rank adventurers to stand a chance of taking one down. The still-inexperienced Kaith and Fuka were overwhelmed just looking at it.

“No...” said Hausman. “Not the griffin...” While certainly eye-catching, the real problem was the place the griffin was sleeping. “The lake’s...dried up?”

The griffin was resting peacefully in what had been a lake not long ago. In addition, the creature wasn’t alone.

“Is that... Could that possibly be the ogre Man-Eater...? And...a girl?” As an ogre with a taste for human flesh, Man-Eater was a specially designated A-rank monster and the cause of no small number of disasters. There was also a girl resting against the griffin, using the fearsome beast as a pillow. Next to her was a beautiful woman with pink hair that fluttered in the breeze.

“N-No...” Kaith said, his voice strained. “It can’t be...”

Hausman nearly let out a yell at the impossibility of what he was seeing, but he held the impulse in check. Now that he had stumbled into the unknown, he didn’t have even a second to act rashly. He weighed the option of making an immediate escape, but while he was deliberating, something unbelievable happened before his very eyes. The griffin courteously lowered its head in a display of loyalty to the girl, allowing her to ride on its back. But before he could wonder what that might mean, she looked up from petting the griffin’s cheek to shoot a sharp look of enmity directly toward the thicket where the three of them were hidden.

“Gah!” cried Fuka and Kaith.

“Go!” ordered Hausman, prepared to sacrifice his own life for his students. “I’ll hold them off!”

“Sir?!”

“Report this to the guildmaster in the city! Hurry!”

“But—!” Fuka shouted, but there was no time to argue.

“You’ll just get in my way! There’s no way I can escape if I’m babysitting you lot,” Hausman shouted back, doing his best to push the two away.

“No!” Fuka insisted. “I’ll never abandon—”

“Kaith!” Hausman barked. “Take her!”

Kaith grabbed Fuka’s hand. He knew he had to escape. But just then, an incredible pressure bore down on them. Hausman drew the sword he wore strapped to his back and stood ready to defend the two young adventurers he treated like his apprentices. His blade shone a dull silver in the strange light that was flooding in from between the gaps in the trees.

“Protecting the weak?” the girl said. “You have an admirable quality of character, human.” She calmly stepped forward. As she did, the living creatures of the forest—the grass and trees themselves—parted as if swayed by a great wind to allow her to move freely. She had a single horn growing from her head. It was like standing in the presence of the god of death.

“You would never understand,” Hausman said, giving the best act of defiance he could muster. He had something he needed to protect—his family, the people of the city. They weren’t related by blood, but they were his family nonetheless, and that made them precious to him. They were treasures he would give his very life to protect.

“Of course I understand,” the girl said with a disarmingly kind smile and sadness in her voice. For a moment, her eyes even lost their poison, simply seeming to be empty. “How could I not when I have been working toward my grandfather’s wish for so long? That is why you will be the first.”

And so, the war began.

‡

“M-Mistress...” Aisha said. “Do I really have to take this off?” She held the last of her defenses to the bitter end, a sheepish expression on her face. The very tips of her ears had turned bright red.

“Of course!” Nacht responded, cheerfully continuing her offensive. “Didn’t you tell me that I could look at your body whenever I wanted?”

Aisha made a small embarrassed noise. “I did...” she admitted. “But showing it to you is different...”

“It seems like the same thing to me. Besides, it’s rude to get in the bath with your towel still on.” Nacht, for her part, was already stark naked. As a Japanese person, she refused to entertain the ridiculous notion of getting in the bath still wearing a towel.

“M-Maybe later?” Aisha requested. It seemed like she was on the verge of running away, but Nacht took her gently by the hand.

Slowly, she reached out toward Aisha’s towel. “Don’t be like that!” she said. “Spending time together naked is a great way to get to know each other!” At long last, in the steam-filled bathroom, Nacht’s fingers undid Aisha’s final fortification.

“Ahhh!” Aisha cried. Now naked, she immediately jumped into the bath.

“Jumping in is bad manners, Aisha!” Nacht scolded as she gently lowered herself in.

“I-I’ve never taken a bath before...” Aisha said. “I didn’t know...”

The practice of bathing had come to this land from trade with the far east. Offering it as a service was one of the peculiarities that came with the first-class inn at which Nacht and Aisha were staying. It was a cypress bath, assembled using a water crystal and a magic circle designed to keep the bath hot. It cost about as much to simply enter the bath as it cost to spend the night in a room, but Nacht had plenty of cash thanks to the reward she’d earned for exterminating the bandits. She’d had no compunctions about using it to reserve the entire bath for the two of them and had even decorated it with some gemstones from her storage.

The bath was big enough for ten people—about the size of a small hot spring. It felt good to relax and stretch out their arms and legs. Nacht’s Second Home had a shower, but it was only big enough for one person at a time. It was her one point of dissatisfaction with the place.

“This is heaven...” Nacht sighed.

“It is...” Aisha admitted. “I’m still embarrassed, but...it does feel really nice.”

The two girls enjoyed their time in the bath. It really was the height of luxury that this world had to offer.



Nacht looked over Aisha's body, lovingly following its contours. Starting at her feet, Nacht moved her eyes up to her slightly rounded butt and slender hips, over her smooth stomach, and past her budding breasts to settle on her adorable little face.

"Ahhh!" Aisha cried, unable to take any more. "Stop staring at me! You're making me all embarrassed! That's enough! No more looking!"

"Aww, that's a shame. But all right. From now on, I'll limit myself to just looking at your face." Nacht sat down in front of Aisha, once again making the girl blush. "What's wrong, Aisha?"

"I-It's just... You're so pretty, Mistress..."

"Ha ha ha! You're super cute yourself."

"It makes me really happy to hear you say that, Mistress. I'm so, so lucky to have met you. So lucky that maybe it feels a bit unfair..."

They were unexpectedly honest words, and this time, it was Nacht's turn to get embarrassed. She lowered her gaze just slightly. "But haven't you had all sorts of terrifying encounters since coming with me?"

"That's true..." Aisha said. "Running into a dragon, being attacked by those bandits and then attacking their cave, and being targeted by the nobility... It was all pretty terrifying. But it's also been really, really, *really* fun. There's so much of the world that I've never even imagined, and I can't wait to see it with you!" These words were coming straight from her soul, with no artifice whatsoever. They mended Nacht's heart and lifted her spirits, lingering happily in the air. Aisha cupped her hands and held up a pool of warm water like it was liquid happiness.

Nacht gazed up at the ceiling, hidden and distorted by the mist and hot air. "'We can only ever see a tiny part of the world,'" she said.

"Mistress?"

"A friend of mine said it all the time. The world is vast, and a single person is very small. That's why we make it our goal to see, feel, and enjoy all we can of it. But now I can't imagine enjoying it without you by my side, Aisha."

Nacht had searched for purpose inside the game. She'd sought the unknown in a never-ending battle with boredom, and she had gone down that road with her friends at her side. All she had with her now was Aisha and the world. She was extremely grateful for Aisha's presence.

"I-I may still be completely useless to you, Mistress," Aisha said, "but I promise that one day, I'll become someone worthy to be by your side."

"You do more than enough to support me!" Nacht objected, speaking the earnest truth. But Aisha shook her head.

"That's not true at all! You've done nothing but look after me since the moment we met! I'm just as much of a useless dummy as I've always been..."

"You shouldn't put yourself down like that, Aisha. And that's a misunderstanding caused by your limited perspective. You've helped me far more than you realize."

"But—!" But she still couldn't do anything! Nothing at all! Aisha sprung to her feet, raising her arm to deliver a rebuttal.

"But if you yourself wish to change," Nacht continued, "then all there is to do is fight. Fight the weak parts of yourself, and fight strong opponents. People only change when they fight for it." She patted Aisha gently on the head. "But there's no need to rush. You'll get stronger before you know it. That's a promise from your bestie."

It hadn't yet been a week since Nacht met Aisha, but in the few days they had known each other, she felt she had gotten a pretty good sense of her character. And for all of Aisha's self-deprecation, Nacht had never known her to be anything but an honest, eager, and hardworking girl. Nacht held Aisha tight and brought her mana in contact with the young girl's—just for a second—as a ward against the bad thoughts. Aisha shivered and pressed closer.

"Are you doing better?" Nacht asked.

"A bit..." said Aisha. "I'm sorry..."

"There's nothing to apologize for. You can always come to me when things are hard. I'm here to support you."

“I feel like you’re *always* supporting me, Mistress... But one day, I promise I’ll return the favor.” Aisha clenched a fist in determination and smiled bashfully.

“Well, I feel like *you’re* always supporting *me*,” Nacht countered. “But if you really wanna return the favor so bad, then stay with me. I want you to stay by my side for as long as you wish. I can’t think of any better way to return the favor than that.”

Aisha’s smile turned a bit bratty. “I’m staying with you even if you decide you hate me,” she said.

“In that case, I’m not letting you go even if *you* decide you hate me!”

The two shared a heartfelt laugh.

“All right, shall we be getting out?” Nacht asked, deciding that it was a good time to finish up in the bath. “I believe we have a guest.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, they heard Krista’s voice at the door. She was speaking more quickly than usual. Perhaps she was in a hurry.

“Miss Nacht, I’m sorry to disturb you in the middle of your bath. There are some things we’d like to ask you about as soon as you have the time. Would you mind coming with me to the guild?”

“See? Let’s go, Aisha!” Nacht said cheerfully.

The pair followed Krista through the streets to the Adventurers’ Guild. The atmosphere inside was completely different than it had been the last time they were here; there was a palpable tension in the air. Everyone was restless and on edge—the man sharpening his weapon, the party arguing loudly about something, the woman quietly nursing her drink, and the noisy crowd gathered around the window. They all kept glancing at one of the posted requests, holding their heads in anguish. It was nothing like the fun, relaxed scene that had greeted Nacht two days ago.

“Unbelievable!” Nacht jokingly exclaimed. “How rude of them to not celebrate my arrival!”

“Mistress...” Aisha said, sighing deeply at the audacity of Nacht acting like nothing was out of the ordinary. Even putting aside the issue of the spell she

had cast in the forest, Krista had told them about the disturbances happening there. She knew full well that an emergency request had gone up seeking adventurers to join monster extermination squads.

To adventurers, the Yolno Forest was not just a wild and dangerous place, but also one full of opportunities for profit. Anyone could participate in emergency requests, the rewards were fairly high, and they were a great way for one to get their hands on materials from unknown monsters. Plenty of veteran adventurers had experience with them. True, the risks were great, but such was the fate of the adventurer. Those who were afraid to risk life and limb in battle wouldn't be long for the job anyway.

"Things have gotten a bit gloomier, huh?" Nacht said. It wasn't anything like the guild she'd been part of in RWO, which had been full of adventurers cheerfully eating and drinking and shooting lascivious gazes at her. She found the atmosphere quite disagreeable.

"They look lost..." Aisha said, worried.

"A lot of adventurers looked up to Hausman a great deal," Krista replied.

The reason Nacht had been called to the guild today was first so they could ask about the unidentified lightning dragon that had destroyed the Lenvell mansion, and second to request her cooperation in dealing with the developments in the forest. Hausman, one of Free Market City's few A-rank adventurers, was missing and presumed dead. That seemed like an important enough matter to warrant getting Nacht involved.

To most adventurers, A-ranks were like higher beings looking down at them from atop the clouds. It must have been unfathomable to them that the situation was beyond even *their* ability to handle. The looks of exhaustion on the faces of Hausman's two apprentices, Fuka and Kaith, only served to intensify the anxiety everyone was feeling. Word that they had seen a griffon and the ogre Man-Eater in the forest had begun to spread. That alone was a threat great enough to justify running for their lives, but there were also rumors that an ancient demon had been resurrected. Even for adventurers, who thrived on danger, a sense of one's own limits was necessary if they intended to survive. Adventurers in Free Market City were taught to first seek to improve

their own strength. Those who intended to risk their lives needed to become strong.

“Mm,” said Nacht. “My bad.”

Krista inclined her head at Nacht’s words.

Despite what she had said, Nacht didn’t feel the least bit guilty about things. While it was true that she had been the cause of this incident, that was hardly a matter of consequence. It was bound to happen at some point, it just so happened that “some point” was today. The real cause was the history between the humans and the ancient demons. In fact, what Nacht felt more than anything was curiosity. Conflict was instinctual for living beings, and she had taken an interest in the reasons behind this particular one.

Although if the ancient demons want revenge on me for waking them up with a blast of magic, that’s fair enough, I guess, Nacht thought.

There were two things keeping Nacht here: her desire not to lose the city, and the sense of duty she felt after promising Aisha to clean up after her own mess. As such, she was more than happy to oblige.

“Well, whatever,” Nacht went on. “I guess these adventurers are just a bunch of wimps. Why don’t you hurry up and get the guildmaster?”

The tension in the room quickly turned to anger. Nacht’s arrogance had simply crossed the line. Mugs were slammed on tables. Chairs were kicked to the side as adventurers sprung to their feet. Aisha panicked. “Wh-Wh-What?!” she stammered, frantic.

Krista, however, must have realized that Nacht was behaving this way for a reason. She drew back quietly, allowing a group of men with swords to surround her.

“How dare you!” one of them demanded, standing in front of Nacht to block her way. “What gives you the right to speak to us that way?! You’ve got a lot of guts for a damned kid!”

Nacht shrugged dismissively. “What gives me the right? I might ask *you* that. Are you happy with this? Because I’m not. Look at you, sitting around, grumbling about how powerless you are, stewing in your misery together. I’m

starting to think working with you might be a pain in my butt!”

“What?! You cheeky little brat! I’ll have you know that I, Henry, am a C-rank adventurer! What does a kid like you know about what’s going on?! You aren’t one of us! This city’s finished! Kaith said he saw a griffon and Man-Eater himself! And that’s just the start of it! There’s an even greater threat out there, and Hausman’s never coming back!”

Nacht appreciated Henry’s thorough explanation of the situation. “And?” she asked. “You think it’s better to run away?”

“Hah. If you wanna throw your life away, go right ahead. We’re just commoners looking to make ends meet. Why *should* we go get ourselves killed? People quit their jobs all the time!” For all his bluster, his words were empty.

“How come you haven’t left, then?” she inquired with a playful grin.

“I’m an adventurer of Free Market City,” he said with a miserable look, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “My family lives here. I have no place to run *to*. Everyone who’s still here is prepared to lay down their lives in some way or another. That includes me, for whatever it’s worth.”

Nacht laughed like the gloomy-faced Henry had told a hysterically funny joke.

“What?” Henry said. “Did I say something strange, missy?”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Nacht laughed. “Oh, you know! It’s just funny is all! You’re saying all this stuff about giving up and how hopeless everything is, but your heart is bursting with fighting spirit! You want to take a stand! You’re an adventurer! You’d find it *boring* otherwise! But you don’t want to get anyone else involved, so you snapped at me instead of admitting that you’re frustrated with this! Come on. You see how that’s funny, don’t you?”

“Well, it seems like *someone* thinks a lot of herself,” Henry replied, shrugging off Nacht’s words. “Who are you, anyway?”

“What, you haven’t heard of me?” The din of the room grew louder. People *had* heard of Nacht—the young beauty in a jet-black dress who was accompanied by an elven girl. She had defeated a legendary mercenary and rescued the Ice Queen. “Well, allow me to introduce myself! My name is Nacht Schatten. But you all can go ahead and call me your bestie Nacht!”

“That’s you?” Henry sounded skeptical. “So, how much of the story’s true?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Once you know what I can do, you’ll forget all about that despair of yours. I’ll show you what hope looks like!” Nacht’s lofty attitude attracted some withering glares from the assembled crowd. Hadn’t she said enough? But Nacht was enjoying her bit of grandstanding. “Now, Henry, was it? Draw your sword.”

“Huh? What the hell are you saying?” Henry stood motionless, a confused look on his face while she again gestured for him to draw his sword. Reluctantly, he obeyed, and Nacht held up her index finger in response.

“Ready when you are!” she said with a smile. “Hit me with your best shot. I’ll give you a handicap, of course. I won’t move my feet the whole time, and all of my attacks will be made using only this finger!”

“Come on... You can’t be serious...”

“I said I’d show you what hope looks like,” she replied. “I may not be one of you, but I’m gonna be helping out for the time being. This seemed like the easiest way to show you just how strong your ally is. My power is overwhelming. Absolute. So vast as to strike fear into the hearts of men. And I will be your hope for victory.”

Nacht grinned so proudly and so ferociously that even a lion would have fled in terror.

‡

Henry could hardly think of a time in his life when he had been more baffled. Not even an exhausted Kaith reporting that he and Fuka had been ordered to run by the currently missing Hausman had left him so utterly perplexed.

He took another look at the girl standing in front of him. She was so beautiful that it made him doubt his senses—like she might vanish the moment he tried to touch her. She was holding up her index finger, instructing him to hit her with everything he had.

No way... There’s just no way...

C-rank adventurers were individuals acknowledged by the guild as elites.

Henry himself had come to blows many times with vicious monsters, armed only with his sword. Even if the rumors that she had vanquished the invincible Dulan were true, the idea that she could defeat his swordsmanship without moving and using only her one finger was absurd.

“Don’t blame me for what happens, then!” he bellowed.

The onlookers became noisier still. Some begged Nacht to back down before she got hurt, while others were merely trying to see what was going on. As Henry settled into his battle stance, he considered what would be the kindest way to bring an end to the duel. He settled on striking her on the solar plexus with the flat of his sword to knock her out of the fight. Using the blade on an unarmored girl was completely out of the question.

Henry stepped forward and took a solid swing at Nacht. He was holding back as best he could, given his skill level, hoping not to injure her any more than he had to. But then...

“Whaaaaat?!” The room erupted with a clamor of voices. A metallic clang rang out, and Henry’s sword went flying. Somehow, Nacht must have parried it with her finger, sending the blade across the room.

Henry and the rest of the adventurers were all relieved that it hadn’t ended in blood, but Nacht wasn’t finished.

“Did you not hear me?” she asked. “I told you to hit me with your best shot!”

“Huh...?” Henry didn’t understand. He had given Nacht a proper strike, charging in and putting his full body weight behind the blow. A hit like that had enough force to knock someone unconscious. And yet, true to her word, she hadn’t moved a single step when she’d disarmed him. How could she have possibly done it?

“Your full strength, please,” Nacht repeated. “You can use magic or Martial Arts if you know any. None of it’ll work on me.”

Suddenly, Nacht’s fighting spirit felt like an enormous presence. Henry gulped. He could hardly believe he had entertained the notion of holding back. What had he been thinking? He wanted to kick himself. A frail girl? A phantom who might vanish if he touched her? No. The thing in front of him right now was

something beyond human comprehension.

Henry raised his sword. An aura of magical power enveloped his body. The adventurers watching had seen this before; they knew it meant that he was about to get serious. But the girl just smiled. She didn't move, nor did the mana in her body so much as stir. If—if—she could deflect this next attack, that would be worth quite a bit of hope indeed.

Henry charged forward, swinging his sword in a wide arc. He was putting everything he had into this attack, both body and spirit.

“Martial Art: Placid Water!” A strike with so much speed that it could cut through the surface of a lake without creating even a single ripple. Time seemed to slow down. He saw Nacht's eyes gleam golden, following the arc of his sword. And then he heard another loud *clang*. His hand, numbed by pain, was clutching thin air.

“Not a bad attack!” said Nacht. “Can't wait to see you get even better!”

His sword was out of reach, stuck firmly in the ceiling. It glimmered, lonely without its wielder.

The people in the room exploded into joyful cheers. Henry couldn't blame them. That attack had been performed using his full power; he had intended it to kill. And she had defeated it with a single finger. That power, overwhelming and absolute as it was, didn't feel bad at all. It might even have given him hope.

“See?!” Nacht said spiritedly from amid the cheering crowd. *“This is how a guild should be!”*

At that point, the guildmaster came down the stairs with Kaith and Fuka to see what all the commotion was about. “Oh! Miss Nacht! Thank you so much for—” he began, but he was cut off.

It was like a record skipping. Nacht disappeared immediately, leaving only an afterimage of golden light. But a second after he lost sight of her, Henry found her again. She was standing next to the guildmaster.

“Wh-What?” said Niguld.

“Weh...?!” exclaimed Fuka. Neither of them had been expecting her to

teleport like that.

Nacht held out her hand to Fuka. Everyone in the room watched intently, wondering what the mysterious girl was going to do. Nobody had expected her to start peeling off the black cloth of Fuka's outfit.

‡

"Eeeeeek!" shrieked Fuka.

"Niiice!" a group of lecherous men shouted from the sidelines. Nacht rolled her eyes and blinded the group with a quick blast of wind magic. Ignoring their cries of "My eyes! My eyeees!" she seized the shadowy creature stuck to Fuka's chest.

"Looks like you were followed," she said. The thing squirmed in Nacht's hand. It was a lizard made of solid shadow, its whole body transparent. Nacht hurled it up into the sky, where it vanished back from whence it came.

"What was that?" Niguld asked.

"Ars Umbra: Pursuer in the Dark. It seems like Aisha was right."

"Hwah?" Aisha exclaimed, confused.

"You're no match for this opponent," Nacht explained. "They know what they're doing. They took advantage of the two of you getting away to get a guided tour straight to your headquarters. They know where you are, and they've been listening in on your conversations."

Kaith and Fuka blanched. Intelligence was their job, but they had blundered and provided it to the enemy!

"This was my mistake," said Niguld. "I should have noticed. You two shouldn't blame yourselves."

The three fell glumly silent. They weren't the only ones either. Even the guild's magic users like Krista and Irena had failed to notice the tracking spell. Everyone felt like they were responsible for the oversight.

"Well, my good adventurers," Nacht began, cheerfully filling the awkward silence like an actor onstage, "I said I'd be your hope, so how about leaving the rest to me this time? You can all just hang back, okay? Take it easy and have a

cup of tea. I'll have this wrapped up before you know it."

Nacht's offer was given freely. Aisha had asked her to resolve the incident, after all. But more to the point, she wasn't sure what the adventurers would even be capable of. This would be the best way to do things.

Be that as it may, Nacht wasn't so detached from humanity as to think that her settling everything would be nothing but helpful for all involved. Once a person made the decision to run away, it could easily become a habit. Nacht—no, Toru—knew that better than anyone. If they came to depend on Nacht's power, the people here would lose their independence. Because her power was so great, she had to take care to monitor the influence she was having on the world.

"But I have a feeling you wouldn't want that, would you?" Nacht said. Everyone in this room was familiar with danger to some extent. They were people who fought for their loved ones, for status, or for pride. Were they really going to flee without so much as drawing their swords? Were they really going to shrink from the challenge? That was what Nacht was asking. Were they adventurers or not? Did they have things to fight for or didn't they? "Do you want me to be the only hero of the day?"

"No!" shouted Niguld. "This is our city! It's ours to protect! That was what Hausman believed, and the reason he fought! There's no way in hell I'm standing idly by!" He raised his voice, speaking with a passionate fury that seemed unlike him. "Hear me, adventurers of the guild! Free Market City is in greater danger than we have ever seen! Our foe is an ancient demon straight out of legends! The enemy of all mankind!"

A murmur of fearful voices filled the room, but Niguld pressed on, his voice full of fervor.

"Soon, the moment will be at hand! Will you fight, or will you run?! There is no alternative!" He paused to look over the crowd of adventurers, then smiled kindly. "The guild will never compel you to take a request, but all those who are willing may join! Now, if you want to protect this city, this guild, and your families and loved ones, then ready your swords and follow me! Freedom is the creed of the adventurer! You are free to fight or to run as you wish, but I will

fight to protect this city of my own free will! What is the Adventurers' Guild for if not this?! What about you, you youngsters?! You idiots who only know how to fight?! Are you with me or not?!"

Niguld took on a more serious tone as he continued to speak.

"But no matter what you choose, don't throw your life away in vain. You only get one, so be sure not to waste it. Your life is worth more than any amount of money, so before you put it on the line, make sure that you have what it takes to survive. All of you have been taught well by the guild, though. I know that you can make it out alive. It's time to decide, youngsters! As your guildmaster, I don't want to see you head off to your deaths. I'm not going to give you a mission if you have no chance of making it back. And that's why, Miss Nacht..." He turned to face Nacht and bowed his head. "We are weak. Please, lend us your strength."

Niguld's words came directly from his heart. He didn't want anyone to be forced to fight if they didn't want to. It was a difficult choice, one for which anything he had to say was insufficient.

Nacht, of course, was happy to accept the guildmaster's request, but Krista first added one of her own, also bowing deeply. "Please, Miss Nacht. I beg of you."

The rest of the room followed suit. "Please help us!" they said, bowing as one.

Nacht truly was a light in their darkest hour. All of their thoughts were focused on the tiny seed of hope she had given them.

For her part, Nacht grinned deliriously. She looked like a child who had gotten away with some kind of mischief, or perhaps like a teacher's pet getting elected to a school committee. It was a very, very simpleminded grin.

"Heh heh heh! Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Fine, I get it! Message received! Count me in, guys!"

Nacht was experiencing pure, simple joy. Back in the game, nobody had taken her seriously, let alone believed in her. She was far from the strongest person around—she wasn't even max level! Everyone treated her like a child who needed protection. Far from relying on her to solve their problems, they would

spend their time fussing over her safety.

The catgirl twins, for instance, would worry about her when she played late into the night. *“Ah ha ha, you’re still on?”* they’d say. *“Don’t get too far ahead. We worry about you.”*

Then there was that perpetually tired friend of hers who cared so much about efficiency. They’d just tell her, *“You can do whatever you want, just get it done.”*

Her guards would chime in with a *“How dare you speak to the princess that way!”* and a *“Don’t worry, Princess! We’ll protect you!”*

Everyone took great pains to look after Nacht. They trusted her as a friend, of course, but they saw her more as someone they needed to look after. She had enjoyed that state of affairs well enough, but it had never quite satisfied her. She wanted people to depend on her. How could she not have when she was nothing if not a desperate show-off? Now that people were finally looking to her to rescue them, she was getting a bit full of herself. She found it extremely gratifying.

Suddenly, everything went dark. The lights in the room went out. Nacht’s form was shrouded in darkness, concealing her naked body. And then, the darkness transformed into a dress. This was Primordial Darkness, a piece of Ancient-tier armor. The impenetrable shroud of black now trailed out around her, seemingly beating with a living heart as it devoured all light in the area.

The darkness moving about her like a living thing was Nacht’s real armor. Night’s Embrace was her dress for casual occasions, whereas Primordial Darkness was for battle. The way her bare skin was visible beneath it made her look like an angel in her divine robes. Nacht wasn’t finished yet, though. She had one more item to equip.

A rainbow shone out against the darkness, its thin arc shining brightly before tapering off. What created that rainbow was Septima Terror, a gemstone from the seventh dimension. It was Nacht’s weapon, and it could take the form of a sword, a spear, a staff, or even a shield. Only the gem itself, which floated next to her, was solid. The light it gave off danced through the air like a whirlpool with her at the center. And then the guildhall’s lights came back on.

Everyone looked—or rather stared—at Nacht in shock, bewilderment, and

confusion. Shrouded in living darkness with a gem shining mystically as it floated alongside her, Nacht looked too beautiful to be real. The adventurers found themselves wondering whether she was one of the Five Greater Deities. But the image was ruined by her smile. She looked like an incorrigible child having the time of her life—which, indeed, she was.

“With me here, you’re sure to win!” Nacht said. “The rest of you should focus on opponents you can handle. Now, come on! Quit with the gloom! You’ll all win a rich bounty of gold and experience points!”

A great cheer rang out, so loud that Nacht almost had to cover her ears.

In the past, Nacht had always stayed at the back of her party. It was a game back then, but she had been risking her life all the same, so she understood the fear and anxiety the adventurers were feeling to some degree. That was why she would lead from the front as if she had done it a thousand times before. She carried their hope on her dainty back.

Nacht was more excited than she could ever remember being. But looking back, she would end up regretting what she did next.

“And how ’bout this!” She let her excitement and the adulation of the crowd go to her head and spoke without thinking. “A special prize from your bestie herself! Whoever slays the most monsters can rest their head on my lap! I’ll even throw in some head pats!”

If only she hadn’t said that. Perhaps then things would have ended without her beloved servant being put in danger.

The room went silent, then everyone cheered again. The vulgar men started leering, talking about her in lustful voices. Nacht had meant the words as a joke—it was the kind of thing she would say to her guards before a fight in the game. She had no idea that it would be the trigger for a certain young girl to suddenly blossom with talent.

Nacht sat alone atop the wall of Free Market City, ignoring the soldier on watch shouting at her not to give up on life. The girl who was meant to be by her side was gone.

Nacht had been shocked when Aisha asked her for permission to work separately from her.

Her face miserable, Nacht threw herself from the wall like she intended to fall to her death. The soldier screamed, but then her wings appeared, carrying her high into the air.

“I really shouldn’t be moping like this...” Nacht said. “I should be happy that Aisha’s growing up.”

Forcing a smile, she sped up. She looked over the land as she flew. In just a few seconds, Free Market City was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. She took a glance back, then continued forward.

The enemy leader was in Yolno Forest, southeast of Free Market City. To get there, Nacht had to cross a grassy plain called Cetonia Field. There was a road through Cetonia Field to Yolno Forest that ran to the southeast, as well as a road leading southwest to Estoll, the neighboring kingdom. Farming villages dotted the way to the forest, growing great fields of grain, but there was no sign of any people. The Adventurers’ Guild and the knights must have sent out evacuation notices. It was silent as Nacht flew along.

She enjoyed the sensation of flying for a moment before spotting the knights building fortifications in preparation for battle. Niguld’s squad of adventurers would be here before midday. Then, she saw the army of monsters advancing toward them. They were far enough away that, to a human, they would have looked no bigger than grains of rice, but Nacht’s draconic eyes saw them clearly. Three thousand low-level monsters such as orcs and goblins were heading their way, and they didn’t seem to be acting on instinct. Instead, they were advancing as proper regiments.

The people of this world had some experience with monster armies. Sometimes, a particular monster species would see a huge spike in population, and their chief would lead them into battle. Orcs had once raised a force as large as two thousand, though their ranks had been made up only of orcs. It was nothing like the mixed-species army before them now.

The low-level monsters were divided into groups of one hundred, each led by a demon like a troll or a lich. The unit closest to them was led by an ogre with

humanlike intelligence.

Nacht flew above the enemy army, her smile unfaltering even before thousands of loud, hostile monsters. The thudding footsteps, the clanging weapons and armor, the yelling monsters... It would make just about anyone shrink back in fear. But to Nacht, it was just a regular, noisy crowd. These monsters were no match for her. She tried to soar calmly overhead, but they weren't going to just quietly watch her go.

"Get the intruder!" shouted the ogre in command of the unit. "Eat her!"

The next moment, two wyverns flew up at her, shrieking as if to say that the sky was theirs. Each one was over five meters long, with jaws big enough to swallow a dainty young lady like Nacht whole.

"Sub-dragons? Blocking *my* path? That takes guts," Nacht said. She held out her right arm. "Down!" she commanded as though the wyverns were unruly pets.

It was surprisingly persuasive. Having cast *Ars Gravitatis: Gravity Well*, the world distorted before her eyes. The gravitational field she'd created pulled the wyverns in, crushing their wings and sending them falling helplessly at an incredible speed. Their bodies pelted the monsters below, flattening them and forming craters in the earth.

"Mm, I probably shouldn't interfere *too* much," Nacht said, nodding at the now far less threatening wyverns. The low-level monsters were for the adventurers to fight.

The commanding ogre stared in confusion as Nacht flew past. "What was that...?" it asked, but nobody in the unit had an answer.

‡

"Is this really what you want?" Krista asked sleepily.

"It is," Aisha said, her eyes gleaming as she gazed off to the south. They reflected both her inner conflict and her strong will. "If I stayed by Mistress's side today, I wouldn't be of any use. I need to fight now so that I can be with her later."

Krista had no further questions.

In Aisha's mind, the only value her life had was that Nacht had noticed her. She had lost her father and been cast aside, unwanted by everyone she had ever known. The people in her village had shunned her and treated her with contempt, telling her she wasn't needed until they eventually drove her out. But just when she had resigned herself to spending what was left of her miserable life alone, Nacht had told her that she needed her—that she *wanted* her. No one had ever said anything like that to her before.

Just remembering it made Aisha's heart beat hard enough to hurt. She had no idea that being needed by someone felt this good. She belonged with Nacht. Her life only had meaning as long as she was with Nacht.

Aisha was Nacht's servant, but she herself had little to offer. She had spent her whole life being protected from the dangers of the world—first by her father, and now by Nacht. She was still just a spoiled child.

Mistress... she thought. I want to be by your side...

What had started this was her mistress's careless promise. *"A special prize from your bestie herself! Whoever slays the most monsters can rest their head on my lap! I'll even throw in some head pats!"* It made Aisha think about how she was lazing around while Nacht was moving on ahead, maybe even looking for someone else to stay beside her. Aisha hated that idea. She wouldn't allow someone else to have her mistress for even a moment. The flames of jealousy in her ignited her mana.

"A-Aisha!" Krista exclaimed.

"Hwah? Wh-What is it, Miss Krista?"

"Control your magic!"

"Wheh?!" Aisha recalled the magic she had unconsciously released, shaking.

"You'll have the guards after you if you release your mana in the middle of the city like that!" Krista scolded her.

"Nhh..." Aisha moaned. "I'm sorry." She hung her head.

Suddenly, Aisha heard the sound of footsteps coming closer. She assumed it must be the guards, but it turned out to be someone else entirely.

“I apologize for my tardiness, Lady Krista.”

“Not at all,” said Krista. “You did well, Lana. And you too, Emma.”

It was the woman and her new adopted daughter Aisha had met in the bandit cave. They had come out of a nearby workshop to bring Krista her two slender swords.

“L-Lady K-K-Krissa...” Emma stuttered, bowing her head.

“It’s good to see you, Miss Aisha,” said Lana. She was smiling brightly, appearing more at peace than Aisha could have imagined.

“I-It’s good to see you both too!” Aisha replied, smiling happily at the pair. “Do you work here now?” she asked, surprised.

“These two were the first I helped find employment,” said Krista. “Lana’s husband was a merchant. It seems that he gave her a basic education. She can read and do arithmetic, and she has experience handling merchandise. I was able to get her a job at a store run by an acquaintance of mine. He’s a dwarf, and a father himself. His wife helped him run the shop, but she passed away some time ago. He’s a little strict with his children, but he’s a good man.”

“I’ve been assisting Mister Balbos at his shop,” Lana said, bowing again. She and Emma both looked happy. “I suppose you’ll be leaving, then...?”

The citizens had been told at least the basics of what was happening. Lana had heard that there was going to be a big battle with a mob of monsters, but seeing Krista’s party equipping their weapons, it seemed like it was something more than that.

“Yes,” Krista responded gravely.

“You...okay?” Emma squeaked with great effort. She was deeply worried for everyone’s safety.

“We’ll be okay! Don’t worry!” said Aisha. “Mistress will be there, after all!” It was the best reassurance she could give the girl, and she believed it wholeheartedly. As long as Nacht was there, everything would be fine.

“L-Lady N-Nacht!” Emma smiled, remembering the mysterious woman who had saved her.

“Yes! So there’s no need to worry about anything at all!”

As they headed off, Aisha looked back at the two lives her mistress had saved and smiled.

‡

“Oh? So the girl who broke that spell of yours is here.” Rinoa took a sip of tea.

“Yes, my lady. Unho reports that he was unable to capture her.”

Rinoa closed her eyes in thought. “I suppose this warrants caution,” she said after some time, placing the teacup down on the table. “Sakura, dispose of her as usual.”

“As you command,” Sakura replied. She then vanished beyond the reach of even her master’s senses.

“We know very little about this girl,” Rinoa said, “but I will not allow her to stand in our way.”

‡

Nacht flew past the enemy encampments as she made her way across Cetonia Field. As she went on, the road came to an abrupt end and the land became wilder. She gradually saw more green as the number of trees increased until she was surrounded by forest as far as the eye could see. Nacht had come into being not long ago in this very part of the world. Coming back here felt somewhat nostalgic.

She alighted, kicking up a great cloud of dust, her wings vanishing from sight. Despite her landing, not a single speck of dirt sullied Nacht’s figure. The dust dancing through the air was absorbed into her robe of darkness and vanished.

Using her Dragon Eyes, Nacht looked through the forest. Dragon Eyes, also called Eyes of Judgment, was a passive ability Nacht got from her fourth-tier class, Dragon Princess. In the game, it had the effect of increasing attack range, making it quite a sought-after skill. It had other effects too—it let one see through illusions, warned about incoming threats, and increased evasion, to

name a few, but the most useful effect by far was the increase in range. Thinking back, it *was* a little silly that better vision somehow increased attack range.

Nacht's perspective on the ability had changed, though. Her Dragon Eyes were magic eyes of real power. In the game's lore, a dragon's eyes gave them the power to perceive and strike at any foe within their range, as well as peer into the souls of those who fell under their gaze. The game, however, didn't have any mechanics that could actually implement such a subjective effect. That was why they'd represented the ability with an increase in attack range. But the effect Nacht was experiencing now seemed more like what was written in the ability description. She had used it when she dropped that lightning bolt on the now-ruined mansion, and it had struck precisely where she had wanted.

Nacht was beyond grateful for the powers of vision afforded by her Dragon Eyes. She looked through the nearby trees as if they were invisible. Her eyes showed her what she wanted to see—what she desired. And right now, they showed her a solitary girl relaxing and drinking tea.

"Looks like someone's taking it easy," Nacht muttered. She wondered if this woman's plan was to leave everything to the monsters while she watched from afar, but a second later, she felt a surge of mana behind her. Some of it was mana with which she was very familiar. "I guess things have started on their end..."

Aisha chose of her own will to fight separately from Nacht. Her mistress, of course, had been dead set against the idea, but Aisha was steadfast. In the end, Nacht yielded, but she insisted that Aisha take a ludicrous stockpile of items and made her promise to stay with Krista's party.

Nacht could feel Aisha's mana even when the two were apart. The sensation of the energy on her skin made it clear how much the girl was growing up.

"I'd better take care of things here too, then," Nacht said, preparing her opening salvo. She cast a spell—Ars Ventis: Tempest. Immediately, a storm arose. It was hard to believe that even Mother Nature herself could have conjured a deadlier wind. Trees were ripped from the earth, roots and all. The ground itself was torn up and sent flying like an avalanche. Unlike snow or sand

in a natural disaster, however, the dirt didn't descend a slope. Instead, the wind carried on along flat ground. Any human caught in the effect would be instantly crushed to death. Even if they were to somehow survive the avalanche of dirt and the volley of trees, the wind itself formed blades that would cut down all in their path.

To Nacht, this was nothing more than a preliminary attack, but as a result, she had permanently changed the landscape of an area of several square kilometers. The green forest had become a wasteland, with the dust kicked up by the wind swirling around in what looked like a small tornado.

Suddenly, a flash of silver appeared, running around the tornado of debris against the direction it swirled. It cut through the tornado, revealing the blue sky. The wind returned to a mere gentle breeze, leaving a single woman standing before Nacht.

Nacht stared in surprise. In her right hand, the girl held a long sword. Its blade, blue and transparent, looked like it was made of crystal rather than metal, and was shaped like a branch bristling with thorns. She wore a great silver gauntlet on her left hand that seemed to double as a shield. The shield's surface was reflective like a mirror, and below it was a crest depicting roses.

Nacht had seen this girl before. It was the horned girl who had been relaxing with a cup of tea. "That was rather savage of you," she said. "Is that how you treat a lady?"

"A lady?" Nacht inquired. "Is that what you're going for? You just look like a bratty little kid to me."

"Indeed? I suppose those lovely eyes of yours are just for show, then."

"Alas, but my eyes only show the truth," said Nacht, lowering her gaze just a little. "If you don't like it, come back when that tiny chest of yours is a bit bigger."

"Hmph!" The strong-willed girl seemed lost for words. Nacht took advantage of the opening, continuing her assault.

"Touchy subject? No wonder. Even my Aisha's are bigger than yours. Small breasts are classy, sure, but you just don't have breasts at all."

The girl's face turned bright red, nine-tenths from anger. Her sword arm shook. It looked like she might strike at any moment.

"How dare you?!" she demanded. "You have no right to speak to me that way! I'm only seventy-two! I'm a child! Of *course* my breasts haven't come in yet! I still have plenty of growing up left to do! Although, I *was* asleep for a long time..." She shook her head. "But that's not the point!"

Nacht had been messing with the girl, but this seemed like a point worthy of investigation. "How many years were you asleep?" she asked.

The girl seemed embarrassed. Maybe she even felt guilty. "About two thousand..." she said.

"I know growing girls need their rest, but that seems like it was rough," Nacht commented.

"I don't need your pity!" the girl chided. "If you want to pity me, just give me your breasts instead!"

Despite the absurd way she'd worded it, Nacht was surprised at how well she understood this girl. Her eyes were sharp and she was wreathed in an aura of rage and hostility, but there was something childish in her eyes that reminded Nacht of Aisha. In any event, it seemed like the girl was, in fact, a child.

"I suppose there's no need to be rude to you, even if you are a child," said Nacht. "I'm Nacht. Nacht Schatten. You can go ahead and call me your best enemy Nacht! Or something."

"Don't call me a child! Listen, you fool who makes allies of the humans! I am Rinoa Lutina Grimwall, the eldest daughter of Duke Grimwall—a true demon descended from the Lord of Calamity himself! Kneel, if you know your place!"

"Oh, very good!" Nacht beamed at Rinoa's loud pronouncement. "You know how to introduce yourself!"

"Stop treating me like a child!"

"Well, you aren't exactly acting like a revered lady," said Nacht, "but I'll let it slide. You're still a kid, after all. So, Rinoa, was it? Why don't you stop playing war and go somewhere else?"

Rinoa once again shot Nacht a sharp glare. “What is *that* supposed to mean?” she asked. “If you’re going to spout nonsense—”

“You don’t understand?” Nacht cut her off. “Then let me put it in simpler terms for you. If you withdraw now like a good girl, I’ll write this whole thing off as a bit of childish mischief.”

Nacht’s offer only seemed to stoke the flames of Rinoa’s rage. “Don’t toy with me! Do you think you can stop us? But how about this: if you and the rest of the human scum surrender, I’ll at least spare their lives. Unlike humanity, *I* at least have a bit of mercy. If you surrender yourself to my army—”

Nacht tilted her head as she glanced back at the Rinoa. The demon seemed to be a prisoner to her own hatred. “Why do you hate humanity?” Nacht asked, interrupting. “Why are you attacking the city? And why do your eyes look so sad?”

Rinoa swallowed, but her surprise at the question vanished beneath her rage. “Why?” she repeated. “That’s what you would ask after you humans rejected our offers of reconciliation and named us your sworn enemy? After your so-called ‘holy war’ where you drove us out in the name of peace? You’re asking why *now*?!”

“Hm,” said Nacht. “It sounds like there’s been a lot of bad blood and misunderstandings between you. But I’ll warn you one more time. Withdraw your army.”

From Nacht’s point of view, humans weren’t so different from the girl in front of her. What mattered was the soul. Rinoa didn’t look to her like the enemy of humanity spoken of in legend, nor like the horrible fiend Aisha was afraid of coming in the night to devour children. That was why Nacht gave her that warning. She wanted this to end peacefully, if it were at all possible.

“Never!” Rinoa shot back. “But I’ll give you a warning as well. Come quietly and surrender yourself to my army. If you do, your life will not be in danger. Perhaps you might even join us? If that spell you cast is anything to go by, you would be useful to have.”

Rinoa’s will was strong and unwavering, if poisoned by her hatred. Nacht sighed and shook her head. It looked like talking wasn’t going to resolve this.

The two were simply repeating themselves.

“There’s lots I wanna ask you about this Lord of Calamities you’re descended from and where you got your hands on the Crystalwood Thorn set, but I guess I’ll have to give you a bit of discipline before we can have a proper chat,” Nacht said. She released her menacing Dragon Aura as she spoke, but Rinoa reacted as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

“Oh?” she said. “You’ve taken an interest in my sword?”

“Yeah,” said Nacht. “I’ll ask about it later.”

“I see,” Rinoa said, getting on guard. “Then neither of us is backing down.”

Reflected in Rinoa’s shield, Nacht saw a girl in a low stance, preparing to charge. She opened her mouth slightly, and then, without a moment’s notice, the girl appeared in reality. Not even Nacht’s senses had warned her about the attack. It took her an entire tenth of a second to get a handle on her surprise. By then, the pink-haired girl’s sword was nearly at her throat. She had appeared so suddenly that it seemed as though she were an illusion. The sword threatening to stab through Nacht’s neck seemed quite solid, though.

“Poor girl...” Rinoa muttered, too quiet for anyone to hear.

‡

Sakura was certain she had struck true. Her short sword, given to her by her mistress and decorated with thorns running down the blade, was a Unique-tier weapon. Its attack power was great enough to cut through the largest of boulders as if they were butter, and it had a deadly poison that could kill with the slightest scratch. Even so much as a glancing blow would be fatal with this weapon, and if she also managed to catch her opponent unawares, her victory was certain.

The enemy’s battle strength was unknown. However, someone who had seen through one of Sakura’s spells and challenged the ancient demon Rinoa to combat must be an opponent of considerable power. As such, she had bided her time, waiting for the perfect moment to unleash her surprise attack.

Rinoa had created the opportunity for her by drawing Nacht’s attention, forcing her to guard against Rinoa’s attacks while remaining ignorant that

Sakura was in hiding. Nacht's death was assured the moment Sakura struck.

Sakura's face betrayed no emotion as she did the deed. She was slaying an enemy on her mistress's orders. That was all there was to it. But when the point of her sword made contact, her mechanical eyes opened in surprise. Nacht was smiling.

"Ah!" The first thing she noticed was her fingers. The fingers of her hand holding her thorned short sword were in pain. Then she felt an enormous sense of loss. It struck her, maybe for the first time, that she, who took others' lives so freely, would one day have her own life taken from her in turn. "Wh-What?!"

Just as Sakura had been assured of her victory, the living darkness enveloping Nacht seized her as its prey. Primordial Darkness's ferocious fangs hungrily devoured her slender arm.

Sakura pulled back in the nick of time, barely escaping with just a single missing limb. The darkness devoured it, absorbed it into itself, and hid its fangs. It returned to its form as a mantle.

"Sakura!" Rinoa cried. "No! How dare you dismember my Sakura like that?!" Furious, she charged straight at Nacht, moving as fast as a bullet.

"My lady!" Sakura exclaimed, still not understanding what had happened. "Stay back!"

They knew almost nothing about Nacht. Sakura's surprise attack had worked, but all she had managed to do was make physical contact with Nacht's body. Nacht's eyes were looking down at her as if to say, "Is that all?" Charging straight at her was far too reckless.

If Sakura was being honest, she would have very much preferred that her mistress flee. Rinoa was much stronger than her, but even so, she had a bad feeling about this. Chills ran down her spine as she cried for her mistress to stop.

‡

Meanwhile, Nacht now had both Rinoa and Sakura cleanly in her sights.

"Ars Draconis: Falling Lightning!" She released her magic into the sky.

Without missing a beat, a dragon of black lightning fell from the heavens. There would be no evading it.

Rinoa seemed to realize what Nacht was doing. “Raaaaah!” she screamed as if to oppose the roar of thunder from her foe’s spell. “Bind and crush! *Magic Art: Splitting Thorn Blade!*”

Her blue crystal sword shone with magic power and split into seven parts, each one lashing out at the lightning dragon Nacht had released to cut and entangle it. The sword and magic made a horrible sound as they contended with one another until the dragon dispersed in a shroud of blue light. The fragments of the sword glowed, and the magic dissipated.

“Haah... Haah...” Rinoa panted, yet she stood tall, proud to have accomplished a deed worthy of an ancient demon. Despite that, however, the palms of her hands were swollen and bright red with burns. Her body was shaking slightly. It looked like she had been affected by paralysis.

In the game, charging in heedless of the damage you’d take was often the best option, but in reality, there was pain to consider. Nacht would have to keep that in mind.

Nacht prepared her mana to cast another spell.

“My lady!” Sakura ran up to her mistress, who was paralyzed from the effort of dispelling the lightning dragon. Nacht had no intention of letting her get close, though. The instant she had finished casting her *Ars Draconis* spell, she had begun preparing her follow-up.

Rinoa had done a splendid job of dispelling Nacht’s magic through her own strength, but that was only *one* of Nacht’s spells. If she had relied on a single spell to get the job done, she could easily have ended up in close-quarters combat, where the time it took to cast her spells would give a considerable advantage to her opponents. A spellcaster must never allow her opponent to have that luxury. That was an ironclad rule in the game, and one that seemed to carry over into this life as well.

Sakura would have been better off not worrying about her mistress and instead simply charging straight at Nacht while she was focusing her attacks on Rinoa, but that was impossible, of course. Sakura seemed to be some kind of

assassin; she wasn't going to attack Nacht in close quarters again without knowing how her equipment worked. She certainly wouldn't be able to stop worrying about her mistress after she'd taken a hit from Nacht's *Ars Draconis* either.

"I guess I didn't need Septima Terror after all," Nacht mused as she cast her second spell in the direction of Rinoa and Sakura both. "*Ars Glacies: Frozen Prison!*"

Nacht's spell transformed the forest—wrecked by her earlier Tempest spell—into a frozen tundra. Her and her opponents' breaths came out in white puffs. Tiny snow crystals danced beautifully through the sky, which Nacht turned her attention away from the fight to admire for a moment.

"N-No!"

"M-My Lady...!"

Nacht's magic was as cruel as it was beautiful. Rows and rows of square cells stood in that winter wonderland, making it look every bit like a prison. Rinoa and Sakura were shut up like criminals in two of the cells, facing each other. Countless chains appeared from the walls, binding their limbs in a matter of seconds. Nacht stood between them.

Frozen Prison was a spell that affected a wide area around the caster. Its attack power was low, but it hit its targets with a status effect that restricted their movement. As one might imagine, higher-level monsters were often immune. Its main use was crowd control—for keeping the weaker mobs from ganging up on the tank—but with Sakura missing an arm and a weapon, and Rinoa suffering from paralysis, Nacht figured there was a high possibility that it would work on them.

Satisfied that the two had been rendered unable to fight, Nacht turned her attention to Sakura. "I see," she said. "You're not actually alive, are you? I guess that's why I couldn't sense your presence."

There were two reasons Nacht had failed to notice Sakura in hiding. The first was that she wore Legendary-tier armor called the Mirage Vestments, which was limited to assassin-type classes. Its base stats were low, but it had a powerful effect that hid its wearer from abilities granting Danger Sense or True

Sight. It was even able to trick Nacht's Dragon Eyes. But her Soul Search was harder to deceive.

Nacht had the ability to perceive the souls of almost any living being. If Sakura had been a human, Nacht would have immediately noticed her planning a surprise attack. But Sakura was a magic automaton created by the secret arts of Magastia, the City of Alchemy. She was a soul in an inorganic body; it was no wonder Nacht had failed to notice her.

Nacht had gotten lucky. She had made it out of the attack unscathed thanks to Primordial Darkness's automatic counterattack, but that attack would have done a fair bit of damage if it had hit. Maybe it was because the girl's level was more on par with hers than the other opponents she'd fought, or maybe her sword was also a Legendary-tier item capable of doing her harm—not that she'd ever had a chance to defeat Nacht. For as quick as she was, Nacht's agility made her look slow.

In the game, magic automatons were level 55 monsters. Sakura had a true soul and had grown beyond what a typical automaton was capable of, but that still left a gap of nearly a hundred levels in their base abilities. Nacht didn't need to activate an ability. A tenth of a second was more than enough time for her to evade.

"Hmm..." Nacht mused. "It's a little faint, but I can sense real emotions from you. So that's what an automaton's soul looks like. Next time, I'll be on the lookout for you." Nacht took her misstep this time to heart.

Then, Nacht looked at Rinoa. She had been on guard before, when she wasn't sure what to expect, but now that she had an opportunity to look over Rinoa's equipment and abilities, she let herself relax. According to her Dragon Eyes, Rinoa's base level was only around 70. Of course, "levels" were a property of the game and didn't seem to exist in this world, but it was an easy point of reference to help Nacht understand someone's vitality and magic power. Either way, it was clear that fighting Rinoa would be picking on someone weaker than herself.

In Real World Online, if one was twenty levels below their opponent—ten levels below if at high levels—they had almost no chance of victory. The only

exception might be if they had something like an Ultimate-tier item.

One thing the game had in common with the world she found herself in, though, was that enemies could target her in the blink of an eye. Perhaps Nacht hadn't been taking this battle seriously enough. She had done much better back in the cave.

"All right," Nacht said. "Enough self-criticism. Now that you two have quieted down a bit, how about we have our chat?"

Rinoa, bound and immobile inside her cell, could only move her mouth. She bit her lip in humiliation. "Kh..." she said. "Just kill me."

"What are you, a heroic lady knight?" Nacht shot back. She hadn't meant it to, but Rinoa's line sounded like something out of a manga. Nacht shrugged her shoulders and shook her head like she was dealing with a difficult child, then she spoke more seriously. "I'd like to hear all you can tell me about that automaton and your equipment. What are you doing with items from Real World Online?"

The Crystalwood Thorn set was a group of Unique-tier items players could obtain from a quest in the Frozen Continent. They were mostly melee weapons, so Nacht had never gone after them herself, but she was certain she recognized them as belonging to the game she was from. Sakura, meanwhile, was an automaton players were able to obtain during the Automaton Invasion event. Even her name was very obviously Japanese. It had been bothering Nacht for the entirety of their fight, and for good reason.

"I have nothing to say to you," Rinoa said. "Kill me." It looked like she had no intention of letting go of her stubbornness. She could only move her eyes, so she used them to glare murderously at Nacht. However, it seemed that she was so blinded by her hatred that she couldn't even see Nacht right in front of her face.

Nacht decided to change her approach. She stepped away from Rinoa, her footsteps deliberately breaking the silence.

"What are you doing...?" Rinoa asked.

"If you don't have anything to say, then I suppose I'll grant you your request,"

said Nacht. “You wanted me to kill you, right?” As she spoke, she walked up to Sakura, placing her claws against the automaton’s neck. “First, I suppose I’ll take care of this automaton of yours.”

“Wh-What? Y-You! What are you—?!” Rinoa’s attitude changed instantly. Sakura was far more valuable to her than her own life. “Wait! Stop! Sakura has nothing to do with this!” she shouted, clearly panicked.

“Nothing to do with this?” Nacht said forcefully. “She attacked me and tried to stab me through the neck!”

Rinoa’s eyes misted over, but she held back her tears, searching desperately for the right words. “Sakura was only following my orders!” she shouted. “She can’t refuse an order I give her! All of the responsibility is mine! I’m the one you should kill!”

“You aren’t in a position to decide that,” she said, glancing at her sharp claws. “I’m the victor of this fight, aren’t I? Listen, you silly girl. You lost, and now you’re going to lose something important to you. You started this war, didn’t you? That must mean you’re prepared for this.”

To Nacht, this was a familiar sensation. In hardcore PvP, players fought until one of them no longer existed. If you challenge someone with an unknown level and unknown equipment, you may have found yourself unable to escape death. Even in friendly fights, her guild had lost scores of items in skirmishes.

If you wished to gain something through war, you also had to be prepared for casualties. That was what Nacht was trying to communicate as she held the life of Rinoa’s treasured servant in her hand.

“But...” Rinoa begged. “Please... Anything but Sakura. Just don’t hurt her.” She began to sob. “Please! I’ll tell you anything! Just let her go!”

“My lady...” Sakura’s soul seemed to grow a little bit stronger.

Nacht turned to face Rinoa, her voice uncommonly stern. “In war, someone is always made to suffer. That pain you’re feeling right now? What you are doing is going to force that pain on many, many more people, do you understand? I know you have your reasons. I know you hate humanity. Maybe it’s a reaction to persecution against demons. I don’t know the details, so I won’t judge your

actions, but ask yourself this: what is most important to you? Give it some thought.”

Nacht released her magic. The tundra vanished as if it had never existed in the first place. All that remained were small ice crystals dancing in the wind.

‡

The oldest recorded era of human history was also the most brutal. A period of ferocious conflict, it was known as the Great War of Man and Demon.

There were two major religions in the world: the Holy Church of the Ancient Dragons, the oldest faith still in current practice, and the Order of the Elect, who taught that humans were the chosen of the gods. According to the Order of the Elect, the Great War was a crusade fought to exterminate the demons. They claimed that though the demons possessed greater might, the favor of the gods had led the humans to victory.

What made the ancient war so utterly brutal was its totality—the way it had encompassed every part of life. Duty and purpose. Discrimination, contempt, and hatred. Mistakes, ignorance, and common sense. Envy, jealousy, and fear. Love and friendship. Even hope. All became part of the war.

Of course, so too did justice. But for what justice there was, there was even greater evil.

Demons were labeled as the enemy of humanity. Per the Order’s teachings, the conflict with them was nothing short of existential. It was a pretext for war that lasted even into the era of feudalism.

Two thousand years ago, when the Yolno Forest was only a small woodland, the demons united behind a single liege. It was a development that had long been regarded as impossible. Demons were monsters whose forms had evolved through conflict, be it struggles against their fellow monsters, repelling invaders from the outside, or warring against humanity. All who had attained the rank of demon were confident in and proud of their strength; it was unthinkable that such creatures would deign to submit to another’s will. If nothing else, there would be too little prey for all of them. Moreover, demons held no respect for something as abstract as “nobility.” The strong preyed on the weak. That was the ironclad law of the demon world.

But that was before the Lord of Calamity had come into the world. A being of overwhelming, absolute power whom even a demon would hesitate to challenge.

The first and only Lord of Calamity was Renji Shinohara, a boy with a single divine horn and eyes that burned like fire. Rinoa called him “grandfather,” but his appearance was that of a soft-skinned youth. The high-level demons drawn to his power became the core of an orderly society, and little by little, demonkind, who had only ever lived according to their instincts, became the citizens of a proper civilization.

The other peoples of the world, however, were frightened by the number of powerful demons that were assembling. The humans, who dominated the continent, had been especially influential in their opposition, and just as the people of a city would band together to deal with a single demon, they had responded to the threat of a country of demons with an alliance. The kingdoms of the world and their contentious peoples put aside their quarrels to stand back-to-back in unity against a common enemy. It was the inevitable outcome, albeit deeply ironic that that was what had finally driven them to cooperate.

But the demons never answered in kind. They maintained their neutrality, sometimes supporting one country or another in a war, but never contesting human hegemony. Instead, they sought the same thing all others did: to build settlements where they could live in peace. As hard as it may have been for the humans of the world to imagine, that was the kind of person Rinoa’s grandfather was. And gradually, the united human kingdoms settled into an uneasy balance of power with demonkind.

And then, the Order of the Elect burst onto the scene, throwing the delicate balance into chaos. With lightning speed, the new religion spread all over the continent. They taught that the wisdom of humanity proved they were the people chosen by the gods, whereas demons were nothing more than the hideous, wicked monsters they’d evolved from, incapable of reason and hungry for the flesh of men. Their power of speech was stolen from humanity, and their strength was stolen from both humanity and the gods.

Rinoa thought it was absurd. Monsters gained power by risking their lives in battle day after day. They had every right to take pride in their strength. But

that was why the Order of the Elect hated them. It was pure human supremacy.

However, for as baseless and fantastical as the Order's teachings were, humanity had welcomed them with open arms. Much to the consternation of the demons, kingdoms adopted them for reasons of their own convenience. They used these teachings to excuse their own exploitation and misgovernment of their people and the poverty within their lands. And soon, demons and humans were at war.

It was then, when the Order of the Elect held full sway, that the Hero emerged. A boy who seemed to have come from nowhere was, somewhat forcefully, elevated by the Order to the status of Hero. Despite having no authority himself, he came to be revered by the people as a symbol of hope and was thrust into the limelight as the champion of humanity. It seemed that humanity began calling him the Hero long before the Order did.

Putting his tremendous strength to use, he took on all sorts of heroic quests. He fended off monster attacks. He rescued captured maidens. He fought to defend the kingdom. And over the course of his adventures, he found himself involved in conflicts with the demons—small conflicts that brought forth hatred and bound him to the cycle of violence.

The war between the Hero and the Lord of Calamity wreaked destruction on the land, leaving misery and misfortune in its wake despite neither of the two having wished for it. The land sunk into the mire of war and the number of casualties continued to mount. Rinoa lost her grandmother, her grandfather, and both her parents.

Humans outnumbered demons ten to one, but each individual demon was a being of immense power. If the war had gone on, the humans would have eventually been eradicated. That result was not anyone's desire, and as such, the fate of the world was to be entrusted to trial by combat.

On Terminus Isle, a solitary island bereft of life, the champions met. The one and only Hero, the pride of humanity who wielded power worthy of the gods themselves, and the Lord of Calamity, who'd had the strength to unite demonkind—Rinoa's beloved, kindhearted grandfather.

The Lord of Calamity had always doted on Rinoa. To her, he was a gentle man

with a kind smile, whereas humans were villains who had killed her grandmother and grandfather. They were cowards who made a mockery of the proud strength of the demons. To be defeated by fiends such as them, to have her parents and grandparents taken from her, to be driven powerless from her homeland... It all served to inflame the hatred in her heart. Hatred enough to give cause for revenge.

She would have her revenge and bring forth the world her kind grandfather once dreamed of—a world where demons could live in peace.

‡

Rinoa wept and clung to Sakura for some time before continuing her story. “’Twas the Hero who sealed me away. My honorable mother or father must have asked for me to be imprisoned to save my life. I was a young girl, after all. The lake was chosen as an inconspicuous location...”

It felt a little strange to hear Rinoa speak so forthrightly. She sounded different from when she was putting on airs or when she was acting childish. Rather, she spoke like a young aristocrat who had received a proper education.

“So the Hero spared your life?” Nacht asked.

“Grandfather and the Hero were friends,” Rinoa answered obediently. “They crossed blades from time to time, but they also often drank together. The war had simply progressed to the point where they had no choice but to fight. And the root of it all, I believe, was human pride...”

Nacht was getting sick of the despondent, melancholy Rinoa. “Would you stop talking all stiff like that?” she said. “It’s getting on my nerves.”

“Excuse me?!” Rinoa shot back. “How rude! Of course I’m gonna act formal when I talk to you! You defeated me!” She seemed upset, but Nacht thought she was more fun this way. “Fine,” she eventually said. “My father and mother were both ministers serving my grandfather. They were busy with the war, so they didn’t really have time to play with me. That’s why my grandfather gave me Sakura as a present on my fifteenth birthday. I got the equipment when I turned twenty. I turned them down at first, but Grandfather told me that it was better to use them than to let them rot, so I trained hard until I was strong enough to use them. My grandfather was always helping me out in all sorts of

ways..." Rinoa trailed off, her voice tinged with the bittersweet melancholy of memories of times long past.

"I see..." Nacht was certain that the Lord of Calamity Rinoa spoke of, Renji Shinohara, must have been a Japanese person and Real World Online player like she was. Maybe she would have recognized him if he had used his in-game name, but it sounded like he'd chosen to go by his given human name instead, which Nacht had never heard before in her life. But at the very least, she could rule out any members of her guild.

There were only two members of Outer Cafeteria who played demon characters. One was Toru when he used his main, and the other an acquaintance of Nacht's, a slothful and efficiency-minded man. He didn't have the disposition to become a king, nor could Nacht imagine him as some kind of peacemaker.

"So the Lord of Calamity lost to the Hero," Nacht confirmed. "Is the Hero still around, then?"

Rinoa gave a sharp laugh. "Now *that* would be quite the surprise. Have you ever heard of a human living for thousands of years? He would have died of old age during the two thousand years I spent asleep. If there's anything left of him in the world, it would have to be a descendant or something. I wonder if that's why he chose to face my grandfather in that climactic duel to determine the fate of the world. See, the Hero had a set life span. Once he was gone, the demons would inevitably win. I suppose that didn't account for *you*, though. That's something I didn't see coming. You remind me of grandfather, you know. It's like the rules don't apply to you."

Rinoa was correct, in fact. Nacht's existence in this world was in direct violation of the rules.

Thinking back, Rinoa had behaved rather childishly from the moment they'd met, not even entertaining the possibility of defeat. She had simply given in to her hatred and sought revenge without any consideration at all.

"Oh yeah," Nacht said. "Just checking, but your reason for declaring war didn't have anything to do with, say, getting blasted with magic while you were asleep, did it?"

“Excuse me? Why would you ask something like— Wait! It was *you*!” Rinoa immediately saw through the reason behind Nacht’s question and realized whose spell had set her free. “I can’t believe it! That hurt like hell!”

“Well...” Nacht hesitated, “Yeah, that one was pretty much my fault. But hey, I set you free too, didn’t I?”

“That’s true...” Rinoa ruminated. “But I’m still pissed about it!”

Nacht had no counterargument. Aisha had given her a hard time for the lake too. It was shaping up to be a real black mark on her record.

“Hm,” she said. “I guess I owe you an apology, then. Here.” She removed two high potions from storage and applied them to Rinoa’s hand and Sakura’s arm. Motes of light gathered around their injuries, and they were quickly restored to perfect health. It was as if they had never been harmed.

“You really are a ridiculous person...” said Rinoa. “Not just me, but Sakura as well?”

“That should take care of your physical injuries,” Nacht said. “We’re even now.”

Even Sakura’s arm, which had been lost entirely, was back as if nothing had happened. It was an impossible feat, but one Nacht had performed regularly back in Real World Online.

“Automata are living beings created by alchemy, right?” Nacht explained. “Healing items work on them just fine.”

That attack should not have taken more than half of Sakura’s HP, let alone cost her an arm. One of Primordial Darkness’s special abilities caused it to automatically counterattack at close range. The damage of the counter scaled based on the strength of the opponent’s attack. Even Ancient-tier armor never dealt more than ten or twenty percent of an opponent’s maximum HP in an automatic counterattack, but its power in Nacht’s fight against Sakura had been far greater. Dragon Eyes had also had a different effect than it had in the game. That change in her abilities was another thing she would need to learn more about.

“Thank you for your kindness, Lady Nacht.” Sakura bowed deeply. It wasn’t

clear whether she was thanking her for healing her arm or for sparing her mistress's life. Perhaps it was both. Her eyes were intelligent and self-possessed. Her soul seemed to be growing stronger and deeper in color. Nacht found herself very interested in the changes she was seeing in this automaton.

"W-Well," Rinoa mumbled, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment, "it doesn't really matter if I forgive you or not. You defeated me. You can do as you like."

"Lady Nacht," Sakura interjected. "I will accept whatever punishment you wish to inflict on me. However, I ask that you please spare my lady..."

"What are you saying, Sakura?!" objected Rinoa. "As your mistress, I am responsible for this loss!"

"Not at all, my lady. It is a servant's duty to take on the burden of responsibility as well. Moreover, I do not believe Lady Nacht could satisfy herself with your scrawny body, my lady."

"Sakura!" Rinoa snapped. "So you agree with her? You're saying I'm just a bratty kid?!"

Sakura went silent.

"I knew it..." Rinoa sobbed. "If you have any sympathy, you'll give me your breasts!"

The two argued like old friends. Slightly astonished, Nacht managed to get a word in. "I've done what I came to do," she said. "I don't want to trouble you two any further."

Nacht had confirmed what she'd been told—that at one point in the history of this world, there had been others in circumstances similar to hers. She'd even learned that some of their equipment survived until the present, and so had Sakura. Personally, she was very satisfied with what she had gained from the encounter.

"Really?" Rinoa asked. "You aren't concerned we'll wage war on humanity again if you let us go?"

"Go ahead and wage war on humanity if that's what you want," Nacht said. At

the end of the day, if she didn't happen to be residing in Free Market City, and if it weren't for the lecture from Aisha, she never would have gotten involved in the conflict in the first place. "I wouldn't want to tell you not to hate humanity. If you want to start a war, go right ahead; I'm not exactly on the humans' side or anything. But to me, you don't look so different from the humans yourself. Just, next time, before you start a war, think carefully about the people most precious to you."

"I see..." said Rinoa. "I'll keep your words in mind."

Suddenly, their conversation was interrupted. As if a second sun had risen, the northern sky was set ablaze with a brilliant light. The cause, a fire so vast it was visible from where they stood tens of kilometers away, was a nostalgic sight for Nacht. And why wouldn't it be? It was a dragon's signature attack, after all.

Nacht recalled the dragon Alhazred's words. *"Our only power is to detect abnormalities, and yet it is maddeningly imprecise."* A thought crossed her mind. If the dragons' power to detect abnormalities was as imprecise as Alhazred claimed, what if they mistook Aisha, to whom Nacht had given a portion of her power, for an abnormality?

"H-Hey..." Nacht said. "That isn't, like, your secret weapon by any chance, is it?"

"N-No..." Rinoa answered, shaking her head. She was just as dumbfounded as Nacht. "I may be a demon, but I have no power over *them*..."

"I see," Nacht muttered darkly. She took the cursed bracelet from her arm and cast it aside. Immediately, her aura became even more overwhelming than it had been before.

"What the—?!" Rinoa exclaimed, but Nacht had already dashed away.

Damn it all! Nacht thought. I got careless! I should have seen this coming! What do I do? Counterattack? No. First, I need to make sure Aisha's safe!

She sped up. There was a tremendous boom as she broke the sound barrier, drowning out all other noise. Her full power released, she rushed toward the source of the light.

Chapter 5: Ars Draconis

Back around the time Nacht was infiltrating Yolno Forest, an army of knights more than a thousand strong made its way across the plains. The noontime sun shone down on them as they marched, the conspicuous clamor of hoofbeats and metal armor accompanying them. Unlike Nacht, several days and long supply lines were required to move their assembled force.

A vanguard of seven hundred foot soldiers moved at the head of the army. Behind them was a unit of robed spellcasters. To the left and right flanks were forces of two hundred knights and one hundred magic knights, mounted on horseback and armed with lances, ready to charge at any time. They were seasoned veterans and moved with military discipline.

The adventurers, however, of which there were several parties' worth mixed into the vanguard, were cut from a different cloth. Their role in the battle was as skirmishers. Adventurers were no strangers to teamwork, but they fought in small parties, not the grand armies fielded by companies of knights. Larger groups made it more difficult to maneuver, and maneuverability was a necessity in the battles with dangerous monsters that were an adventurer's bread and butter.

The commander of this haphazard force was none other than Niguld. This wasn't his first time in command, nor even his second. He was well-known as a master of arms, and with the current emergency facing Free Market City, he had been given full control over the city's defenders.

"Hrrrm," he grunted. "My blood is boiling. I have to say, I'm jealous of all these young folk." His battle-axe glinted murderously in the light. He no longer looked anything like the kindly middle-aged man Nacht had met at the guild. The look in his eyes was that of a predator assessing its prey.

Grandia, the captain of the magic knights and the army's second-in-command, laughed. "Please refrain from charging ahead, Commander," he said. "You have to stay in the back of our ranks and look imposing." Grandia was a man with

narrow eyes and a long black beard. He had the look of a true warrior. “But if we do have need of your strength, Sir Niguld, I will assume command so you may join the fray.”

Niguld nodded. “What about our little rats, by the by?” he asked.

“They’ve been obeying orders so far,” said Grandia. “But they might be planning on taking advantage of the chaos of battle. Not that we intend to give them the chance. If it comes to it, they might just have to meet with a series of unfortunate accidents...”

“I see,” Niguld replied. “I’ll tell Krista. But aren’t you going to get in trouble for telling me this?”

“Ha ha ha ha ha!” Grandia laughed again, this time more loudly. “Ahem. Forgive my rudeness. I believe you have some mistaken ideas about knights, Sir Niguld. A knight’s loyalty is reserved for their liege. Elenora is nothing more than my employer.” He spat the name Elenora when he said it. It seemed he had some kind of personal grudge.

Elenora had exhibited exceedingly poor discretion the previous day. When word got out among the populace that she had been subject to a dragon’s judgment, her retainers had been struck with fear. Grandia saw it as nothing more than her just deserts and thought she should consider herself lucky to have escaped with her life, but Elenora was furious. She had ordered the magic knights who had sworn allegiance to her to find any opportunity they could to kill Aisha during battle.

Elenora was a genius at both business and politics, and as a noble, she had considerable authority. But once she had set her eyes upon a treasure of her liking, her sense of reason went out the window and she became a simple, avaricious fool. She would do anything to wear Aisha’s marvelous ring on her own finger.

“I see,” said Niguld. “Thanks for the information.”

“Don’t mention it. You had your suspicions before I mentioned anything, did you not? That monster, Nacht—no, forgive me.” Grandia shook his head. “*Miss* Nacht must be aware as well. I have no idea what those idiots are going to do, but hopefully they know better than to step on a dragon’s tail...”

Elenora didn't believe that an ancient demon was really behind the army they were facing, but Grandia wasn't about to laugh off Niguld's information as a joke. More than anything, he wanted to avoid picking a fight with Nacht, who was in the middle of doing battle with creatures of legend. And so, he had given several of his own subordinates orders to kill anyone they saw behaving suspiciously.

Niguld looked out over the front line from his position on horseback. His eyes settled on two women among the ranks. "All right," he said. "Guess it's about time."

‡

"Are you ready, Aisha?" Krista, wearing lightweight blue armor that left her shoulders and other joints exposed for the sake of mobility, asked as she turned toward the girl beside her.

"I-I'm ready," Aisha said. "I can do this."

She seemed tense. Her voice was much stiffer than usual. But that was hardly a surprise. This was her first battle, after all. Not only that, but her mistress, who had been watching over her until now, was no longer by her side. She would have to overcome this trial alone. She tightly clutched the Yggdrasil Rod Nacht had given her. The staff, made of heavy wood, shone with a mysterious light and raised Aisha's magic power considerably.

But Aisha refused to falter. She was the servant of the demiwyrm Nacht Schatten, a being so far above humanity that she was practically a god. Aisha would not permit herself to succumb to this level of pressure. She took in a deep breath, tasting the air of the battlefield, then exhaled both it and the tension in her body.

"Haah..." Her eyes shot open. "Here I go!"

Aisha's magic power shot up considerably when she found her resolve. Growing up, she had never been very capable when it came to anything. It had taken her longer than the human children to learn how to speak, and she still wasn't very good at reading and writing. Under normal circumstances, she shouldn't have found it so easy to learn how to use magic, but now, she had help. She could turn to the voice that was always there for her.

The vast magic potential given to her as Dragon Priestess coursed through her body, then released. “Hear me, O great spirit of water,” she said. “I beg you, lend me your strength!”

Suddenly, the sound of giggling stretched across the field of battle. It rang out to the heavens, blessing enemies and allies alike, and even the very earth and sky themselves. A bubble came floating through the air, ridden by a person so tiny that they could fit into the palm of a human hand.

More and more tiny bubble-riding people appeared. They clumped together in the air, fusing with one another until a miniature ocean had manifested in the sky. From it emerged the form of an achingly beautiful woman. That woman held out her arms and a hundred or more great spheres of water appeared in the sky, each large enough to fully submerge several men. The battlefield let out a collective gasp.

This was Spirit Magic, a form of spellcasting said to only be practiced by elves. Nobody on that battlefield had ever seen such a large-scale manifestation of its power. Even Krista struggled to conceal her surprise, but she quickly recovered and began casting magic of her own.

“All the world will be encased in ice. The flame of life will dwindle and fade. And we will embrace oblivion!”

Krista’s pale blue magic entwined with her words. This was *Ars Glacies: World of Ice*, the spell that had earned her the name of Ice Queen. Its power was absorbed into Aisha’s water bubbles—a truly vast amount of water, utterly impossible with ordinary magic. The natural-phenomena-like spells conjured by the spirits weren’t going to dissipate anytime soon, and Krista’s spell gave them a destructive aura of ice magic. The light of the sun danced through the crystals, making them shine in the sky like stars. It gave the whole battlefield a truly otherworldly atmosphere. And then, the frozen globes of ice, more than a hundred in number, rained down on the battlefield like meteors.

“Fusion Magic: Comet Hail!” the two girls shouted at once.

The spheres of ice sped up, raining down mercilessly upon their enemies. It was a grisly sight that signaled the start of the battle.

It was like a scene straight from hell. The chunks of ice raining down on them were no smaller than ten meters in diameter. They mowed through the crowds of weaker monsters, killing them instantly. Their flesh was crushed and their blood froze solid. Wreathed in crimson mist, they hurtled on and on and on. That one spell, Comet Hail, had wreaked untold destruction on their numbers. Of the nearly three thousand monsters that made up their army, about a third were killed or incapacitated.

If it had been a human army, they would have fled in terror, but Man-Eater merely became so enraged that his face went red. He had fully expected the small fry to get themselves killed, after all. That was all there was to it. Man-Eater, whom the demon had renamed Unho, exhibited not a single trace of fear. On the contrary, knowing that they faced a powerful enemy only made his blood boil with excitement at the opportunity to test himself and grow in strength.

Three comets rained down on the back of the army, where Unho was. A shadow fell over him. Without stopping to think, he swung his swords—one in each hand—using them as a conduit for his magic.

“Hex: Wild Flame!” Purple fire lashed out from the blades, blasting the comet apart with a tremendous explosive blast. It vanished into a patch of white mist.

Man-Eater, too, had once been a small goblin. He had evolved and become an ogre. He had fought with humans and devoured their bodies. And now, he stood as Unho. Even with so much of his army destroyed, he retained absolute faith in his own victory.

‡

Niguld’s command post was far from the front line, but high enough to look out over the entire battlefield. When he saw the destruction Aisha’s spell was bringing about on the enemy ranks, he let out a gasp. “I had no idea she could do *that...*” he said.

“It doesn’t seem surprising to me,” said Grandia. “The servant of Miss Nacht, who dropped that dragon on us, and a famous A-rank adventurer working together... As a knight who stakes his name on his magical ability, I have to say that I feel a bit self-conscious about being outclassed...”

“It won’t be enough to finish them, though,” Niguld said. “Rally the troops. Use the chaos of the attack as an opportunity to finish this! Break their line!”

Grandia nodded and used a wind magic spell to send a message to the entire army, beginning the fight in all its murderous spectacle. The foot soldiers advanced, their armor clanking as they charged, and the monsters charged right back. The two armies grew closer and closer, but as they came together, the demons spread out instead of fighting as a single unit. The knights did their best to break up the individual units of monsters, but some of them were preposterously strong—stronger than any human.

Between the military discipline of the knights and the individual strength of the monsters, the front line settled into a kind of equilibrium. Part of that was thanks to the adventurers, who sought out the monsters of considerable power from among the goblins and orcs and eliminated them.

Blood filled the air. One after another, people’s wounds led them to fall. But the savagery only increased. Knights and monsters crossed swords. Spells flew through the air. The dominant strategy for wars in this world was for infantry soldiers on the front lines to buy enough time for the mages to cast their spells, which they would use to decimate the enemy. The adventurers worked to hem in the monsters, where their mages’ spells would be more effective.

Cries and screams rang out everywhere. Earth, water, wind, fire...spells of all sorts were flying through the air. The knights favored fire, while the spells used by the monsters included both fire that burned with an unseen flame and an unnaturally dark ice that seemed to absorb light from the surrounding area. They were so frighteningly powerful that only a truly first-class adventuring party would have a hope of defending themselves. The infantrymen on the front lines were simply helpless.

The monsters had an unquestionable advantage when it came to magic power, thanks to their liches and other high-level demons.

“Tch,” Henry, on the left flank near the front line, clicked his tongue. “There’s too many of them! We can’t get close!” He had tried making a charge at the lich flinging its spells from behind a fortified position but had no luck. No matter how many monsters he cut down, there were always more. “Kaith! Still no word

from the guildmaster?!”

“Not yet,” Kaith responded calmly despite Henry’s panic. “This is going to be a decisive battle. It’s only a matter of time until the knights are ready. Until then, acting in haste will only get us killed.”

“Yeah, I get it,” said Henry, smirking cockily. “But I’m still taking down that lich! Don’t get in my way!”

‡

About one hour had passed since the start of the battle. In this world, where martial arts and magic could easily kill vast quantities of people, battles were usually decided in a fairly short time.

Niguld observed the flow of the battle. The enemy’s right flank, he saw, was on the verge of collapsing. His men were pushing forward in the middle and on the left flank as well, but the enemy’s magic was stopping them from landing a decisive blow. Reports had confirmed the presence of liches among their ranks.

“No sign of the leader,” Grandia said, looking out quizzically.

“We’d heard they had wyverns and even a griffon, but they haven’t come out either. Gotta assume that’s Miss Nacht’s doing. If it stays that way, we might be able to finish this.”

What Niguld was most afraid of was an attack from the sky. He had been holding his knights back for fear of demons mounted on wyverns descending upon them, but even though the battle was almost settled, the enemy showed no signs of releasing the wyverns. Niguld’s estimation of the flow of battle was that it would take no more than one good push.

“Send in the magic knights! All two hundred of them, to the front line! Have the adventurers finish the battle!”

This was a tactic they had discussed beforehand. The adventurers would move about the battlefield, hunting down large targets, with the knights creating opportunities for them to do so. Clad in armor and atop mighty war steeds, these knights were Niguld’s best bet against the monsters.

Two hundred of them thundered across the plains. Unlike human opponents,

the monsters made no use of shield walls or lines of spears to fight off enemy cavalry. Defenseless against the knights' charge, they were torn apart by mighty lances.

The monsters weren't without their own defenses. They had giant orcs, bigger than horses themselves, and liches whose spells could instantly slay fully armored knights. Nonetheless, the knights had done their job and created an opening for the adventurers to pour in. Parties of B-and C-rank adventurers, specialists in monster fighting, put their skills on full display.

"Take that, you spell-flinging maniac!" Henry channeled his pent-up anger into his sword. His eyes flashed. "*Martial Art: Placid Water!*"

Following Henry's lead, the adventurers felled the enemy magic users one after another.

"It's over," said Grandia. It had ended in the humans' victory. The enemy's front line was in shambles, unable even to flee. In an ordinary battle, an enemy who could not flee would choose surrender. But Grandia was mistaken. He was thinking in terms of battles between humans.

"Hah. You truly are a military man, Sir Grandia." Niguld worded it as praise, but the fact of the matter was that he disagreed with Grandia's conclusion. This was not a battle between humans, but a war against monsters. "Send word to the whole army. We're falling back!"

"Excuse me...?" Grandia didn't understand. That was the last order he would have expected to hear.

"*This* battle is settled," Niguld explained, "but now, the main event begins."

As he spoke, a demon came plummeting from the sky like a boulder. It fell upon the right flank and pulled itself up to its full height. The trained soldiers started to tremble and draw back when they saw what it was, overwhelmed by the aura of its presence.

Suddenly, all eyes were on a single corner of the battle. In it was a demon on a level beyond any they had faced so far: a griffon, flaring its wings.

Grandia gulped.

“Irena and I will head to the right flank,” declared Niguld. “Krista and Aisha will be in charge of stopping the griffon. You and your magic knights take the left flank. And take care! This is the real thing!”

‡

The monsters, who had spread out in three main bodies across the battlefield, converged back on a single point. The soldiers trembled as they advanced through the grisly fields, strewn with their friends’ corpses and stained with blood.

Man-Eater Unho swung his swords, sending scores of humans flying.

“Sasha. Garen. A’lu. It’s time.” said Krista.

“As you command.”

“Right.”

“Got it!”

At Krista’s signal, Garen and A’lu took off running. Unho met them, unafraid. A’lu opened with a barrage of throwing knives.

“*Martial Art: Flying Knives!*” They pursued Unho from the left and right. Unho lashed out with his swords, too fast to follow with the naked eye. There was the sound of metal impacting metal, and the knives fell to the ground, broken.

“Damn! This one’s got some moves! All right then... *Martial Art: Explosive Charge!*” Garen’s sword shone with light as he charged straight ahead, aiming straight for Unho’s midsection. The ogre’s arms were raised to fend off A’lu’s attack, so Garen thrust his sword straight at the opening he’d created.

Unho didn’t seem any more concerned about Garen’s furious charge than he had been about the barrage of knives. He effortlessly saw through his opponents’ maneuvers and responded without any wasted movement. “Foolish,” he said. A second before Garen’s sword struck his belly, he pulled back and spun, dodging easily. Then, using the momentum from the spin, he swung at Garen with the blade in his right hand, striking him down.

“Gh—! Shit...” Garen took the sword to his gut and winced in pain. The force of the blow was enough to send him flying through the air and rolling on the

ground.

Sasha was as quick as she always was, moving to heal Garen immediately. “May the small be blessed with the fruit of life. *Heal!*”

Then, Krista went on the offensive. “Those who are sinners shall be cast into hell. Perish! Begone! And repent! *Magic Art: Blades of Ice!*” Seven blades of ice flew through the air, striking at Unho as if they had wills of their own.

“Oh?” the ogre said. “*You* seem a bit more fun.” His putrid eyes opened, reflecting the swords chasing after him. He swung his own swords twice, the blades leaving traces of light that arced out. His first swing destroyed two blades. He dodged three more, and his second swing struck down the final two. “Not bad for a human,” he said. “Making me use Martial Arts. But— Hrk!”

Alas, it had been a mere distraction to create an opening for Krista. Her two swords thrust through Unho’s flesh, and the ice blades he had dodged were circling around to strike him from behind. Her attack had gone just as planned.

“Wild Flame— Grh!” Unho’s spell was interrupted as the sharp blade flew into his body. The ice blades were deadly, and Krista’s two swords were far faster than his.

“You’re quick...but you don’t have the strength!” Unho’s last resort was raw power. He put all of his might into his muscles and swung his swords, hoping to simply endure the thrusts of Krista’s weapons. While he was only lightly damaged, a single hit from him would spell doom for Krista’s party.

“Don’t underestimate me, fiend,” said Krista. “Behold the rose of ice! *Magic Art: Flowering Sword of Ice!*” An aura of cold appeared along the blade of her rapier. Ice bloomed where it struck, red like rose petals.

“Gwaaaaaaah!” Unho cried out in agony.

Krista glared at him with cold eyes. “I am A-rank adventurer Krista Niese Branrichter, the woman who killed you. Remember my name when you make it to hell.”

Krista glanced at the young girl she had brought to the battlefield and breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed like her own efforts hadn’t been entirely wasted.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What...?”

“Grrrrr...”

A girl and a beast stood facing each other, neither moving an inch. Aisha quivered in fear before the griffon’s massive body, while the griffon cowered before the girl’s powerful magic aura. To Aisha, though, the beast looked like it was sizing her up as prey.

“M-Miss Krista...” she said. “I th-think I’m in trouble...”

Krista, however, took nothing more than a fleeting glance in Aisha’s direction before returning to her own fight.

“N-No!” Aisha cried. She knew Krista was busy with her own opponent, but even so, she hadn’t expected to be so cruelly ignored. Was this a betrayal? A strategy to claim Nacht’s lap for her own?

The truth was that, unlike Aisha, Krista could tell that the monster was afraid. She didn’t see any need to assist with the battle. But Aisha, who didn’t know that, was upset by Krista’s behavior, causing her mana to well up subconsciously.

“Grrrrr...” the griffon shrunk back further.

“Poor thing. It looks scared,” the greater water spirit said as she suddenly materialized. She took the form of a beautiful woman, her body made entirely of water. Her voice was full of pity. “What should we do?”

“H-Huh?!” Aisha exclaimed in surprise. “Y-You speak?” She looked over at the spirit, clearly flustered and trying not to stare too much at the spirit’s strange yet alluring naked body.

“Of course I can speak!” she said. “I’m a fragment of Undine, the great spirit of water! I was drawn by your tasty-smelling mana.” She giggled. “Nice to meet you, elf girl!”

“O-Oh! I-It’s nice to meet you too!” Aisha said, still flustered in front of the very spirit whose strength had been lent to her.

“Well, you’re the one who summoned me,” the spirit said. “What is it you

want to do?”

“Um... Well, I’d like to do this without any more fighting if I can. B-But if killing more monsters is what will earn me my spot on Mistress’s lap, maybe...” She shook her head furiously. “N-No! I mustn’t do such a thing!”

“It sounds like there’s quite a bit going on. Oh, to be young,” the spirit laughed. Then, her expression darkened. “What about the humans over there?”

This spirit was rather keen to human emotion, and a good judge of character. The mana offered as a sacrifice in summoning had a strong effect on the personality of the spirit who manifested; it was an inevitability of using spirit magic. The spirit had answered Aisha’s call because of the elven mana she possessed. Looking over at the mana of the nearby humans, Undine felt glad that it was Aisha who had summoned her and not them.

Suddenly, there was the sound of horses riding up behind Aisha. “Weh?” she exclaimed. By all appearances, they were allied knights.

“Miss Aisha! I’m here to assist you!” one declared. But instead, he brought his sword down, striking at Aisha’s head from atop his horse.

“That’s a sick way of assisting someone,” Undine said. She struck with blades of water, neatly separating the knights’ heads from their bodies. The fight was over before Aisha realized what was happening.

“There you go, summoner,” she said. “I’ve disposed of these fools for you.”

In the end, Aisha hadn’t needed Nacht’s equipment or Krista’s protection. Her own power was more than enough.

“Wh-What?” she bumbled. “Wh-What just...?”

“You’re pretty spacey, aren’t you, summoner?” asked Undine. “Well, that’s what I like about you, after all.” Suddenly, she looked up at the sky. She was the first to notice that something was wrong.

Then, the griffon took off, flying away at top speed.

“Summoner!” Undine shouted. “Behind you!”

“What?” said Aisha. “I—”

But that was all she could say before being engulfed in a sea of crimson flames.

‡

“Gh! I-Impossible!”

Niguld looked down at the fallen demon, a pitiless look in his eyes. “Looks like it’s not your lucky day.” He brought down his axe, and all that was left of his opponent was the blood and flesh smeared over the ground.

“Excellent work, guildmaster,” said Irena. “Now, allow me. O flames, descend from on high! Burn my enemies, and see me to victory! *Ars Ignis: Funeral Pyre!*” The ogre, already clinging to life, was enveloped in the flames and reduced to ash.

“What was that for, Irena?” Niguld ribbed. “Stealing my kills?”

“I suppose you must be after Miss Nacht’s lap as well if you’re in such a hurry to collect the head for yourself.”

“Slander!” declared Niguld. “You’ll get yourself executed if you keep making accusations like that. Take it back!”

“I will not,” said Irena. “You damned pervert.”

As they teased each other back and forth, Niguld looked over the battlefield to see how things were faring in the middle and on the left flank. Everyone was fighting for all they were worth.

“I’ll take the middle,” Niguld said. “Irena, you take the left flank. Let’s go assist them.”

Irena began to nod in assent but stopped halfway through. It wasn’t just her—the whole battlefield was starting to take notice. After all, the thing flying through the sky was simply too large to miss.

A single beat of its crimson wings was enough to stir up whirlwinds, shredding through flesh like sharp knives. Its mouth was full of silver fangs. Past them were its eyes, hidden in shadow. And, of course, it breathed fire.

“The fire dragon? It can’t be...”

It was too utterly absurd to have been anything but a sick joke. Humans and monsters alike stopped what they were doing to look up at the creature, struggling to accept the reality of the situation.

The gouts of fire issuing from the fire dragon's mouth reminded Niguld of the time he had seen a volcano. They were infinitely superior to the flames produced by human magic.

Although, come to think of it, they had seen some magic rather like it recently—the lightning dragon that fell on Free Market City. But unlike Nacht, this dragon was not taking care not to harm innocent lives.

“G-Guildmaster! Watch out!” Irena calmed herself. She had begun casting defensive spells the moment she sensed a threat. They would make no difference, however. The dragon's flames torched the land, turning the battlefield into a literal living hell.

‡

Aisha could hear the sound of something burning. The light seared her eyes as if she were looking directly at the sun. She squeezed them tight, trying to hide from the bright red flames, and didn't open them again until the heat was gone.

She couldn't believe her eyes. The land was no longer covered in grass. It was smoldering, sending up sparks here and there. The greenery, the sand, and even the rocks had melted away, the ground flowing like magma in the hellish heat.

She heard the burning sound again. The air smelled noxious as she breathed in through her nose—a stench that made her want to vomit.

“Oh no...” Aisha clasped a hand to her mouth and fell to her knees. She knew what she was hearing. It was the sound of burning human flesh, of skin and organs popping and sizzling in the hot air until they were reduced to charcoal.

Then, she heard screams. They were loud enough to burst her eardrums. It was the only thing she could hear. Scream after scream after scream after scream. The battlefield was full of screams and lamentation.

The fire dragon had aimed its breath at Aisha, but it had been the area around her that had taken the brunt of the damage. Lives scorched and burned away to

nothing. The only ones who had escaped the devastation were Krista and her high-level adventuring party members, as well as a unit of magic knights. The other humans and demons in the vicinity alike were burned to death indiscriminately.

“Why...?” she asked. “Why is this happening?!” Until a second ago, everyone had been on their feet fighting for their lives. How could it have come to this? The dragon circled overhead, glaring down at Aisha.

“Sorry, Summoner,” said Undine. “This body has about reached its limit...”

Aisha, meanwhile, was completely unhurt thanks to the first-rate defensive equipment Nacht had given her. Her gear’s resistance to magic had taken most of the force out of the dragon’s fire breath attack. Undine had insulated her with her body as well, protecting her from the rest of it.

“Huh? That’s strange! That should’ve totally killed you! I guess I held back too much or something!” the dragon said telepathically in a cheerful, childish voice. It didn’t sound anything like the voice of the being who had just performed such a massive feat of destruction, but there was no one else it could have come from. *“But jeez! What a letdown! My sister said she had to let the abnormality go, so I was all worried you’d be super strong, but you’re just a little thing! I’ll have to lord it over her later.”*

Aisha was furious. How dare that dragon speak so lightly about the lives it had cost?

“Hmm...” the fire dragon went on. *“But come to think of it, you did survive my fire breath. Maybe there is something abnormal about you, tiny! Now, would you please die?”*

The fire dragon looked directly at Aisha. She could feel the force of the killing intent behind his eyes. But Aisha no longer felt any fear. All her emotions were buried beneath a white-hot rage. She and her friends had staked their pride and their lives on this fight, believing in their own principles. How dare this dragon come out of nowhere and burn all those people’s dreams to ash? How dare he?!

Aisha’s mana welled up in anger, growing darker and darker until it was the color of the night sky—the same color as Nacht’s. It was the barest hint of her

mistress's power.

"Why?!" she repeated. "How could you do such a thing?!"

"Huh? What do you mean, 'why'? What 'thing'?"

The dragon didn't seem to understand. His attitude only infuriated Aisha further.

"You know what I mean!" she shouted. "Hurting all these people! If I'm the one you're after, you should aim your attacks at *me*! How *could* you?!"

"Aim? But I did aim at you," the dragon said, apparently confused. *"I don't really care about the others. If some puny humans can't take the heat, that's their problem. They die all the time, and they just keep making new ones! All that matters is the balance. I'm one of the dragons charged with observing and mediating this world. I can't even imagine how many humans have died while I was carrying out my duties. They were just unlucky for being here, y'know?"*

Such were the words of the dragon, equal in stature to the gods themselves.

Aisha, for her part, couldn't say whether the dragon's words were correct or not. She was simply full of rage—rage that brooked no reason. Was this...this *creature* a god? Aisha refused to believe it. No one who could look so undisturbed in the face of the destruction they had unleashed could possibly be worthy of worship. Aisha's mistress had tremendous power, but she only brought her strength to bear against her enemies. She protected the weak and saved lives as much as she took them. She would never call anyone "puny" or say that their life didn't matter. She saw all lives as worthy of value. She even said that she *needed* a puny thing like Aisha.

Maybe that was why Aisha refused to acknowledge the fire dragon's words. Agreeing with him would be tantamount to betraying her mistress.

"That's enough!" she said. *"That's your reason? You can't treat people's lives like they're beneath your notice! Their lives...their reasons for fighting... They had value! Those are the people Mistress Nacht cares about! How dare you take them away?! You egotistical jerk!"*

Until a minute ago, Aisha herself had thought of this dragon as a god. It struck her that she was shouting quite a lot at a being regarded as a deity. She didn't

care, though. To her, a god was just another person. After all, Aisha was the beloved servant of someone of even greater power.

“You never shut up, do you?” the dragon said. *“Look, just go ahead and die for me, okay?”* He swung at her with his powerful foot. Each of its claws was the size of Aisha’s entire body, the whole foot as big as forty of her.

All Aisha could do was stand there. The dragon was much, much bigger than her, and she had a feeling he was much stronger as well. As the wind pressure forced her down, she desperately shouted the magic words Nacht had taught her to say in an emergency. “P-Pumpkin, pumpkin!”

The foot bore down on her, only to be thwarted by a pair of tridents, deflected back into the air. “Keeeeee hee hee hee hee! Trick or treat!”

Aisha saw two figures in front of her. They had jack o’ lantern heads and wore black capes over their spindly, treelike limbs. In their hands, they each held a lantern and a trident.

The pumpkin devils laughed wickedly as they interposed themselves between Aisha and the dragon. Summoning them was one of the abilities granted to her by her underwear, the Pumpkin Panties. Once per day, at the cost of its other defensive abilities, she could summon two pumpkin devils as guardians. They were level 50 monsters with high attack and fire resistance, making them fairly deadly creatures.

“Weh?!” Aisha exclaimed. “Wh-What...?”

“Keeeeee hee hee hee hee! Trick or treat!” the devils repeated. They did have one downside as a summon—if you gave them candy-type food items when they asked, they would enter a non-combat mode. The panties were an event item, so that aspect was well-known among players. Nobody wanted to embarrass themselves by summoning a monster who wouldn’t fight for them.

“Wh-What do you mean?” Aisha asked, bewildered. “Where did you come from...?”

The devils’ mouths turned up in fearsome grins and their heads erupted in flames. “Trick it is!” they sang.

Fortunately, the people of this world didn’t know anything about Earth’s

customs. Aisha had no idea what the pumpkin devils were even asking.

The devils turned their tridents on the fire dragon, while Aisha once again began casting a spell. "I'm sorry to ask so much of you, but I need your strength again, Undine!"

"Oh, sorry..." the water spirit said. "I can't..."

Aisha went stiff. "Wh-Why not?"

"It's just that we spirits are a bit particular about mana. I can't use such twisted magic power. Sorry..."

Right now, Aisha was drawing on her magic as Dragon Priestess. It was draconic mana like Nacht's, not the mana of an elf. It was a far cry from something a spirit could use.

"Th-Then, what do I do?"

"Hmm..." Undine said. "I'll do what I can to hold him off while you escape. Although fighting a dragon in this fragment of a body will be rough..."

Conjuring blades of water, she moved to assist the pumpkin devils in their fight against the dragon. The difference in their power couldn't have been more obvious, though. The dragon's breath reduced Undine to steam, and he tore through the pumpkin devils with his claws and fangs and crushing jaws.

"H-H-Huuuuuh?! Wh-Wh-What do I do?!" Aisha asked. She could concentrate her dark-colored mana into her hand, but that was all. She didn't know how to control it. She almost shouted for Krista or the guildmaster, but thought better of it. The dragon's target was her, so she wanted to avoid involving anyone else in the fight.

As she stood at a loss, Aisha heard the dragon's voice. "*Jeeez!*" he said. "*That kinda hurt! I got stabbed in my foot! But it looks like you're out of tricks, right?*"

Though she had bought some time, the situation was hopeless. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the dragon's claws and fangs drew closer, inch by inch. She racked her brain for any fighting technique she could use, any way to prevent herself from dying, but nothing came.

"*So that's a yes, right?*" the dragon asked. "*Cool! Now die!*"

He swatted Aisha's delicate body aside with his enormous foot. "Gah!" she cried, but as she sailed through the air, she noticed that her body was completely unharmed. Such was the power of Nacht's defensive equipment.

"You're a tough one! Okay, then...!"

Aisha was face-to-face with the dragon's gaping maw. Its fangs, dripping with saliva, closed around her.

"Ah!" Aisha had a sudden flash of memory. It was a memory of her time with her father. Then, more and more memories came. She remembered meeting her mistress, offering herself up to her, spending day after day by her side...

Aisha decided that she didn't want to die. Dying was even worse than being lost in the forest while on the verge of death. She wanted to stay with her mistress for just a little longer. No. She wanted to stay with her forever if she could. But the fangs were already piercing her body. She could feel her stomach being torn open.

Without warning, the bracelet Nacht had given her flew off her arm. And then, she blacked out.

Her body seemed to have somehow moved while she was unconscious. It felt like she was having an out-of-body experience. Her mind was racing. She had the sense that something deep inside of her had stirred.

She could see far, far better than usual. She could count the teeth inside the dragon's mouth. She could see everything.

She didn't notice the golden rings that had appeared around her eyes.

Without thinking, her body acting purely on instinct, the night-colored mana in her body surged and lashed out at the dragon in a lightning-fast torrent of magic power.

"Grwaaaaaaaaah!" the dragon bellowed, screaming in real pain for the first time that fight.

That attack had been no ordinary blast of energy. It came out in waves, dark and deep, threatening to swallow up everything. The whole world shook as the

magic gouged a hole in the red-hot earth.

“Ow! Crap! Dammit! Now I’m angry! This time, I’m not holding back!”

Aisha’s attack had done real damage, but it may have had the opposite of its desired effect. Enraged, the fire dragon opened his mouth, intent on unleashing hell.

“I can’t...do anything...” Aisha’s body wouldn’t move. She had used up all of her mana. She felt faint, like she could lose consciousness at any time. Her mind was fogging over with fatigue.

This was the end.

I’m sorry, Mistress... she thought, a tear rolling down her cheek. *Goodbye...*

The flames issued forth, brighter than the sun and hot enough to swallow everything and return it to oblivion.

Then, she heard a voice. Full of anger, it shouted, “Primordial Darkness, go!”

It was her beloved mistress, Nacht. She had arrived before Aisha’s tear could even fall to the ground.

‡

The raging fire burned hotter than the sun as it was unleashed from the dragon’s mouth and rose from the burning land. Then, the dragon’s breath began to shrink, focusing in on a single point until it became a small sphere of brilliant light floating in the creature’s mouth. It glowed eerily, red like the fresh blood covering the battlefield or the flowing magma.

But Nacht’s eyes were on one person and one person alone—someone who was shaking with fear, tears poised to begin streaming down her cheeks. The sight of it sent Nacht into a mindless fury. Her blood burned hotter and hotter, like her whole body was on fire. With no hesitation, she leaped into action.

“Damn it...” She held out her arm toward the symbol of fear flying overhead. “Primordial Darkness, go!”

Nacht’s robe of darkness flew off into the sky, spreading out like a carpet and forming a vortex. It was like day had immediately turned to night. The vortex of darkness swallowed up the miniature sun without a trace.

As if carried along by the spreading darkness itself, Nacht appeared beside Aisha, just in time to wipe away her tears.

“M-Miiiiistreeeeessssss!!!” Aisha sobbed. The sound of her voice returned some of Nacht’s sense of reason.

“You fought well, Aisha. You can rest now.” She patted the crying girl on her head and then, reluctantly, turned away from her to face her enemy.

“*Whoa!*” the dragon exclaimed. “*What’s going on?! Everything’s all dark! Oh, never mind, the light’s back!*” The dragon babbled to himself as the cloud of darkness vanished. The sight of the buffoon made Nacht’s fury take on a murderous edge.

“You...!” Nacht said. The malice in her voice seemed to make the world warp and wobble. The surreal scene of the battle seemed to crumble. Spirits screamed and fled as Nacht’s power rose without end.

“*Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What?! Who are you—?!*” It felt like the sky was being torn apart. Maybe it was the shaking of his enormous body, or maybe it was the wind spirits fleeing in terror.

As it turned out, Nacht hadn’t recovered any of her sense of reason.

“You!!! You made my Aisha cry!!!”



It was far beyond a shout. It was the roar of a wyrm.

“Eep!” The waves of energy Nacht released left the fire dragon lost for words. He couldn’t move his body. He couldn’t even beg for his life. All he could do was quake with fear.

Nacht hadn’t even attacked; she had merely released her full power. Her mana was so dense that it was visible to the naked eye. That same mana gathered around Aisha’s hands as well.

It wasn’t an illusion. The dragon closed his eyes and reopened them only to find that Nacht’s surging vortex of dark energy was still there, rising high into the sky. Just the turbulence surrounding it was enough to destroy any faith the people watching still had in the stability of the world.

“Septima Terror! Grant me the world of my dreams!” Nacht said, invoking the rainbow-colored holy gem. “Your very soul will feel the depth of your crimes.”

“H-Hey! Wait! W-We can talk about this! Oh no... She’s not listening...”

Septima Terror split into eight, each acting as a stationary cannon. This was one of the weapon’s abilities: it could automatically fire off spells one after another. It was limited to spells available to third-tier classes, but it was an invaluable ability to a caster. After all, it eliminated their greatest vulnerability—the downtime between spells.

The gem launched spell after spell. Ars Draconis: Doom Tempest Dragon. Ars Draconis: Falling Lightning. Ars Draconis: Water Wyrms Cross. Ars Draconis: Eternal Ice. Ars Draconis: Earth Dragon Crush. Ars Draconis: Binding of the Gravity Wyrms. Ars Draconis: Eternal Darkness.

The first attack came from the sky. The clouds twisted and vanished in the overwhelming wind. It was hard to even find words to describe the tempest of unnatural ferocity. The wind took on the form of a dragon and bore down upon Nacht’s enemy.

“Gwaaaah!” the fire dragon exclaimed. He fought back against the dragon of wind bearing down on him but was quickly overpowered and forced to the ground.

Nacht's assault didn't let up for a second. The fire dragon was helpless to resist, let alone launch a counterattack.

"Agahyaaa!" he cried as he was struck by a dragon of falling lightning. *"I-It hurts! I can't move!"* Tears welled up in his eyes. Dragons, it seemed, could cry after all.

Nacht resolved to make him cry as much as he had made Aisha.

A long water dragon with spiked spines coiled around the fire dragon, intent on crushing its life out. Then, an ice dragon descended from the sky. It froze the water dragon solid, encasing their enemy in a pillar of ice and shredding its scales.

The fire dragon shed fresh blood, but Nacht wasn't finished. The ground crumbled away, an earth dragon as tall as a skyscraper emerging from the hole. It smashed the fire dragon on the head with its ferocious limbs, splintering his teeth and making him cough up blood.

As the dragons Nacht conjured pulled the fire dragon underground, he opened his mouth, trying desperately to speak. *"I-I'm sorry!"* he pleaded. *"I submit! I apologize! Please don't kill me!"*

Two black dragons appeared, piercing the fire dragon's wings with their fangs and ripping them apart. Nacht looked down upon the dragon lying helplessly on the ground.

"I see you broke Aisha's Decoy Bracelet," she said. *"That's a real-money item that prevents you from taking lethal damage one time before breaking. You were trying to kill my Aisha. Trying to...to take my Aisha from me!"* Nacht's voice was full of cold rage. It had been a mistake to expect even an ounce of mercy from her. Until she had given the dragon a taste of the pain he had inflicted, her anger wouldn't abate. *"You want me to forgive you?! Cry! Weep! Tremble in lamentation! Only then will I accept your penance!"*

Nacht began an incantation. *"Heed the words of the Soul Dragon, who rules over the cycle of death and rebirth. All that is will one day die. And by my hand, it shall be guided toward death. Now, pray to me. Pray for your rebirth."*

As she spoke, the dense cloud of mana began to change shape. It looked like a

dragon, but no dragon the people of the world had ever seen. It towered more than one hundred meters tall, shining black. Its eyes were golden. Its scales were obsidian. Its body was made of darkness itself, and its claws were crimson.

“I-I’m really going to die, aren’t I...?” the fire dragon whimpered.

“Be judged in the name of Nacht Schatten!” said Nacht. “*Ars Draconis: Nacht Atem!*”

The dragon’s mouth opened wide like the gates of the underworld. An elaborate, spherical magic circle appeared, revolving in midair.

Darkness fell. It was too dark to see even an inch in front of one’s face. Stars twinkled overhead, the only guiding light in the dark world. The dragon was swallowed up by the night. And not just the dragon. The sky above, the surrounding air, the earth—all of it had been engulfed. Everything became formless, melting away. All that was left was an enormous hole. It went down as far as the eye could see, seemingly forever.

In the days to come, the hole in Cetonia Field would become known as the Dragon’s Hellgate. Travelers made a point to avoid drawing near.

Her business done, Nacht turned away from the dragon and ran up to Aisha, a look of relief on her face.

“I-Is he dead...?” Aisha asked.

“No,” said Nacht. “It looks like he’s hanging on by a thread. Shall I finish him?” Surely even Aisha wouldn’t object to killing the dragon now.

A look of shock passed over Aisha’s face. “N-No!” she said. “We mustn’t! We... We... *Hic...*” And then she started to cry. “Waaaaah! I’m soooooorrrrryyyyy!”

“Oh no! What’s wrong, Aisha?!” asked Nacht. “Are you hurt? Leave your aches and pains to me! I have lots of special potions from the real-money store! They should fix you right up! You have nothing to worry about, okay?”

“B-But...” Aisha sobbed. “But it’s all my fault! Everyone’s dead because of me!”

Ah. So *that* was the issue. As far as Nacht was concerned, as long as Aisha was safe, all was well with the world. She hadn’t been paying much attention to her

surroundings, but now that she was looking, she saw that a truly stupendous number of lives had been lost. There were even more who were still alive but were suffering from fatal burns. They would be dead within a few hours.

Aisha, kindhearted as she was, must have felt responsible. She had been fighting alongside them as a Dragon Priestess. The lives she couldn't save must have been weighing heavily on her.

That should have been Nacht's burden. There was no need for Aisha to suffer through such painful emotions.

Nacht held Aisha tight. "You didn't do anything wrong," she said. "I'm the one at fault. I was prideful, and I caused you a lot of pain. I'm so sorry, Aisha." Then, she set to work on setting things right. *"Expand Magic Field... Healing Wind!"*

The spell was just preliminary first aid. The real healing was done with Nacht's precious supply of items. She took out the most powerful area-of-effect healing item she had, Communion of the Goddess, and cast it into the air over the battlefield. The land was enveloped in light. Everyone who was still alive would survive.

Nacht clapped her hands once. "Brave fallen warriors. The Soul Dragon Nacht commands your spirits. Be reborn!" There was the sound of a great bell tolling from somewhere unseen. The souls of the dead ascended into the sky, guided by the light of the stars.

"Mistress..." said Aisha. "I fought really hard against the dragon...but I couldn't do anything..."

"I know," Nacht replied. "You fought well. You did a splendid job making it back to me. I'm glad you're alive."

It was clear that the dragon had attacked because of the traces of Nacht's power in Aisha. Nacht felt mortified that Aisha had faced such danger because of her. She should have seen it coming. She had been careless, naive, and overly proud, and because of her faults, she'd nearly lost the person most precious to her.

She shivered. Since being reborn as Nacht, this had been her first taste of real fear. If Aisha had been hurt, if she had been lost, Nacht's mind would have

shattered. She might honestly have destroyed the world.

“I’m so glad...so glad you’re all right...”

Nacht didn’t sound like herself at all. Her voice was frightened and small, and there were tears rolling down her cheeks.

Aisha smiled slightly, letting Nacht hug her all she liked. Her warm hands brushed against her mistress’s skin, wiping away the tears.

“Yes, Mistress,” she said. “I will always, *always* be by your side.”

Epilogue

The battle had come to an unexpected end. It would come to be known as the Battle of the Dragons and be considered a victory for the humans. From Nacht's perspective, neither side had won, but it was true that the humans had been saved one way or another.

According to the report written by Guildmaster Niguld, the ancient demon who caused the incident had been defeated, and the dragon's motivation for interfering was unknown. They had gone to Cetonia Field to fight demons and had had the misfortune of being caught up in a battle between dragons—that was his conclusion.

The dragon Nacht had conjured with her *Ars Draconis* magic was massive enough to have been visible all the way from Free Market City. There had been no shortage of witnesses, so nobody doubted Niguld's account.

The truth, though, was that Niguld had manipulated his report to avoid upsetting the Holy Church of the Ancient Dragons as much as possible. If it was widely known that a part-human had fought a dragon and won, it might cause senseless conflict.

Many people refused to believe him, of course, and the reputation of Free Market City suffered somewhat for it. Nacht, for her part, held her silence about the events of that day.

What worried them more than anything was the possibility of the Church, who worshipped dragons, picking a fight with Nacht. That was why it was necessary to keep what had happened a secret.

As for the claim that the demon behind everything had been defeated, that was true. What had happened there became common knowledge. Scores of enemies and even a legendary ancient demon had been struck down by a mysterious and beautiful young woman—by Nacht Schatten, the champion of Free Market City.

Nacht, however, had no intention of letting herself get stuck in either that role or that city. The people could elevate her if they liked. It didn't matter to her either way.

Many people had seen Nacht unleash her full power that day, but many of them had been on the brink of death or unconscious. Even from relatively nearby, the display in the sky was clearly a battle between dragons, so not many people knew the full extent of her strength. Her name spread, but few people in Free Market City saw fit to meddle in her affairs. As for Nacht, as long as it meant that she could spend her days enjoying her time with Aisha, joining the fight between humans and demons had been worth it.

It was another busy day in Free Market City. Niguld and the other persons of note were still busy dealing with the aftermath of the battle. He kept nodding off, but every time he closed his eyes and made it halfway to dreamland, Irena would thwack him savagely on the head.

Oh, and there was one other thing worth mentioning—an event that gave everyone plenty of cause for joy.

‡

“Why did she let us go, do you suppose?”

“Hm?” Rinoa responded. “How the hell am I supposed to know what that weirdo's thinking? But...no, never mind...”

Sakura looked curiously over at her mistress, who had suddenly cut herself off. She was glancing down and to the side. “My lady,” she began, “do you suppose it's for the same reason that you let that man go?”

“D-Don't be absurd! That was completely different! I just thought it would be a shame for such a brave man to—no, what I mean is, wimps like that aren't worth killing! Yeah!”

“I see...” Sakura didn't press the matter any further. She lowered her head for a second, then raised it again to see Rinoa giving her a quizzical look. “My lady...?”

“Is that your version of a smile?” Rinoa asked.

“Is it...?” Sakura pressed her hands to her face and tilted her head as if checking herself over to see if everything was working normally. Rinoa laughed happily at the sight.

“Ah ha ha...” she said. “Well, Sakura, it’s been two thousand years. What do you wanna do?”

It had been a long time since Sakura had seen her mistress smile so happily. In her mind, she was beaming with delight.

‡

“M-Mistress... A-Ah... It feels good, but...a little softer, please...?”

“Mm. Like this?”

“Y-Yes! Oh, Mistress! I’m so happy!”

Aisha rested her head on Nacht’s lap, her eyes shining with delight. Whether it was out of guilty pleasure or a sense of triumph or perhaps even simple fulfillment, the smile on her face didn’t look particularly childlike at all.

“Mistress’s lap...” she muttered softly—though if anyone had overheard her, she would deny it fervently.

In the end, the prize of Nacht’s lap was Aisha’s. At first, Nacht had considered whether Niguld, who had directed the entire battle and felled the ogre, might have earned it, but after Irena knocked him around a bit, he’d withdrawn from the contest. She’d also considered Krista, but the Ice Queen had demurred, arguing that it should go to the one who had faced the dragon.

Aisha had earned it fair and square. Her magic had defeated countless monsters, she had been the one to face off against the griffon, and, of course, she had faced a dragon head-on. She had grown up a lot during the battle.

Not many people had directly witnessed Aisha’s fight with the dragon, and those who had were sworn to secrecy, so it was hard to publicly credit her performance. However, just surviving against an opponent like that was an incredible feat.

Nacht hardly thought it a fitting prize. After all, Aisha was already more than

welcome to as many head pats as she liked. Watching her now, though, she realized how special this was to Aisha and how happy it made her. As such, Nacht held her tongue, instead opting to ask a question.

“Hey, Aisha,” she said, her eyes filled with childlike wonder. “Where do you wanna go next?”

Did I Seriously Just Get Reincarnated as my Gag Character?! Volume 1

Fin

Afterword

When I told my mother that the story I wrote was going to be a book, she told me, “That’s a con artist! Don’t let them trick you! They’re after your money!” I have to admit, it made me worry.

Hello! It’s nice to meet you! You may call me Kanade Otonashi. You can probably tell from the title, but this story was originally posted on the website *Shosetsuka ni Naro* (“Let’s Be Novelists”). It seemed out of the question back then that it would get a novelization. For a while, I really *was* worried that I was being taken advantage of by some kind of con, but since you’re reading this afterword, I suppose it was legitimate after all. I’m terribly sorry for my lack of faith.

Now, about the book. I began the process by rereading the web novel. Much to my chagrin, I found it to be sloppy. The point of view kept changing at random and it was chock full of typos—it made me feel a little bit mortified, to tell you the truth. But thanks to our efforts, the book’s all polished up and our devil-may-care heroine Nacht is two hundred times more alluring than she was before. Now I don’t have to feel ashamed by the idea of it being read by people all over. That wasn’t all, though. It’s been revised and added to in many places, so those of you who’ve been reading along since the web novel was finished can enjoy it as well.

To be honest, I pretty much went with the flow when it came to this book. The plot doesn’t exactly make it lofty literature, but I was excited by the idea of online gaming, and girls being cute together is always good. Before I knew it, I had written an entire story. It started as some nonsense I was writing online, but a lot of people read it and liked it, so I kept writing. And now, it’s the book you just finished reading. I suppose there’s a lesson in that. Even if what you write is awkward and full of typos and the point of view keeps changing at random, if you keep at it, you’ll eventually have a story. It’s quite something. If there’s someone out there thinking they’d like to take up writing but aren’t very

good with words, my advice for them would be this: let the words follow your passion. I'm sure you have a story to tell.

Finally, I have some people to thank. I would like to thank O, my editor, who apparently read the web novel version a long time ago and thought it was funny. Thank you also to azutaro for the beautiful illustrations. They look exactly like I imagined they would in my mind. Thank you to everyone who read the web novel, and, of course, thank you very much for reading this book.

See you in the next volume!



Nacht Schatten (Protagonist)

REINCARNATION OF TORU AIKAWA AND
THE WORLD'S MOST POWERFUL, DRAGON GIRL.



Aisha

HALF HUMAN AND HALF ELF.



Did I Seriously Just Get
Reincarnated
as My **Gag Character?!**



Sakura

RINOA'S AUTOMATON SERVANT.



Rinoa Lutina Grimwall

ANCIENT DEMON DESCENDED FROM THE LORD OF CALAMITY.



Bonus Short Story

Nacht's Memories

"Haah... Dammit! I really can't beat you, can I?" Nacht lay on her back in the guild's training grounds, a barren desert that stretched as far as the eye could see. Her arms and legs were spread wide, and her hair spilled over the desert sand, illuminated by the pale light of the crescent moon in the night sky. She had been reduced to a single hit point. The words "You Lose" floated detestably in midair.

"It's not surprising," said her opponent, a woman in a military uniform. "Nacht isn't made for 1v1."

"Ngh..." Nacht groaned. "I *know*... Actually, maybe *you're* just too strong. How about holding back a little next time?"

"Hey, we're just blowing off steam! Or 'training,' rather."

"Hang on. Are you mad at me about something?"

"Ah ha ha ha!" the woman laughed evilly, darkness shrouding her eyes. "I'll never forgive you for having higher DPS than me! Not in a million years!" She sounded halfway serious, but she held out her arm to help Nacht to her feet. "I'm kidding."

"You don't sound like you're kidding..." Nacht lay there for a moment before taking her friend's hand and standing up.

"I am. I'm just the type who fights to win, you know? Don't let it get to you." Her expression softened into a smile. Nacht let out a sigh of relief.

But what really annoyed her was that her opponent's health bar was still more than eighty percent full.

The woman she was fighting was a part of Nacht's team of guards. Unlike most of her friends, her outfit was quite sensible: a sophisticated military uniform, which looked like it was perhaps tailored for a man. She wasn't

carrying a weapon, but a small white bag inscribed with magic runes. The hard soles of her shoes clacked on the ground as she walked.

This woman was a master of PvP. She, under the handle Tasty Pickles, was the top-ranked magic-class player in one-on-one battles and one of the founding members of the guild Outer Cafeteria, where she often gave training and battle advice to the newbies. She was reviled—or rather, loved—as a strict drill sergeant.

Even against such a strong opponent, Nacht found it vexing how little damage she had been able to do. Tasty Pickles had lowered her stats to match Nacht's, who was still only level 140, but the gap in skill alone had enabled her to truly mop the floor with the demiwyrm.

"Hmm..." Nacht grumbled. "Still, Pickles, you're just unreasonably strong. That build of yours being as strong as it is has gotta be one of the great mysteries of Real World Online."

There were two ways to change your character class in Real World Online. The first, the Standard Class Change, was done by leveling up. At certain points in a player's progression, they were given the option to advance to the next tier of their main class. The other was the category of Special Class Change, which could only be performed if certain conditions were fulfilled. Depending on the class, these could be anything from specific ability score requirements, to quest completion, to rewards from tournaments or special events. Standard Classes were well-balanced but lacked punch, while Special Classes were powerful but hard to use, with much higher ability scores.

Pickles had not once done a Special Class Change. She had remained a pure Mage from the moment she made her character. It could be called an orthodox approach, although when Nacht was in a bad mood, she sometimes felt inclined to call it a character anyone could make.

And yet, Pickles was strong. Preposterously strong. Since the servers had gone online, she'd held the title of RWO's strongest magic player for five years and counting. She certainly had to be counted as a mystery.

"Balance and ease of use is a kind of power," Pickles said. "Maybe you'd do better if you weren't min-maxed to high heaven."

“Ngh...”

“Regardless, you’re a long way from the top.”

“Being on top is important to you, isn’t it?” Nacht said, sounding uncharacteristically reflective. “Does being the best really matter that much?”

“It’s just how I am,” Pickles said proudly. “I know I’m a difficult person, and I make lots of enemies, but I refuse to make excuses or cut corners.” She laughed. “Well, in the game, at least. My family is fairly strict. They had me practice calligraphy and music, play sports, study hard in school—the whole nine yards. My father always told me I could do it if I gave it my all. He always told me to aim for the top.”

She looked away from Nacht, up at the sky. “I enjoyed exerting myself,” she continued. “And I liked it when my parents praised me for coming in first. I thought that I could always be number one as long as I worked hard. But reality isn’t like that. I haven’t been number one at anything since elementary school. I keep on giving it my all, but all I can seem to accomplish is ‘fairly excellent.’”

“I don’t do my best at anything. All I do is play games. You’re making me feel kinda called out...” That comment had come more from Toru than Nacht.

“Hah! No, don’t get me wrong, I’m in your camp too. I am absolutely using the game to escape from reality.” She seemed sad. Sad about something other than not being number one at everything. “I was unhappy. My father told me that it’s okay not to be the best in the world, but that hurt more than anything. Worse than not getting the highest score on the practice exam. Worse than not winning first prize at the music recital. Worse than falling short of first place in the national tournament or the novel I wrote not selling well. It felt like he was telling me to give up.”

Pickles had lost her motivation for working as hard as she did. She’d given up on all her goals and retreated into the game, still seeking to be number one.

“I may be an adult now, but I never learned how to quit. I did the same thing in the game that I did in real life—devote everything to being the best. It’s pathetic.”

Nacht shook her head and laughed haughtily. “Pathetic?” she said. “Not at all.

You know, there are people out there these days who eat meals in virtual reality. If you want to aim for the top, I say go for it! I'll be supporting you the whole way."

She was sure that Pickles could do it. She idolized her skill. From her perspective, Pickles's character might as well have been shining with divine light.

"I see..." Pickles responded, a smile coming to her face. "In that case, let's continue our training. Since you're supporting me, Nacht, I expect you to participate."

"A-Again...?" Nacht looked over at Pickles, who seemed to have enough motivation to last for hours, and finally realized that she had switched into drill sergeant mode.

"Well, you're not done training, are you? Your movements are sloppy because you rely on your friends to level you up. Tactical movement as a Mage is completely different from being a close-range fighter or healer. You need practice or your body will never learn."

Tasty Pickles may have had a peculiar name, but the truth was that she was alarmingly fierce. She was the guild's teacher, but she had the habit of forgetting herself in the heat of battle.

Nacht looked over the Duel Request she had been sent, pondering it. She could hardly refuse after saying she would support her. And besides, Pickles was doing this for Nacht's own good.

Nacht sighed and touched the button labeled "Yes."

The two stood fifty meters apart. A giant counter appeared in the sky, ticking down until the start of the duel. When it reached zero, an announcer's voice rang out. "Fight!"

Nacht took off at full speed, darting around the arena. Pickles, meanwhile, remained stationary, simply waiting. Their last battle had been an exchange of spells, which had only served to remind Nacht that her skill as a Mage was profoundly lacking compared to her friend's. So, this time, Nacht decided to use her strengths to her advantage and confuse Pickles with her superior agility.

As she slipped past her opponent's flank, Nacht released a spell. "*Ars Draconis: Eternal Darkness!*" She fired it off and kept moving, using her speed to circle behind Pickles. The Archsage's Ring, one of her two equipped weapons, enabled her to cast spells without the long invocations they normally required. "*Doom Tempest Dragon!*"

The two spells struck at different angles, from different ranges, and using different elements. They were dark and wind spells, respectively, two *Ars Draconis* magics that fired off relatively fast. She had the Ring of the Dead equipped as well, increasing their destructive power.

For an opening salvo, it should have been difficult to escape unscathed. Hopefully, both would score hits. But Pickles stayed unnervingly calm. Her eyes flickered. The next moment, somehow, the two dragons vanished with shrieks of pain. The dark dragon burst in a flash of light, while the tempest dragon caught fire and burned away.

That's just ridiculous! Nacht thought.

It would have been one thing if Pickles were using defensive skills, but she was not. She had simply struck the encroaching dragons down one after another via a game mechanic known as Neutralization. By using equally powerful spells of advantageous elements, she had been able to completely cancel out Nacht's.

While simple enough in theory, Neutralization was a very difficult trick to actually pull off. It didn't work if your magic wasn't equally strong, and if you got the element wrong, it might only add fuel to the fire. Moreover, it required precise timing. It was generally regarded as a rare phenomenon that sometimes happened by chance in close-range clashes. It was completely out of the question for someone to do it intentionally, let alone at range. Or it would have been if Nacht's opponent were a normal player.

But Nacht was fighting a master of PvP—the guild's drill sergeant. "*For Mages in PvP,*" Nacht remembered her saying, "*mastering Neutralization is essential. Without it, the enemy will just whittle away at your defenses and overwhelm you with their speed.*"

But that was impossible. Or so Nacht would have liked to say, but Pickles was,

somehow, actually putting it into practice.

“*Dragon Princess Fury!*” It was a favorite spell of Nacht’s, but in this case, merely a distraction. Neutralization was a reflex-based technique. While Pickles was focused on dispelling Nacht’s magic, Nacht would buy time to unleash a more powerful technique.

But of course, it didn’t work. Ruses like that were far beneath Pickles. “Foolish,” she said. Nacht felt a sharp pain in her right shoulder.

“Wh-What?! Are you serious?!” She checked with her Dragon Eyes and saw that she had been pierced by an invisible bullet from the spell Unseen Shot, taking out a fifth of her HP. “You interrupted my spell?”

“I’m going to have to deduct points for using cheap tricks like that,” Pickles answered. “You’re fragile, Nacht. All I have to do is hit you with a knockback effect and your spells won’t go off.”

It was as if she was putting on a show—a demonstration of all the ways Nacht’s spells could be countered. First with Neutralization, and then by striking with a hidden attack to disrupt her Ars Draconis casting during the window of vulnerability.

“Your first weak point is your lack of flexibility,” Pickles lectured. “You only have a couple of tricks.”

Nacht’s stats made her a spellcasting specialist, but her class, Dragon Princess, was not classified as a magic class at all. Compared to a pure Mage, her basic spellcasting capabilities like incantation time or sequential casting left something to be desired. While she was casting her third spell, Pickles had been able to fire off a spell of her own.

“I guess you’re right,” Nacht admitted. “But all I can really do about that is trust my equipment. And I have those weirdos following me around. They’re more than happy to make me whatever I ask for, so I should have that covered, at least.” She spoke as if the two of them were having a polite conversation, but the match wasn’t over. Nacht crouched down to dart away, only to find herself unable to move.

“Your *second* weak point,” Pickles went on, “is that your movement ability is

heavily limited in enclosed spaces like a PvP arena.”

Nacht looked down. Her leg was trapped in a beautiful crystal of ice. *Ars Glacies: Millennium Crystal*. It was a spell that did very little damage, but in exchange prevented movement in a wide area. It seemed like Pickles’s strategy was to counter the vast destructive power of *Ars Draconis* with her own ice magic, favoring status effects over damage. Nacht was experiencing firsthand how effective a tactic it was.

“How many spells did you *cast*?” Nacht asked. But Pickles just laughed. Instead of answering, she cast another spell, attacking Nacht with a blast of pale blue flames.

Maybe I shouldn’t have focused so much on dodging... Nacht thought, having been beaten in the exchange of spells. Nacht was a high-evasion magic user, but Pickles’s focus was on spellcasting. She was good enough that she could cast ten or more spells simultaneously, and like a proper Mage, she hadn’t taken a single step, using nothing but her magic. She’d had a response for everything Nacht tried and had timed her attacks perfectly. It was a splendid display.

Nacht made up her mind to give up on evasion and counterattack using pure overwhelming force. The second her foot came free from the ice, blue flames still lapping at her body, she struck back with the only thing she had left—her magic.

“Maximum Spell Boost! Earth Splitter!” She aimed for the ground under Pickles’s feet. Her spell split the earth in two, threatening to swallow Pickles up and crush her under the weight of the land. Normally, this would have been enough to buy her some time, but by this point she had well and truly learned her lesson when it came to using tricks like that here. Pickles was far from a normal opponent. *“Expand Magic Field...”* she began. *“Ars Draconis: Labyrinth of the Mist Dragon!”* It was a spell her opponent hadn’t seen before, and an expanded version at that. There was no way Pickles could counter it as easily as she had the others.

Nacht took to the sky. All of her hopes were riding on this next spell. “And now, the Dragon Princess’s ultimate ability. *Ars Draconis: Nacht Atem!*”

The breath of a dragon, burning with black flames, descended upon the

arena. Pickles was swallowed by the flames. Nacht watched her HP bar grow shorter by the second. It seemed to be working better than she could have possibly imagined.

“Did I...get her?” Nacht watched Pickles’s HP drop below half. A shiver went up her spine. Something was wrong. Pickles was taking far too much damage.

She had expected Pickles, who lacked Nacht’s dodging ability, to use a defensive skill to counteract an attack she couldn’t avoid. Had she done so, a single attack taking her below half health was highly unlikely, which meant that she must have chosen to forgo defense. It seemed she had made the same error as before. While she was flying around, Pickles had been preparing a counterattack.

“Dang it!” Nacht shouted. “*Dragon God Passage!*” She activated an ability—one of her hidden aces—that increased her movement speed to ridiculous heights. But what she was facing now was an undodgeable array of magic fire, like something out of a bullet hell game.

Pickles had said that Nacht’s second weak point was the limits imposed on her mobility in an enclosed space like a PvP arena. If Nacht knew anything about Pickles’s educational philosophy, the drill sergeant would keep this up until Nacht could figure out a way to make her build work. But if the fix for her first weak point was the equipment her supporters had made for her, what was the fix for her second?

“Gh...” Nacht grumbled. “Oh, come on, Pickles...”

She prioritized dodging the spells with the highest attack power. If there was a spell she couldn’t avoid, she would use one of her defensive skills to survive. But no matter how much she dodged, the number of bullets coming her way didn’t decrease in the slightest. They kept coming and coming, so much so that it seemed unthinkable that she hadn’t run out of ammo.

There was no way a simple barrage of bullets like this was Pickles’s strategy. She had spent most of her mana on this attack. Nacht was sure she was planning something.

These weak attacks are just a fake-out, she thought. Her real attack is still coming!

She activated her Dragon Eyes along with every analysis skill she had and gave the bullet hell pattern a long, hard look. Then she saw it—a spell that looked off. At first glance it seemed like a fire elemental projectile, but it was moving far too slowly. It must have been a powerful spell disguised as something else. The inescapable barrage was all just to ensure that the one real attack struck true.

Just as the suspicious projectile made impact, Nacht activated her defensive abilities. “Gah!” she cried as it sent her flying, but thanks to her timely use of her skills, it dealt minimal damage to her health. Nacht had come out ahead in the exchange—and compared to Pickles, she had much more MP remaining.

“Hm,” said Pickles. “Passing grade.”

“Hey!” Nacht shot back. Her performance had been nothing short of splendid! But then she realized that the knockback from Pickles’s spell had sent her straight into an ice magic trap, binding her limbs with its slowing effect.

The bullets vanished, leaving only Pickles standing before Nacht, her arm outstretched. “All of creation is one,” she said. “*Primeval Magic: Meteor Strike!*” A bright light streaked through the sky, following her hand. A meteor was falling. Nacht looked up and knew that she had lost.

The true purpose of the barrage had been to force Nacht to use her defensive skills. The attack that Nacht had thought was the real one had actually been another fake. Pickles had spent almost all of her MP, but Nacht was in a hopeless position.

And so, Nacht was back where she’d started, lying on the ground with the loss message floating above her head. It had been a crushing defeat, but for someone like Nacht, who usually relied on her friends’ protection as she fired off spells from well outside the enemy’s range, just being able to fight like that had been victory enough.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling in satisfaction as she made to leave the arena.

“And where do you think *you’re* going?” asked Pickles.

“Oh, you know. I just thought I’d grind a few more levels!”

“Levels mean nothing if you don’t know how to fight.”

“I thought I did pretty good...” Nacht had resolved to herself to stick to the battle plan that suited her magic DPS build—staying behind the tank.

“Preposterous! We have a lot of work to do on that second weak point of yours.” Pickles seized Nacht firmly by the arm. She tried to escape, but her movement was still restricted by Pickles’s spell.

“Stop it!” cried Nacht. “I’m going hunting! I don’t have time for this!”

“Ah ha ha! And let all our training go to waste? You, my friend, need *practice*. You can go hunting after we’ve corrected ten of your weak points.”

“Ten? You’re joking, right...?” Pickles’s jovial smile vanished. She gave Nacht a deadly serious look. “Nooooooooooooo!” Nacht exclaimed.

As for what happened after that, well...Nacht put in some hard work.

‡

N-No... No more training... No more... Ah! Nacht’s eyes shot open. She had been asleep, reliving a bad memory in her dreams. But here in the waking world, she saw a girl whose presence warmed her heart.

“Oh!” said Aisha. “Mistress, you’re awake! Usually, I’m the one who sleeps late...”

“Haah...” Nacht sighed. “I was just remembering something that happened a long time ago. But Aisha, what’s...?” Nacht could feel something soft underneath her head. Soft and faintly warm. A wonderful sensation, threatening to make her heart melt.

Aisha looked down at Nacht, whose head was resting in her lap. The sight of her blushing cheeks filled Nacht’s heart with indescribable joy. It was more than enough to dispel any lingering trauma.

“You’re always letting me rest on your lap, Mistress,” Aisha giggled. “I thought I would return the favor. Do you...like it?”

“I love it!” Nacht said. “I don’t think I ever want to move from this spot.” She finally understood why Aisha enjoyed this so much. It was pure bliss.

Aisha giggled again. “But that wouldn’t do! If you stay here too long, your breakfast will get cold!”

“Oh? Did you cook breakfast today?”

“I did! I’m your servant, after all, Mistress! A-Although all I did was heat up the curry you made last night...” Not that that mattered to Nacht. She was happy just to know that Aisha wanted to help. “B-But I put something special in yours, Mistress! I hope you like it!”

“Oh? Well, that’s exciting.” Nacht began to regret her words almost as soon as they left her mouth. “Um...Aisha...what’s...?”

“It’s the fruit you gave me, Mistress! You said that apples go well in curry, so I put lots and lots of them in yours!”

Nacht’s plate was piled high with diced fruit. True, Nacht had mentioned the technique of using apples and honey to give curry a subtle sweetness—she had even said something about chocolate working well—but the key word was “subtle.” It wasn’t something you filled up your plate with!

“Go ahead, Mistress!” Aisha said. Her plate looked perfectly normal. She had given up loads of her favorite food, restraining herself in order to give her Mistress a special treat. Under those circumstances, Nacht had no choice but to eat. “Do you like it?”

Nacht hesitated. “Y-Yeah!” she said. Privately, though, she resolved to never sleep in again.

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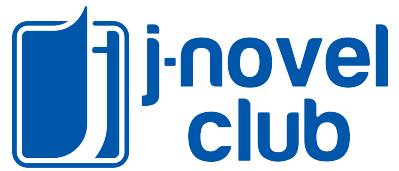
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Did I Seriously Just Get Reincarnated as My Gag Character?! Volume 1

by Kanade Otonashi

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