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Too  
**Strong** to  
**Belong!**  
**Banished** to  
**Another World!**



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Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

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Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

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# Prologue

**IT'S** just past four in the morning.

I rub my tired eyes, wring out the wet cloth I'm holding, and glance around the large dojo.

Every morning I clean it before the students arrive for martial arts lessons. My father trained me here since I was little, and I inherited the dojo one year ago—when he passed away in a car accident.

It happened on our way home. I'd been accepted into high school and, to celebrate, we took a trip with my friend Kazuya and his parents. We both lost our parents that day.

The dojo was meant to go to my uncle, who was named my legal guardian. But I insisted on running the dojo as-is, and luckily got my way.

While scrubbing the wooden floor, I sense a familiar presence behind me.

"Morning, Kazuya," I greet him. "You're early, as always."

"Morning," Kazuya replies with a bleary expression.

The two of us go way back. He's a year younger than me, in his first year of high school. We were orphaned together. Before that we were neighbors, but now he lives with relatives one suburb over.

He was one of the dojo's students, too, but he quit and no longer trains here. Despite that, and the fact that he lives further away now, he still comes every morning to help me out at this ungodly hour.

"Kazuya, you're not our student anymore. And even if you were, you wouldn't have to show up 'til morning practice starts," I tell him.

"You know it's my job to watch over the business side of things." He yawns, grabs a cloth, and starts wiping the floor alongside me.

I was happy that I inherited this old dojo and didn't have to go live with my

uncle, but I suck at wrapping my head around things like taxes and how to actually manage the place. When I got overwhelmed, Kazuya offered to step in. He's smart, unlike me, so I leave that stuff to him. Honestly, he's a huge help, even before mentioning how he gives me a hand in the mornings like this.

We get things ready for the morning in silence as students show up in drips and drabs. I say "students", but there's a wide variety of people; some who come for strength training, elementary school students who are learning the basics, grandparents who are trying to manage their health, and middle-aged women who want to lose weight.

Funnily enough, since Kazuya began helping this year, the number of body-conscious older women has shot up.

He's quite a handsome guy with glossy hair, a well-proportioned face, and a real honor student look. You can tell he kind of gets an ego boost when people say he's hot. To me, he's like a little brother I'm proud of. He was popular when we were in elementary school too, but weirdly enough, he's never introduced me to any girlfriends. Maybe he's hiding them from me?

Honestly, if he does have a girlfriend, I'd probably be a bit put out...because of my pride. I haven't even started dating yet; I don't want him to get ahead of me. Yeah, that's it.

I know that's wrong. I want to be the kind of friend who'd congratulate him if he has a girlfriend.

Still, though. A boyfriend... What I wouldn't give to have a boyfriend... It's all I wish for. I mean, I'm a passionate seventeen-year-old high school girl! I'd love a romance of my own, but that's easier said than done.

I'm kind of notorious around here for being "too strong". One glance at me, and local boys bolt in the other direction. There were times I thought a guy wanted to talk to me, only for him to turn out to be a delinquent picking a fight. With me! A quintessential high school girl!

Nevertheless, I try my best to wow guys, from my hair to my clothes. Hence my long black hair and habit of buying magazines every month to keep up with what's trendy. Yet Cupid's never *once* deigned to so much as glimpse at me.



Is it so bad to be good at martial arts?

When I was in middle school, for whatever reason, there was this group of bullies who were always starting fights with me. If only I hadn't kicked all of their asses without a second thought...

I like martial arts. I like sports. And now that I've inherited my dad's dojo, I don't plan on quitting them. But if I ever get the chance to be reborn, I want to come back as the kind of girl people feel compelled to protect. Someone as delicate as the characters you see in *shoujo* manga, who make guys say stuff like, "*I'll save you!*"

"Earth to Sakurako." Kazuya's face pops up in front of me.

Oh! There's a kid in uniform waiting for a lesson. I glance at my watch and see it's time for the early morning practice to start!

Earth to Sakurako, indeed! I should never let petty things distract me in our sacred dojo!

"S-Sorry! Um, okay, let's start this morning's training!" Flustered, I commence practice as usual.

Because a lot of the people in attendance are long-term students, they smile and forgive me with nothing more than a "Sure, sure."

Still, I need to get my act together!

The morning session starts with warm-up exercises, then karate kata in pairs, followed by sparring in pairs. There's an odd number of students today, so I get to take on the lucky one left. Meaning my partner is... Tsuyoshi, a college sophomore. Tsuyoshi's pretty nice-looking and has a good, strong name.

*Too bad he's so weak*, I think, batting away his fists. He's struggling to push power through to his hands. Doesn't he know he needs to use his whole body?

But I'm not gonna lie, I get a kick out of watching him strive with all his might. And the mole right beside his eye is kind of hot. Perfect boyfriend material—but whoops, he's left his side wide open. The moment he attacks me, I strike.

"Geez, you're strong, Sakurako-sensei. You look so cute and dainty, but I'm no match for you," Tsuyoshi chuckles, his backside flat on the floor.

“What?! Did you... Did you just call me cute? You find *me* cute?!” I stammer, jolted by the compliment that came way out of left field.

“Sakurako’s a prodigy. By the time she was ten, she was already stronger than her dad,” a middle-aged gentleman, one of our regulars, pipes up next to us in a joking tone.

It’s true that I never lost to my father since I was about ten, but that was just because my father would pretend to fall down on purpose.

“Aw, no, my dad was always just playing around. You know, like when you’re playing superheroes with your father, and they’re the monster, and they lose on purpose?” I smile.

*Hmm, it doesn’t look like he believes me. Actually, he’s squinting at me sort of critically...* Maybe I’m being paranoid.



**MORNING** practice wraps up like it does every day. I take a quick shower, change into my uniform, and lock the dojo. Kazuya goes to a different school, but he’s a chivalrous guy and insists on walking me to the train station. We walk side by side, making small talk.

*Hold on. Is there something up ahead of us?*

I tense up. I was right. A big, black wild dog barrels toward me, snarling and foaming at the mouth!

I shield myself with my schoolbag. When the dog bites it, I slam my fist down on its defenseless neck. With a wretched grunt it collapses on the ground, unconscious.

“No! Not another bag!” I cry.

“Uh, shouldn’t you be more worried about getting attacked by *another* stray dog?! That’s way too many recently!” Kazuya shudders, his face pale.

I guess it’s true that for the past year or so, wild dogs have attacked me about once every three days. What really surprised me was when a Japanese wolf came after me. Those are supposed to be *extinct*!

“Ack! Kazuya, take two steps that way!” Sensing something overhead, I bump

Kazuya aside and kick a falling flowerpot in mid-air. It smashes on the footpath. Yikes. That could've really hurt somebody if it landed on their head.

"And *another* falling flowerpot?! How many times has that happened now?!" Kazuya cries.

"Hmm, by my count, that's the 666th time this year."

"666th?! You don't find that ominous?! That's way too many flowerpots!" he says, trying to draw my attention to the absurdity of it.

"I guess. Actually, not just flowerpots, but other stuff keeps falling, too, lately. Oh well. No one was hurt, so no harm no foul." I shrug.

"You can't just write off something like that!"

Wow. Kazuya's normally laid-back in the morning. It's unusual for him to be so chatty.

*Oh... My back's tingling again.* I whip around and, sure enough, a telephone pole is plunging toward us. I thrust out both hands and catch it as it falls.

"Could you move a little, Kazuya?" I ask. "I'm going to set this down."

"Why is something like *that* falling?! No, never mind that; how do you manage to catch literally everything?!"

*Feels like Kazuya's become a big fan of interrobangs,* I think.

"No problem. This happens all the time. At least once a week," I state.

"And you don't find that weird?!" Another interrobang.

With a soft "hup" I gently lower the pole to the ground.

"Things have gotten a little extreme around you this past year. Maybe you should stay home and take shelter?" he suggests.

"Huh? But I have to go to school— Oh, that dog!"

The light is red at the crosswalk we've stopped at, but a dog is crossing the road. And a huge truck is coming— Before I can think, my body is already in motion.

I scoop the dog into my arms and dash across the road. Luckily, I was quick on



my feet. If I hadn't been, both of us would've been flattened by that truck.

I put the dog down— *Oh*. It was another wild dog! And it's snapping its bared teeth, like it could be rabid.

A swift punch to its belly stuns it. *Geez, another one?* That one almost got me. That would've sucked.

I gently set the unconscious dog down. Kazuya was right. There are too many wild dogs around. It's an accident waiting to happen.

*Wait a second, is that...another Japanese wolf?*

Just as I think that, another telephone pole comes toppling down. I catch it, only to spot a steel beam sliding off of a building that's under construction opposite us. I didn't have time to stop it, but if I hit it with the telephone pole then it would land— No, the Japanese wolf is lying right where it would fall. It would be crushed! Then it really would be extinct!

...I hesitate too long.

The shadow of the steel beam is on me. Before everything goes black, I swear I hear Kazuya's voice.



***WHAT*** is this? Where am I?

I wake up in a pure white room.

That steel beam was about to flatten me... What happened?

Am I in a hospital? No, there's no bed, nor any medical stuff around me. I glance down at my body. Everything, right down to my school uniform, is normal. And in front of me, there's a...teddy bear?

"Sakurako?"

Kazuya's familiar voice comes from beside me. I whip around to face him. He looks stunned, but that's all.

*Thank goodness! As long as he's with me, then everything's fine, right?*

"Kazuya! Hey, what is this place? Are we...?" I trail off.

“I don’t know. I guess we must’ve...” he trails off, too.

Right. We must’ve both been crushed underneath the steel beam. So, Kazuya got caught under it as well...

He scrutinizes the strange room, his expression uncertain.

Oh, nope, nope, nope. I need to get a grip. It’s only natural to feel flustered when you wake up in a strange place, but I’m the older one here. If I get depressed, it’ll rub off on Kazuya! I’m the closest thing he has to family left; I have to protect him!

A high-pitched, childish voice rings out while I’m still thinking of how to comfort him.

“Hiya, God here!”

*What?*

“Kazuya, did you say something?” I ask him.

“No, it wasn’t me.” He shakes his head and we share a look.

“Here! Here I am!” the high-pitched voice speaks again.

We look around, but no one else is there. The only other thing in the room is a teddy bear sitting on the floor.

Kazuya frowns and steps toward it. “Uh, was that you?”

“Bingo!” The big teddy bear raises its right hand. “That’s me! God!”

“Eeep! It moved!” I shriek.

Maybe I surprised it back, because it throws up both hands.

“Please don’t yell. You scared me! Of course I can move. I’m God, remember?” the teddy bear says a little haughtily. It clears its throat, then stands.

*Wha—?! The stuffed toy just stood up?!*

“But enough about that. I have to speak with you two.” Its tone becomes serious.

I’m still reeling because it moved. “You do?”

“Yep. I hate to ask this, but could I send you to another world?”

Guarded, Kazuya asks, “Another world? What are you talking about?”

“Well, it’ll take some time to explain... I might as well start from the beginning. Going by the timescale you use in your universe, it all started a year ago.”

“A year ago?”

“Uh-huh, when you got into that accident. You see, only Kazuya was supposed to survive. But you did as well, Sakurako, which really threw a spanner in the works. The Laws of Fate in your world were thrown off balance. They tried to correct things by finishing you off, but nothing turned out the way they planned. Which was quite a shock.”

“The Laws of Fate?” Kazuya narrows his eyes. “No, forget that. You tried to ‘correct’ things by killing Sakurako?”

I tense up at the mention of our accident a year ago.

“Yep, the Laws of Fate are instrumental in determining what can happen in a world. They regulate things to ensure events follow predetermined routes. And, well, since Sakurako didn’t die when she was meant to, er, to put it simply, the Laws of Fate freaked out and tried to kill her. But *nothing* worked.”

“Hold on. For the past year, Sakurako has been bombarded by wild dogs, falling stuff, and even telephone poles toppling over. Are you telling us that was the Laws of Fate trying to put their plans back on track?” Kazuya says in a dark voice.

“In a nutshell, yeah,” the bear nods. “Anyway, back to the point: sending you guys to another world. Would you mind doing that for me?”

“What do you mean? We still don’t even know how we got here!” Kazuya retorts harshly.

I can’t wrap my head around what’s happening, either. Who are “Lawsoff Feit”? A band? And what does the bear mean by “The way they planned”? Does this mean it wasn’t a coincidence that flowerpots and stuff kept falling on me? I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.

But Kazuya realizes something before I do. “Wait, don’t tell me that Sakurako died in that last accident just now? So the Laws of Fate just...”

*Wait, I died? Even though I haven’t gotten a boyfriend yet?!*

“Nooo... Not quite. Sakurako didn’t perish in that accident that the Laws of Fate just caused, she only got injured. Gosh, she’s one tough cookie. Honestly, who’d’ve thunk? And Kazuya, you didn’t die instantly, but you’re at death’s door. And underneath the steel beam,” the bear says casually.

*Excuse me? Kazuya’s about to be crushed?*

I don’t understand entirely what’s going on, but that makes the blood drain from my face. Does this mean...it’s my fault he’s going to die?

“I tell you, your actions back there *really* surprised me, Kazuya. The way you went dashing in. And you know, all the Laws of Fate wanted to do was *off* Sakurako. Not only did they fail to do that, they double failed because you got wiped out before your time. So they came crying to me in a panic. Because I’m God.”

What? The Lawsoff Feit were crying? No, who cares about them! What about Kazuya?!

“Kazuya is going to die?! No way! I won’t let that happen!” I grab the teddy bear by its neck.

It grimaces and whispers hoarsely, “No, h-he’ll be fine. That’s...” — it coughs — “...not how I want things to turn out, either. So I won’t...” — it coughs again — “...let that happen. Uh, do you mind p-putting me down?” The teddy bear is wincing like it’s in pain.

I hurriedly put it down. Whoops. I’d grabbed it without even thinking.

“Sorry.”

“N-No problem. But gosh, that’s some strength. Who’d’ve thunk? Er, look, you can relax. Kazuya won’t die. Which brings me back to my proposal. We’ve talked things over, the Laws of Fate and I, and decided the best course of action would be to erase any trace of you in this world. That is, it would be like you never existed here. But, instead of killing you, we’re going to transport you to

another world.”

*Huh? What does that mean?*

“Are you saying we can’t go back to our world? To Japan?” I ask.

“Yeah. Sorry things turned out like this, but your existence is upsetting the balance of this world. Almost all of its routes to the future are fixed in stone, so even a small disturbance can trigger total collapse. That’s why I want to send you to another world where there’re hardly any set paths of fate at all. Fate there is malleable. It doesn’t matter at all if you add a foreign object to it.”

Oh, the *Laws of Fate!* Not ‘Lawsoff Feit’.

“This is a necessary triage,” the bear continues. “I don’t usually do things like this, but my gosh, you two are pretty abnormal. Who’d’ve thunk?”

“No!” I cry. “What about my dojo?”

But the teddy bear brushes off my question. “I know you’ll be giving certain things up, but your new world won’t be bad. I think you’ll fit in there.”

“You can’t just decide that for us...!” *Are you kidding me?! My dojo was left to me by my mom and dad!*

Then it hits me. If the world is ruled by fate, and everything’s predetermined, that means...

“I know I’m putting you guys through the wringer. Especially you, Kazuya. You weren’t even supposed to die in the first place. So as an apology, I’ll give you a gift when I send you to your new world,” the teddy bear prattles on happily while I glare at it. “On that world, people have ‘skills’. You can do various things if you’re at a high level in a particular skill. Normally, it takes a lot of training and experience to become high level in one. But just this once, I’ll give you experience based on your time in your original world and give you lots of skills. Such as being able to speak the language. You’ve already mastered a language on your world, right? Japanese? So when you arrive in your new world, you’ll already know their language. You won’t have any issues talking to others when you get there.”

“Hey. If the paths of fate were fixed, is that why our parents died? You chose

for that to happen?" My voice trembles.

The teddy bear tilts its head with a blank expression. "Well, no, I'm not the one who decides people's destinies. They're already set. We just tweak things to ensure everything goes according to the plan that was set in the beginning."

What's that supposed to mean? Okay, so the teddy bear doesn't choose people's fates. But it's the one who carries them out, which means it's the one who...

My suppressed emotions begin boiling over. How could it speak as if it were no big deal? A year ago I cursed the world, begging to know the reason I had to lose my beloved family.

Kazuya lets out a small sigh next to me. "I need to check one thing. If we go to this other world, will we face the same destiny? Will the Laws of Fate still try to kill Sakurako?"

"No. Like I said earlier, it's a world without ripples. There's some degree of predetermination in terms of what your roles will be there, but your deaths haven't been decided. So the Laws of Fate won't have to relentlessly target Sakurako."

With that confirmed, Kazuya looks at me, his mind made up. He's on board with going to another world. From the way the teddy bear's been talking, it doesn't seem like there was any other option to begin with. Nevertheless, I'm uneasy.

"I'm sorry, Kazuya. It's my fault you've been dragged into this," I say.

"It's okay. If you had died back then, too... I don't even want to think about it. As long as I have you, I'm fine."

"Kazuya... You really care about me, don't you? Thank you. Then, I'm all right with us going, too. ...But before we go, there's something I want to do." I look down at the teddy bear. "Hey, God. Let me hit you once."

"What? Hit me? *Me*?" it asks in a high-pitched squeak. "Why?"

"I know you didn't choose what happened. I get it. Your job is to make sure things go according to plan. But still, it doesn't sit right with me. No matter how

I think about it, you stole my parents from me. That's what it feels like," I speak slowly and try to stay calm, but my fists tremble regardless.

Seeing me like this, the teddy bear gives a curt nod. "Okay. If that'll make you feel better, you can hit me as many times as you want. I haven't talked to intelligent lifeforms with emotions for a very long time, so I might've said something rude. All right. When you're ready!"

The teddy bear closes its eyes and puffs out its chest.

"Sorry, teddy bear... Sorry, God."

I clench my fist even harder.

"S-Sakurako, wait a second!" Kazuya stops me. "Before you do, I need to ask the teddy bear something!" He turns to God. "You're God, right? Hypothetically, if your body is blasted to smithereens, everything will be okay? Um, the world will be, I mean?"

"To smithereens...? Yeah, it'll be fine. I know how this body looks, but I'll be okay. This form won't take much damage from a girl hitting it. And even if it did, it'll regenerate. The Laws of Fate would take care of things until I regenerated, so yeah, no biggie."

"Gotcha. That's a relief. All right, Sakurako, go for it."

"Okay! Kazuya, I'll hit it for you, too! Oh, wait a second... There's one last thing I need to ask you. Um, what's our new world like? Will there be strong, masc guys there?"

"'Masc'? Not really sure what you mean by that, but there are monsters above humans in the food chain. However, some people have magic and skills, and because monsters drop valuable items, strong humans actually hunt them. So they're not completely superior, but I think there are a lot of people who will be stronger than the people on your original world."

"Right, got it. I understand now. Thanks. All right then, here goes." I draw my fist back and hold it low.

*I'll put all my hatred, all of my anger, into this one shot. Then I can be happy like normal again!*

Breathe...

Hold...

And—

*BAM!*

My fist explodes through the teddy bear's stomach and the boom of a shockwave echoes through the air.

Maybe it's because I was filled with more resentment than ever before, but I'm positive that was the strongest punch I've ever thrown. The teddy bear doubles over then bursts like a balloon. White cotton stuffing flutters around us like snow.

The room distorts around us. The last thing I hear is the disembodied voice of the teddy bear.

"Gosh, it really was to smithereens... Who'd've thunk...?"



# Chapter 1: Too Strong, Banished to Another World

**WHEN** the dust settles, I find myself in a forest, in the same stance I was in when I punched the bear. My right hand tingles from the impact. I flex it a couple of times and feel the full sting on my knuckles.

I feel like a massive weight's been lifted off me. Like I managed to get everything out in that one punch.

"Yep, I knew you'd pulverize him. I'm glad I asked what would happen first," Kazuya says, examining the greenery around us. "Is this the other world? I wonder where we are. Looks like a forest? Is that a path over there? Why don't we follow it for now?"

Kazuya's the same as always. You'd never know he's just been thrown into an incomprehensible situation.

"Kazuya, um, you can hit me if you want," I say awkwardly. "After all, this is my fault, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about? It's not your fault. I... No, if anything, this is sort of fun. This place feels... Well, it's normal enough. Besides, if I hit you, I'd break my hand."

"Break your hand? Haha, what? I can't believe you're in such a joking mood already!" I laugh.

"I wasn't joking..."

Never mind how he's kidding around. He's right... We're in a whole new world. How exciting is that? When I think of it that way, it does start to feel fun.

No, it genuinely is fun. We should be enjoying ourselves!

I used to dream of being reborn as a delicate, cute girl getting married to a prince or something... Can you believe it? I'm actually getting that chance!

The teddy bear's last words piqued my interest, too. It said there are many strong people in this world! Maybe there'll be a lot of knights or princes or the

like to come to my rescue!

“Kazuya, we’re in a new world, so I’ve made myself a new goal!” I declare.

“A goal? Why do I have a bad feeling about this?”

“For years, I’ve always wanted to be a delicate girl!”

“What?”

“I’m only telling you this because it’s you. I’ve always wanted to be a princess who gets rescued by a prince. But in our old world, everybody knew about my family’s dojo. You don’t exactly picture me when you think of someone ‘weak,’ do you? I never got to be protected, or treated like a princess, or anything like that. Plus, guys go for damsels in distress, y’know? That’s the sort of girl I wanna be. So, yeah, I’ll just say it straight out: I want a boyfriend!”

“Is that why you asked the teddy bear if there are strong guys here...?”

“Yeah! I wanted to know if I might come across a guy who’ll protect me, so it slipped out!” I admit with a blush.

For some reason, Kazuya rolls his eyes. “I knew this was going to be a pointless conversation.”

“That’s mean! And after I bared my soul to you! So you’re not gonna help out your big sister?”

“‘Big sister’? You’re only one year older than me, and we’re not actually related.”

“We may not be related by blood, but I think of you as a treasured family member...”

*Wait, am I the only one who considers us family? But I cherish him like a little brother! I’ll do anything to take care of him.*

Kazuya heaves a huge, overdramatic sigh. “Well, whatever. I always knew this was going to be a long, uphill battle.”

*What’s going to be a long, uphill battle?* I have no idea what he’s talking about. Is he in a fight with somebody? Geez, if he’d just tell me, I’d beat them up for him.

Oh! No, I can't think like that. I'm a weak maiden in this world! Yep, super fragile! Fragile girls don't think about beating people up! Probably!

"Hey, since we're in a new world, why don't you try honing your body again, too?" I suggest. "It's every girl's dream to be protected by someone stronger than they are!"

"I used to want to do that, but I could never see myself getting stronger than the person I like, so I gave up," he says.

"It's too soon to give up! You still have room to improve... Wait, you like someone? Oh my gosh! You don't have a girlfriend even though girls flock to you. You always just watch the male B.O. haze at my dojo and don't even train, so who could you..." I trail off as it hits me.

Aha! I thought it was weird that he doesn't have a girlfriend. Of course! Kazuya's into guys. Suddenly, everything falls into place.

If he can't imagine getting stronger than the person he likes, it must be somebody at the dojo. Who's the strongest person at my dojo? Maybe Mr. Watanabe? But he's fifty-six years old. That's quite the age difference... No, love is blind when it comes to age.

Oh, but Mr. Watanabe's back in our original world! Kazuya and Mr. Watanabe are in different worlds now. Kazuya doesn't look upset, but he could be nursing a broken heart. He's been torn away from the person he loves.

"Who could I what? Why'd you trail off? I'm afraid of what you might be thinking." Kazuya breaks my racing thoughts with a questioning look on his face.

I'd better stop dwelling on it. Kazuya told me he wants us to enjoy the new world. I can't throw cold water on that sentiment. He's trying to distract himself.

I know! He should find himself a rebound to crush on!

"Nothing, it doesn't matter. Let me just say this: I'll always be your family, no matter what team you play for!"

"Hey, quit it. Seriously, don't go getting any weird ideas," he says.

"Don't worry. I'll always be by your side. As long as you remember that, it's all

good.”

“Ugh! Will you at least listen to me?!” When I look warmly at Kazuya, he mumbles in embarrassment and sighs heavily. “Whatever. For now, let’s just follow this path,” he says wearily.

Just as I’m about to nod, I sense something in the bushes behind him. I step forward to get between him and it.

A creepy-looking creature shuffles out of the bushes. It has a head like an owl and a humanoid body covered in feathers. What is this thing?

“Is this one of the monsters the teddy bear was talking about?” Kazuya whispers, his voice strained.

Monster? Oh, yeah. The teddy bear said that there are creatures ranked higher than humans in the food chain that prey on them. It stares at us with drool spilling out of its mouth.

Hold up. Does this thing want to eat me and Kazuya?

No. It can’t eat Kazuya. He’s the only family I have left.

“Kazuya, stay back!” I shout.

The monster flies at me. Its arms are like wings with sharp talons on its hands. It swipes at my head. I duck just in time and, when I’m in range of its chest, my fist rips through the air.

A BOOM I’ve never heard before blares out and a round hole appears in the monster’s torso.

*Huh? What?*

I threw a totally normal punch, it wasn’t mystical or anything. But there’s no mistaking it. That attack was stronger than anything I’ve felt before.

Blood spurts out of the owl-headed monster’s beak and it falls forward. I hop aside to dodge as it face-plants on the ground with a thud.

There’s a huge hole in its torso from the back, too.

*Did I do that? With a simple punch? Ew, that’s actually pretty gory!*

The monster vanishes in a puff of smoke, leaving a yellow jewel behind on the

ground.

“Huh? It disappeared?” I say, stunned.

Kazuya picks up the gem that the monster left behind and examines it. “A crystal? It’s pristine; there’s no dirt or blood on it. Sakurako, do you have a bag or something to put it in?” He turns it over, holding it up to the light, perplexed.

I look around, but my bag is nowhere to be found. I’m wearing my school uniform—a navy blue blazer over a navy blue checkered skirt and red ribbon tie—so all I have is a handkerchief in my pocket. “Nope, no bag, I think it’s gone.”

“Oh. Mine, too. Oh, well.” Kazuya slips the stone into his pants pocket.

“What are you going to do with that? Do you think it’ll come in handy?” I ask him, curious.

“I’m not sure, but the teddy bear said you can get valuable items from monsters. This might be one of those.”

“Oooh, gotcha. Either way, it sure is beautiful the way it sparkles.”

“Not to change the topic or anything, but I thought you wanted to be delicate. I wouldn’t call anyone who can put a whistling hole in a huge monster like that delicate.” Kazuya muffles a snicker with a teasing smile.

“I-I had no choice! It came out of nowhere! Besides, there’s no point pretending to be weak in front of you! It’s not like you’d be fooled, and it’s a big sister’s job to protect her little brother. But most of all, as far as I could tell...I barely even hit it.”

I remember exactly how it felt on my knuckles. It was just a punch! I mean, of course, I put my heart into every shot I take. But it’s weird that it was *that* powerful.

Kazuya must notice that it’s bugging me, because he answers seriously, “I think it’s probably a skill thing. The teddy bear said this world operates according to game mechanics, with skills and magic. He said he was going to give us ample skills as an apology... I wish I knew more. Maybe there’s somewhere we can go to learn about it, like a library. We should start by finding a town, somewhere there are people. So, let’s go. If we stick to this path, we

should come across a settlement eventually.” With that, Kazuya takes off ahead.

I rush to catch up...and get the odd feeling I’m lighter on my feet than normal. Is this also because of some sort of skill? I don’t really understand, but if so, skills are awesome!



**WE** walk along the path until eventually a town comes into view, just as Kazuya predicted. There’s a queue of people lined up in front of a towering gate. I guess it’s a checkpoint.

“See that gatekeeper? He’s interrogating everyone passing through the gate. I hope we don’t need a passport or bill of passage.” Kazuya peers at the gate from our spot hiding in the bushes.

I cautiously check out the gate as well. Huh. For some reason, I can see things super clearly even when they’re far away. The gatekeeper is just inspecting people’s baggage and talking to them before letting them through. Nobody’s showing passports.

“It’s fine. It doesn’t look like they’re showing any passports or papers. He’s only checking their bags after chatting with them,” I tell Kazuya.

“What? You can see that? All the way over there?!”

“Yeah, it’s strange, but I can see really far.”

“You had good eyesight to begin with... Is this another skill?” Kazuya pulls a handful of clear jewels out of his pocket. “There’s also the issue of what we’re carrying.”

After I beat the owl-faced monster, we stumbled upon a few other little monsters. Sometimes, after we defeated them, they vanished and left crystals in their place. I say sometimes, because other times they just kept lying there...

My hand flies to my mouth to stop me from throwing up as I recall the gory sight of their bodies. I didn’t mind the monsters that looked like bugs, but the ones that looked humanoid were a bit gross for my liking.

They were all trying to hurt us, and I have to protect Kazuya, so I couldn’t just

let them go. But I've found that my punches are, well, a *bit* stronger in this world, and they all exploded and died when I hit them. It was hard to avoid being splashed with blood.

The teddy bear said monsters are above humans in the food chain, but that wasn't my experience with them. Maybe the monsters we've encountered so far happened to be weak?

"This stone is the only one that's different from the rest in size and color." Kazuya holds up the transparent yellow crystal the owl monster left behind. It's about as big as a 500-yen coin, whereas the other stones are as big as the tip of my little finger.

"You should take this just in case, Sakurako." Kazuya hands it to me. "We can probably exchange it for money, but it's so big that we probably shouldn't flash it around."

I put it in my skirt pocket.

Kazuya wraps the others back up in his handkerchief. "All right. That'll do. Let's go line up. I want to get into the town quick, since the sun might go down soon."

"Yeah. But does it matter that we don't know what the gatekeeper might ask us?"

"I'll come up with something," Kazuya says. "When we get near the front, we should be able to hear what the people ahead of us say and we can just mimic them. No problem."

Kazuya's so confident that I line up like he says. He's so reliable. Even before coming here, I always thought he's the kind of guy you can depend on.

Standing in line is all well and good, but I can feel people's eyes boring into me from all sides thanks to our clothes. Everyone else is wearing loose, simple clothes, while the two of us are in school uniforms. I smile and bear it as we shuffle along in the line until it's finally our turn. Kazuya said all I have to do is nod and he'll do the talking, but I'm worried.

"Hey, you two. Those are some outfits you've got there. Let's start with your names, okay?" the gatekeeper asks us.

“I’m Kazuya and this is Sakurako.”

“Kazuya and Sakurako? Your clothes are one thing, but your names are strange, too. Whereabouts are you from?” the gatekeeper asks while scribbling notes on a piece of paper.

Kazuya gives a bright smile, which is suspiciously out of character for him. “We come from a very faraway place, a small village called Sienna that’s deep in the mountains. I doubt you’ll have heard of it. It’s quite isolated, and this is the first time we’ve ever left.”

“Hmm, Sienna? First I’ve heard of it. What are you doing down here, then?”

“My sister’s getting married, so we came down to find a wedding present for her. This is a beautiful town. I bet we’ll find a gift my sister will love here,” Kazuya rambles, his smile so glorious I can almost see flowers blooming in the background behind him.

The gatekeeper’s chest swells with pride when Kazuya compliments the town. “Yes, this is the biggest town around these parts. So your sister’s getting married! Congratulations. And the woman behind you?”

“That’s Sakurako. She’s my fiancée—mph!”

I clamp my hand over Kazuya’s mouth. What is he doing?! “Stop, Kazuya! What are you saying?! I’m not your fiancée!” I turn to the gatekeeper and explain, while Kazuya groans in pain, “Um, we’re not engaged! We’re just childhood friends; we’re like brother and sister!”

The gatekeeper nods with a knowing smile. “Got it. Sure. It’s charming to see how well you two get along.”

*Excuse me?* He’s definitely got the wrong impression. I shrug it off and take my hand off Kazuya’s mouth.

“All right, mind giving me a look at what you’re carrying?” the gatekeeper asks.

Kazuya gives the guy puppy dog eyes, putting on an Oscar-winning performance. I never knew this side of him.

“The thing is, monsters attacked us on our way here, so we lost most of our



luggage. We managed to defeat some smaller ones and gather these, but this is all we have.” Kazuya takes the handkerchief out of his pocket and unfurls it to show the gatekeeper the jewels the small monsters dropped.

The gatekeeper’s brow furrows in sympathy at our pitiful tale.

Oh, no. Now I feel bad. We’re basically tricking him! *I’m so sorry!*

The kindly gatekeeper nods, his expression somber. “Is that so? It’s been quite hairy around these parts lately. Word down at the Guild is that there’s a B-class monster called an owl demon running around out there. Still, can’t complain when you make it out with your lives, right?”

“An owl demon, huh? Sounds dangerous,” Kazuya says, pretending not to know anything.

“Well, rest assured. If you take these magic jewels to the Guild, you should get enough gaul for a few days’ stay. As for the monster, the Guild’s recruiting folk to go deal with it, so I expect things will be right as rain in the woods again in a week or so.”

“Uh, okay. But we also need some gaul to buy a gift for my sister, so do you know of any good jobs?” Kazuya asks. “Her wedding’s not for a while, so we’re hoping to stay here in town until then.”

“You are? In that case, you could try the Adventurer’s Guild. Considering you managed to get this many magic stones even after getting attacked and losing your luggage, I’m sure you’ll be able to find a job through them.”

“Got it! Thanks for all your help! I’m so glad we got to meet someone as nice as you as soon as we got here!” Kazuya says cheerily.

“Don’t mention it! Go on, get in there! Welcome to the town of Rosettebern!” The nice gatekeeper lets us pass with a smile.

*Thank you, sir. No, really, thank you.* I shoot Kazuya a look.

His lips quirk up on one side in a cheeky lopsided smile, as if to say, *What did you expect?*

It’s not like we’ve snuck in here to do anything bad, but it feels like we’ve done something wrong when he smiles like that. As his big sister, I worry about

his future!



“SO apparently, we can exchange these stones we got at a place called the Adventurers’ Guild for money, and that money is called ‘gaul,’” Kazuya repeats what the gatekeeper said as we walk through town.

I join him in surveying our surroundings. The buildings look like they’re out of an old-fashioned European city. Of course, nothing is tall or glassy like a skyscraper. Some streets are cobblestoned, some aren’t, but there’s no asphalt anywhere.

Everything is screaming how different it is from Japan.

Kazuya asks a passerby where the Guild is and where we can find an inn. We head for the Guild first, since we need gaul to be able to get a room at the inn.

The Adventurers’ Guild is a huge building—three stories tall, which is rare in this town. There’s a bar-type restaurant next door, with brawny men drinking together on its terrace. They look like the kind of guys who do extreme sports. *Mm-hmm, they all look strong... My future husband might be here.*

N-no, what am I thinking about?! I don’t even have a boyfriend yet! I’m getting ahead of myself!

Kazuya strolls into the Guild without the slightest hesitation. There are several windows at the front counter, and he sidles up to the one that says “Exchange Magic Jewels.” Strangely enough, I can read it even though it’s not written in Japanese. Obviously, Kazuya can too. Is this what the teddy bear meant about us knowing the language?

“Excuse me, this is the first time we’ve come to this town, but, um... Can I ask you to exchange these magic jewels for gaul?” Kazuya’s tone goes all buttery again as he appeals to the receptionist.

She blushes as she accepts the stones. “Yes, you can exchange them here! Let’s see, three small, and one, two, three... Five fragments in total. And...no issues with their weight and comparative density,” she says, checking them by weighing them on a scale and seeing whether they float or sink in a jar of liquid. I guess nothing’s amiss, because she faces Kazuya with a smile. “Okay, then. It’s

worth 20,000 gaul total. Does that suit you?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Wonderful. Would you like to take it as two silver coins?”

Two silver coins? I make a mental note to remember that 20,000 gaul equals two silver coins, which means one silver coin is worth 10,000 gaul.

“Hmm. If it’s all right with you, I’d rather have one silver coin and get the balance in small change...” Kazuya’s meek puppy dog look makes the receptionist’s face turn red again.

My face flushes, too, because if I unclench my jaw, I’m going to burst out laughing. Kazuya’s acting so bizarrely, it’s hilarious!

*Yeouch! Owww!* I look down to see Kazuya stomping on my toe. He’s noticed me holding back a snicker.

*I’m sorry! But it’s funny!*

The receptionist is oblivious to the battle raging beneath the counter. Her blush doesn’t fade as she rummages through her counter drawer and places several coins on the countertop. “How about one silver, one half-silver, four copper, one half-copper, four iron, one half-iron, and five small iron? Or would you prefer one small iron and ten scrap iron, or ten iron?”

Ack, she just listed a whole bunch of different coins! How can I remember all of that? Let’s see, that one’s silver and that one’s copper... Um, I think I’ll leave money management to Kazuya. Yeah.

“The first option, please, but can you change one iron to ten scrap iron?” he asks.

“Certainly.” The receptionist sweeps back a small iron coin and replaces it with ten small dull-colored coins from her drawer. So that’s scrap iron? It does look scrappy.

“Thanks very much!” Kazuya says with a deviously sincere smile as he wraps the 20,000 gaul in the handkerchief. Oh, but that much money won’t fit in his pocket. We might need a coin purse.

“Oh?” The receptionist raises her eyebrows. “Don’t you have a leather

pouch?”

“No, I’m afraid we dropped it when monsters chased us on our way to town,” says Kazuya.

“Oh, dear! That sounds awful. Er, would you mind waiting a moment?” She stands and goes to a back room behind the counters, then returns carrying a small leather pouch. “Here, you’re welcome to this. Sometimes adventurers leave their bags with us when they’re exchanging items. I’d be happy to let you have it.”

“Wow! Thank you so much! To think, you’re not just beautiful, but you’re kind as well! I’m so happy we came to this town,” Kazuya exclaims.

“S-Stop, it’s not that big a deal!” The receptionist giggles, clearly over the moon.

I desperately bite back a giggle. Kazuya, c’mon, man...

How can he spew such corny lines?

“That reminds me, um, I’m also looking for a job. What do you think I should do? I’ve never been to a town as big as this before, so I’m not sure where to start,” he says.

“You could ask the receptionist at the quest counter in the bar right next to here.”

“I will! Excellent! Thank you so much, truly!”

“No, it’s my pleasure. Do come again!”

The receptionist waves enthusiastically, eyes on Kazuya. From the moment we walked in, I may as well have been invisible... Oh, well. All’s well that ends well.



“**DON’T** you want to go to the quest counter?” I ask when Kazuya heads away from the bar as soon as we exit the Guild building.

“Nah, I’m wiped out. My facial muscles are twitching from smiling so much, and I’m starving. We should go find an inn.”

I knew he was struggling to keep up that forced smile. But it's definitely why the receptionist gave us the leather pouch, so I'm grateful.

*Thanks for going above and beyond, Kazuya!*

Maybe it was a little funny, but what kind of big sister would I be if I laughed at Kazuya's hard work? I should thank him properly.

"Thank you, Kazuya. Plus, your smile was so, um... Yeah, I was like, 'Wow!' Um, how should I put it...? Excellent job! Yeah." I trip over my words. Then again, I can't put my finger on what it is I'm praising. Uh...

Next time I'll collect my thoughts before I start rambling. Embarrassed by my own confused sputtering, I look at the ground.

But Kazuya chuckles. "Well done. What a compliment."

When I look up he's grinning, which makes me smile, too. It's much better than that shady smile of his!

"Oh, but before we find an inn, we really stand out in what we're wearing, so let's check out a clothing store to get a sense of prices. And I'd like to get us a bag."

"Yeah, good call. Oh! That sign looks like it's for a clothing store."

The signboard of the store in front of us is advertising clothes. We head to the entrance where "Armor & Apparel" is written on the front door. We're hit with the scent of iron as soon as we enter. Armor plates line the walls. So this place sells clothes...and armor?

"Welcome! Are you looking for something in particular?" A middle-aged man approaches us from behind the counter. He must be the store owner.

Kazuya's fake smile makes another appearance. "Just some everyday clothes. Do you have that kind of thing?"

"You want everyday clothes?"

"Yes. We're from a distant village and, as you can see, we stick out like a sore thumb. So we'd like clothes that will help us fit in."

"Uh-huh. Right you are." The shopkeeper hums and hahs as he stares at our

clothes. Then his head snaps up. “In terms of everyday wear, do you need them to have defense power?”

Defense power...?

“That’d be nice, but we’re a bit low on gaul because we were attacked by monsters,” Kazuya says.

“Oh, that must’ve been a pain. Okay, in that case, I’m not sure I can offer you anything with defensive power. By the way, what’s your budget?”

“We’ve got about 15,000 gaul, but that needs to stretch to cover the cost of a few days’ lodging,” Kazuya explains.

The owner crinkles his nose. “Hmm, that’s cutting it close. Even clothes with minimum defensive power will set you back at least 10,000 gaul. And the going rate for accommodation around here is about 3,000-5,000 gaul a night. There are cheaper places, if you don’t mind being packed in like sardines, but that’s off the cards as long as you’ve got a young lady in tow.” He glances at me.

Does he think we can’t stay in a cheap, tightly packed hostel because of me? I don’t mind staying somewhere like that! “Kazuya, I’m fine w—”

Kazuya clamps a hand over my mouth. Blind to my bewilderment, he continues negotiating without missing a beat. “How much for clothes with no defensive power, then?”

“For you, say, 500 gaul.”

500 gaul?! What a price drop! Even Kazuya’s eyes widen a little.

“Gahaha! No, you see, I don’t sell regular clothes without power, so I’d be giving you my second-hand clothes, and my wife’s clothes for the young lady. If you don’t mind that, 500 gaul’ll be fine!”

Kazuya glances at me to check if I’m okay with second-hand clothes.

That’ll be fine for me! Of course, I don’t mind. I give a big nod.

Kazuya smiles at the shopkeeper. “That sounds great. Ring us up!”

“Fantastic! By the way, have you found an inn yet?”

“Not yet. We’re going to look after this.”

“If you like, you’re welcome to stay at my place. It’s just a normal home out the back of the shop, but my son moved out recently, so we’ve got a spare room.”

What?! Sure, we’d be extremely grateful, but why is he offering us that much? Kazuya seems thrown by the guy’s excessive generosity, too, and although his smile doesn’t falter, his brows knit into a knowing frown.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not offering to put you up for free. I’ll charge you for meals... Yeah, 300 gaul each per meal. And the other part of the deal is—I’d like to take a look at your clothes. The armor and gear with defense powers here are sourced from blacksmiths, but I make the clothes by hand. Like the robes. I’m what you’d call a tailor, and I’m curious about what sewing techniques have gone into your attire. I’m not asking you to give me the young lady’s dress, but if you’ll let me look over it, I’ll rent you my spare room. What say you?!” The shopkeeper looks me over with a twinkle in his eye that shows his passion for his craft. He doesn’t seem suspicious to me.

And it sounds like a great deal. “What do you think, Kazuya?”

Kazuya strokes his chin, pretending to think it over. “Do you mind if we take a stroll around the block to talk it over?”

“No problem! Go ahead! Take your time, I’ll be here! And even if you’re not keen on staying, the offer of second-hand clothes for 500 gaul still stands. Come let me know whenever you’ve reached a decision.” The shopkeeper lets us go without trying any pushy salesman tactics.

“What do you think?” I ask again when we’re alone outside. “I think we can trust him.”

“Me too. I agree, I think he’s trustworthy. And the conditions he mentioned suit us. It’s no skin off our nose whatsoever to let him look at how our clothes have been stitched together. I’m happy to accept his offer.”

“Cool. Shall we go back, then?” I ask.

“No, let’s check out prices at other shops and inns to double-check he was telling us accurate rates for stuff.”

Oooh. Leave it to Kazuya to be extra cautious. Measure twice and cut once!

That's how he got into the best high school in the city!

We wander around various shops, inquiring about prices for rooms and meals, and confirm that the shopkeeper was telling the truth. In fact, brand new normal everyday wear without any defense power tends to cost more than 2,000 gaul, so we know we're getting a good deal.



**WHEN** Kazuya and I return to the armor shop, the shopkeeper is over the moon that we accept his conditions. We introduce ourselves again, fully this time, and learn his name is Jabrin and his wife is Marie.

I waste no time changing into the simple, second-hand clothes we bought, which are like any other in town. I have a short-sleeved tunic-type of dress, and Kazuya has a long jacket over loose trousers. Jabrin invites us to gather around a table for dinner, which Marie has made.

"It's nothing fancy, but there's plenty of it! Dig in, and don't go easy on servings!" Jabrin says with a belly laugh. He's in a good mood.

"Hmph! What do you mean it's nothing fancy?" Marie cocks an eyebrow at him. She's spirited with an imposing voice.

Jabrin shrinks in his seat. "No! That's not what I meant, Marie! Your potato dishes are always incredible! Ha... Haha!" Flustered, he desperately tries to smooth things over.

But Marie doesn't seem like she was truly angry in the first place, and turns to us with a smile. "It's true it's only potatoes. I come from a family of farmers, and they send me what's about to spoil. I do my best every year to use them so none go to waste. But they should taste all right. Please help yourself. There's plenty for seconds."

"Thank you!" I say and dig into Marie's cooking. There's a creamy stew with bread and cheese, grilled sausage on a stick, and a huge bowl of steamed potatoes. It looks amazing... Come to think of it, Kazuya and I haven't eaten anything today.

I slurp a mouthful of the stew. Yep, it tastes as good as it looks! The potatoes in the stew are soft from simmering in milk. The base blends well with the other



ingredients, and I can tell its sweet aroma comes from the semolina in the mix.

*Huh? How do I know that?*

I cock my head, examining the food. When I take a bite of something else, same as before, I sense how the dish was made and what ingredients it contains. How weird. Somehow, I know exactly how to cook our meal, and info on ingredients I don't remember ever learning.

*Could this be a skill?*

Cooking is a hobby of mine. At first I just thought it'd make me more popular at school, and on the rare occasion, I'd share dishes I made with boys. They complimented me so much that I got carried away and expanded my repertoire to all sorts of dishes. I even tried my hand at French cuisine. I wonder if those experiences led to me having a useful skill in this world?

"What's up, Sakurako?" Kazuya looks worried because I stopped eating.

"Oh, nothing!" With a smile I shove the spoon in my mouth again. I'm not used to how having this skill feels, and I don't completely understand it, but it's not a bad thing. Not to mention how delicious the food is in this world! And it's important to ensure the food you eat is delicious!

I feel eyes upon me as I chew and look up to see Marie smiling.

"You must've been famished! You're so petite, but you're packing it away!"

*Wh-Whoops.* I guess I've eaten a heck of a lot. But it's delicious... N-No, I should stop. I've resolved to be a fragile princess-y girl in this world.

Oh, would you look at that? I accidentally took a bite of sausage... I subtly wipe my mouth with my hand and face Marie with a grin. "S-Sorry, it's just that it's really good."

"It's nothing to apologize for! Watching somebody enjoy my food makes me feel like it was worth making! Go on, don't hold back!"

"I won't, thank you." I glance at Kazuya, who stares back with a playful smile. I have a feeling he's going to tease me about this later.

Jabrin then asks a bunch of questions about our uniforms. We dodge giving detailed answers by saying an elderly craftsman in our village sewed them, so

we don't know anything about the specific techniques. Jabrin's especially interested in the zipper, and he keeps opening and closing it even while eating, until Marie scolds him.

After the fun dinner, me and Kazuya go to the bedroom which used to belong to their son. It's about 100 square feet and furnished simply with a bed in the center, empty shelves against the wall, and a chair.

"Well, there's only one bed. You can take it; I'll sleep on the floor." Kazuya pulls one of the blankets off the bed and spreads it on the floor, then lays on it.

"What?! That's not right! You take the bed. I can sleep anywhere. You might catch a cold. I've never caught a cold before, so I'll be fine. Also, I've fallen asleep in the dojo before, so I'm used to sleeping on hard floors."

"It's fine. I'll sleep here," he insists.

"But..." I'm at a loss for words. Kazuya's being surprisingly stubborn, but that's why we were even allowed to stay here tonight. I've been depending on him all day for almost everything. I'm sure he's tired, and I want him to sleep well tonight. So he should at least...

"Hey, Kazuya. In that case, wanna hop in bed with me?"

The bed's not that big, but the two of us will just fit. Kazuya's pretty slender and I don't sprawl out in my sleep. At least, I don't think I do. I'm asleep, so I can't say I don't with one hundred percent certainty, but sharing a bed shouldn't be that bad! Yeah, it's a good idea!

But Kazuya looks incredibly put out and looks at me like I'm an idiot. What did I do?

"Excuse me? Are you stupid?"

At long last he's making fun of me with his words, not just his eyes. So cheeky! And not just cheeky. There's a serious edge to his tone.

"I j-just figured that you've gone out of your way over and over again today, so wouldn't you rather sleep in a bed than on the floor?" I suggest, ignoring his frightening intensity.

Kazuya's glare grows even sharper. He stands and approaches me where I sit

on the bed, then puts his hands on either side of me, pinning me—trapping me.

He brings his face directly in front of mine. Whoa. He's really close.

"Sakurako. Do you realize what you're asking by offering that?"

What? What else am I asking? I frown quizzically. "I just want you to be able to rest in a bed, that's all."

All I've done is explain what I meant leading up to when he snapped. I don't know what conversation Kazuya was having, because when I tilt my head in confusion, he lets out a big sigh and lies back on the floor.

"What's wrong?"

He pauses, then says, "Nothing. Forget it, let's go to sleep already. Me on the floor, you in the bed. If you keep talking nonsense, I'm going to go outside and sleep on the bare ground!"

He's acting a bit deranged, so even if this arrangement doesn't make any sense to me, I nod and lie back on the bed to appease him. Yikes. I wonder what his problem is?

I gingerly sneak a peek at him. Even in the dim red candlelight, I can tell his face is red.

Wait, is he embarrassed? I'm like an older sister to him, so of course he wouldn't want to share a bed with me. But c'mon, when we were little, we used to take baths together, so I figured this would be the same...

Now that I think of it, Kazuya's also at a difficult age. I didn't realize he was in his rebellious phase. Aw, that's precious.

"Kazuya, I'm sorry, my bad. I should've phrased it more sensitively. I'll be more careful next time. But even if you're in a rebellious phase, whatever you do, just don't get dragged into anything illegal. Promise me, okay?"

Kazuya turns his head to shoot me another exasperated glare.

Huh? I thought his face was red just now. Did I imagine it? Maybe it only looked that way because of the candlelight.

"Sakurako, if you say anything else, I'm outta here."

Whoops, okay, sorry. All I'm doing is making him angrier. But I only apologized! Why's he being so cold?

I nod obediently and lie back down. I don't understand boys in their mid-teens. When I get a boyfriend, I'll ask him how you're supposed to deal with boys when they're at that age. With renewed determination to get a boyfriend, I drift off to sleep.



**"WHERE** are you headed off to today?" Jabrin calls out while we're getting ready to leave the following morning.

Kazuya gives his usual crowd-pleasing smile. "We're thinking of going to the Adventurer's Guild to look for employment."

"Oooh, the Adventurer's Guild! Going to be adventurers, are you? Before I met Marie, I used to go adventuring to collect materials to make robes! But you don't look that physically strong to me, so what role would you take?"

"Role?" I turned my head toward them, repeating this word that doesn't seem to fit their conversation.

"Don't you know what a role is? You really are from deep in the sticks. A role is basically your job. Adventurers form parties so they can tackle monsters. Within a party, there are different roles. Like swordsman, warrior, shielder, merchant, appraiser, hunter, apothecary, mage, and healer. That last class includes dancers, bards, and rare roles such as cook."

Wow. So everyone works together in different roles to defeat strong monsters! And he used the word "mage." Mage, meaning there's magic! It's the fantasy genre come to life! The teddy bear God mentioned something like that. Magic... That piqued my interest.

"There're so many roles. How do I pick what's best for me?" I ask.

"Pick one that matches your natural skills. When you join a party, they won't just ask for your role. They'll make you prove your skills as well, given lives will be at stake if you're lying. So you ought to choose something that honestly suits you."

“Pick a role that matches my skills...” This is kinda complicated. I don’t even know what I’m good at, or what skills are best for which role.

Beside me, Kazuya stares at the floor as if deep in thought.

“Don’t look so worried, my dear! You don’t have to figure that out on your own! Accurate assessments are done by the temple, and they cost a lot of money, so most adventurers don’t have a real thorough grasp of their skills,” Jabrin says. “That reminds me. There should be a book somewhere around here from my adventuring days, called the Adventurer’s Handbook. It might help you settle on a suitable job. Just a tick...”

Jabrin rummages through shelves in a back room, and produces a slim book. “Found it! Here it is.”

It’s like a picture book, full of colorful illustrations, with the title *Adventurers Handbook for Beginners* emblazoned on the cover.

“Give this a once over before you head to the Guild, and try to pick a general direction.” Having said that, Jabrin goes down to his store, leaving me and Kazuya on our own in the bedroom.

“He’s gone. He left us alone here even though he doesn’t know us that well... Guess he’s not very careful. Well, I suppose that means he trusts us,” Kazuya says in amazement, looking slightly happy as he flicks through the book Jabrin gave us.

I look over Kazuya’s shoulder. What does it say?

“The Ins and Outs of Adventuring”

“Adventurers are Always One Step Away from Danger”

“Bonds between Friends are Vital”

After the chapter list, it goes on to describe roles and skills like the ones Jabrin mentioned. We flip through a few pages and find one with a career aptitude test in the form of a flowchart, which says: “*If you’re lost as to which role suits you, take this quiz to find out fast!*”

“I guess you find quizzes like this in every world,” Kazuya murmurs with raised

eyebrows, placing his finger on the first question.

*“Are you confident in your strength?”*

*Can you use magic to attack?*

*Are you good with your hands?*

*Are you confident in your speed?*

*Can you use a sword?*

*Do you have good eyesight?*

*Can you use a bow?”*

And so on. Kazuya traces his finger down various lines, answering questions until he reaches...

“Look what this says,” I say. “‘If you’re clever and nimble, you’re perfect for work that requires great focus! The best roles for you are locksmith, assassin, merchant, and appraiser! Your specialty is assisting your party! Why not try using the beginner-level magic to test the skills listed on each of those job pages?’ ...Huh. It’s kinda cheesy.”

“Shuddup,” Kazuya replies, then looks up and passes me the book. “You want to do it?”

“Yeah! I love quizzes!”

“I know.”

I take the book and put my finger on the starting question. “First off, ‘Are you confident in your strength’... Nope, not at all.”

“Hold on,” Kazuya interrupts immediately, incredulous.

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t ‘what’s wrong’ me when you’re the one being weird.”

“No, Kazuya, have you forgotten? I’m dainty in this world!”

“Were you serious about that?”

“Yeah! Totally! I’m weak and fragile, and I’ve got to land a handsome brother-in-law for you!”

“You’re killing me here.” Kazuya heaves a sigh as a scowl clouds his face.  
“Ugh, whatever. Just finish the quiz.”

“Okay!” I go back to where I left off and trace the flowchart.

Can I use magic to attack? In my mind, magic is pretty, so let’s just say yeah, I can use it. Next... I can’t use a sword, and I’m not confident in my physical stamina... Okay. “Finished! This is the perfect job for a delicate girl!”

“It’s not perfect for you, though. It’s just your ideal job. What’d you get?”

“Mage!” I answer with a smug grin.







Kazuya wilts in disappointment. “Sure. Good for you. All right, then. Let’s turn to the profile pages for each role.”

He flicks to the pages, indifferent to my glee.

*“Are you giving up on adventuring because you lack strength and stamina? Don’t worry, you have magic! Magi are the cornerstone of a party’s ability to attack!”*

Oooh, I can use my mind to do magic! This is so exciting!

Kazuya points to the bottom of the page. “These sentences here are a spell. Apparently, it’s a copyright-free spell for beginners. ‘If flames shoot out of your fingertip when you read it, you’ll be able to join the ranks of wondrous mages...’ Wow, magic spells have *copyrights*.”

“Flames out of my fingertip? That’s awesome! Like a magic trick! Okay, I’ll try it.” I take a deep breath to still my nervousness, then say... ““Nothing beats a flash of inspiration!””

Nothing happens.

““Nothing beats a flash of inspiration!”” I’ve said it twice now, but there’s still no flame. *Um... I don’t think this is how it’s supposed to go. Aw, this is meant to be my one true role.*

“Doesn’t look like it works for you, but you don’t need to look so down. Even if you can’t use fire magic, you might be able to use magic of a different attribute— Hey, what are you doing?” Kazuya yelps.

I rub my thumb tip to my fingertips really fast. The goal of the spell is only to make a spark light up, so as long as I rub my fingers really fast to create friction, I’ll make fire easy.

*Rub-rub-rub-rub-rub— See? Smoke!*

“Stop it! It’s not even magic at this point, it’s just physics!” Kazuya grabs my hand.

I have to stop rubbing my fingers so I don’t burn him. “But I wanna use magic...” I whine.

“And I’m telling you there are different kinds of magic other than fire magic. Like water and wind, see? But don’t get your hopes up. The teddy bear said we’d get plenty of skills, but they’re based on our experience. So it might be tough for us to use magic, since we didn’t have it in our original world.”

That makes sense. I’m pretty pessimistic when I try casting the other copyright-free magic spells written in the book. In the end, none of the beginner magic works for either me or Kazuya, meaning neither of us has the aptitude to become a mage. What a shame.

Kazuya gives a troubled smile at seeing me so depressed. “It’s not that big a deal. You fit plenty of other roles with your current skills, like *warrior*.”

“No, not warrior. I’m dainty,” I insist.

“Yeah, yeah.” Kazuya flips through the book to a certain page, then shows it to me.

“Cook...?”

“Yeah, you’ve always been an excellent cook. Want to give it a go?”

“Now that you mention it... Yesterday when we were eating Marie’s cooking, something strange happened. I don’t know how, but I knew about ingredients I’ve never had before, and it only took me one mouthful to know for sure what was in each dish.”

“I knew it! You’ve got a cooking skill. Look, it’s written here. It’s permanently activated, meaning you don’t need to say any spells to make it work.”

I look at the book. It’s true, it describes what I felt when I was eating dinner yesterday evening.

A cook. That might be good. I love cooking, and above all, I’m sure that the guys in this world also love girls who can cook! But do adventuring parties actually need cooks? I glance back up the page to the heading summary.

*“Cooks act in a support role to ensure their party maintains perfect health! Plus, if you hone your cooking skills, you’ll be able to create dishes with mysterious effects!”*

Oh, okay. I guess if you’re a highly skilled cook, you can make dishes that will

increase people's physical strength and attack power. That's way better than I thought.

"Sakurako, look here. There's a magic spell for cooks. Try casting it."

"Oh! There is! It says that if you say this, you'll be able to sense information on ingredients. I wonder what that means. Lemme give it a try... 'Sizzle sizzle, bubble bubble, tap, tap, tap.'" I repeat the spell twice. It doesn't sound much like a magic spell...

Suddenly, a mysterious voice speaks in my head.

*"The Adventurer's Handbook for Beginners is not edible,"* it says, and I notice my hand holding the book is glowing faintly. *What? Is this magic?*

"Kazuya! It's working! A voice told me this book is not edible!" Overjoyed by my first inkling of magic, I grab Kazuya's shoulder.

He smiles happily. "It's working? That's great. Then, are you happy to be a cook?"

"Yeah! I'll do it! Hey, what role did the flowchart give you?"

"It said to try something like locksmith or appraiser. I'll have a look." Kazuya turns to the page about locksmiths.

It tells us that locksmiths specialize in disarming traps and unlocking hidden treasure chests in dungeons. They are in high demand, as they are indispensable to parties. At the end, there's a sentence that is a beginner-level spell for perception.

"If you find that your skill activates upon reading this incantation, you'll have no problem working as a locksmith," Kazuya reads. "Okay, here goes. 'Until it's been revealed, the possibilities are endless.' It's kinda embarrassing to say out loud."

"Kazuya, your hands are glowing!"

"Oh. I guess the spell works for me."

"Wow! You can use magic?! Awesome!" I exclaim. "How does it feel?"

"I heard a voice in my head say, 'This book—*The Adventurer's Handbook for*

*Beginners*—was published 40 years ago. It shows signs of wear. If you choose to sell it at a bookstore, it will fetch 3,000 gaul.’”

Are you kidding me?! That’s incredible! It’s not exactly worthwhile information for us right now, and I don’t know how this skill will help fight monsters, but wow!

“What else? Is there anything else listed?” I shake Kazuya to hurry him up.

He scans the page, smiling. “This is the only spell on the locksmith page, but there’s a sort of supplementary description... ‘As well as the temporarily active skill of magic, those who are suited to be locksmiths have permanently activated skills of moving with stealth, lockpicking, and auditory concentration.’ In other words, aside from casting spells to conjure up magic, locksmiths have technical skills, too.”

“Wait a minute, I wanna cast perception magic too! Let me try. ‘Until it’s been revealed, the possibilities are endless.’”

Nothing happens.

“Doesn’t look like it suits you,” he says. “Let’s look at other pages... The appraiser’s page lists perception magic, too. So does the merchant’s page. Oh, but the spells are different. Actually, wouldn’t it be faster to read the list of spells at the back to see what we can cast or not?”

We skip to an index of spells at the end of the book and figure out which ones work for us and which don’t. There are only about ten of them. Apparently, spells are often kept secret and handed down in families, or you can pay to learn them from their creator. The beginner spells in the book, however, have been around so long that it’s fine if anyone learns them. In other words, their copyright has lapsed.

I try them all, but unfortunately, only the one for cooks works for me. Maybe it’s lucky I can even use that one.

Kazuya, on the other hand, can cast perception of objects, map creation, monster identification, and storage magic. The map creation one is fantastic. It makes a map appear in your hand with info about the surrounding area. Monster identification’s cool, too. According to the book, there are two types of

monsters—those that turn into magic crystals when they die, and those that turn into corpses. A sidebar says that monsters that turn into crystals spawn naturally, whereas ones that turn into corpses are their offspring. Naturally spawning monsters... Weird.

Storage magic is also super convenient because it allows for more space inside bags.

“Well, we now know magic, more or less,” Kazuya says. “I’m curious about the precise nature of my skills, even if it costs money to find out. But for the time being, I’ll stick to the role of merchant. The other jobs require a lot more skills, like picking and stealth.”

“And I’m a cook!” I giggle. “Hey, the book says I need to be equipped with cooking utensils, like frypans.” Right. If we go on an adventure, I’ll need gear so I can cook out in the wild.

“Let’s go shopping for some on our way home from the Guild,” he suggests.

“Yeah! Okay, if we’re all set job-wise, let’s head there now! Let’s go join the Adventurer’s Guild!”

We let Jabrin know that we’ve chosen jobs, and make for the Guild without further ado.

## Chapter 2: Too Strong, But My Heart Throbs at a Fateful Encounter

**BEFORE** we go into the same Guild building as yesterday, we peek into the bar next door. There's a fair amount of people, but fewer than yesterday. No doubt, adventurers are out working during the day. Still, it's lunchtime, so there are some people eating here and there...and a few day-drinking.

But everything being served here looks tasty. It's been a while since breakfast and we haven't had lunch yet. I'm hungry.

"Shall we grab lunch? You look like you're barely coping."

"I do not!"

Typical Kazuya, so rudely pointing that out. I'm not a glutton, and I don't look like I'm starving! At least, I don't think I do! But I *am* hungry, so I swallow my pride and follow Kazuya to a table. A waitress soon comes to take our order.

Kazuya takes a coin from our leather pouch and gives it to her, flashing a perfect smile full of sparkling teeth. "Is this enough for food and drinks for two?"

The blushing waitress takes the coins with care and nods over and over. "S-sure!" Then she patters to the counter with a cute bounce in her step.

*Kazuya...*

Why does he hit everyone and their mother with that shady smile? My lip curls.

He notices. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"N-no reason." I shake my head and change the topic. "After we eat, should we head to the quest window?"

"Yeah, that was the plan, but it may be hard for the two of us to take on a quest alone. I'm a merchant and you're a cook. Neither of us are fighters.

Besides which, we still lack a lot of basic knowledge about this world and monsters, so we shouldn't go off on our own."

"You're right," I agree. "It'll be tough with just you and me, when I'm so dainty."

"Yeah, yeah. I heard you. Also, Jabrin said that adventurers usually operate in groups. We should probably join a party until we're more used to things."

"Uh-huh." Yeah, a party, where everyone works together to achieve something! Martial arts are essentially solo sports, so I've always admired teams. I'm ecstatic to have the chance to join one. And maybe my soul mate will be a member of said party...

"Thank you for waiting! Here's your food." The waitress sets down two gigantic plates of meat and some sort of salad. There's bread and soup, too. The servings are so generously portioned that they could easily satisfy four people.

"Do we get all this for just that much gaul?" Kazuya smiles brightly.

"Yes!" The waitress blushes. "And a little extra from me! Ha ha."

"Thanks."

"N-no problem! Come again sometime, won't you?" She skips away.

Kazuya's smile is frozen for a moment, then relaxes into his usual neutral expression.

*Really, Kazuya, what's with the 180-degree change in attitude?*

...Fine, I get why he does it, and it's okay, really. It just doesn't sit right with me.

"It's weird to get *this* much extra food. I know I'm good-looking, but this is a bit much, and she's overdoing the blushing." Kazuya frowns.

He didn't even hesitate to call himself good-looking. I think he's handsome, too. Everyone in our neighborhood used to say he was. But is it cool to say it about yourself?

"Maybe it's another skill of mine. The book said some skills are permanently activated. When we ran into that large monster and you put a hole in its body—



that might be another skill you have.”

“Yeah, speaking of that, it’s easier than normal to prime myself for a hit. And I can see things far away, don’t get tired, and feel light on my feet.”

“Aha. Maybe we have more skills than we thought. I wonder how much it costs to get our skills assessed at a temple... Well, for now, let’s eat.”

When Kazuya gives the go-ahead, my mouth opens reflexively. I mean, I’m hungry, surrounded by food, and it looks amazing! We load up our smaller plates from the shareable platters in front of us and dig in.

Mmm, this chicken’s been roasted with herbs to make it fragrant. They’ve sprinkled Quesella oil evenly on the meat to add flavor, then roasted it to bring out this aroma... Oh, more things I shouldn’t know just popped into my head. Skills are weird. I keep eating, analyzing the food as I go.

Kazuya says he’s full after eating a normal-sized serving and sits back in his chair. He’s a light eater.

What? But there’s so much left. Am I allowed to finish it all?

“Can you make it through the rest?” Kazuya asks.

“Yeah! No worries! Leave it to me!” I enthusiastically pull the platter toward me. *Yay, I get to eat all this good food!* I dive into what’s left without hesitation.

Kazuya looks around, taking in the room. He points to a wall at the back of the bar. It’s covered in posters, and he abruptly asks, “Sakurako, can you read what’s written on the wall over there?”

There are a lot of people milling around one poster in particular.

“Uhhh... They’re standing in front of a notice for a quest. I can’t see the details because of the crowd.” I go to stand up, but he stops me.

“So it’s just a job advertisement? I’ll go take a look; you stay here and finish eating.”

“Aw, I wanna come too.”

“No, you’re busy. I’m just going to take a peek. Be a good girl and wait here.”

Ha! What’s with that turn of phrase? He’s treating me like a child, when I’m

like his big sister! But he's right—we shouldn't leave the table unattended while there's still food left.

"All right. Take care, okay?"

"Yeah," he replies lightly and heads over to the wall.

Well then, without further ado, better eat up! I munch in silence until I get the feeling someone's approaching. I turn to see a pair of middle-aged men with beards coming over to me.

They grin broadly when they catch my eye. "Yo, missy, are you by yourself?"

I am right now, I suppose. But maybe I should say I'm with someone since Kazuya is here. "Um, I—"

"This is the Adventurer's Guild, you know? It's no place for a young lady wearing plain cloth clothes."

"Are they against the dress code?" Uh-oh. We didn't expect there'd be a dress code.

"That's cute! You're so naïve. Say, wanna join our party? We'll teach you all kinds of things."

Oh my God! Did he just call me 'cute'?! Woohoo! Is he for real? Actually, wait. He said 'party'. Kazuya said we should join a party. Maybe I should hear this guy out—

Out of the blue, he puts his hand around my shoulder.

*Whoa, whoa, whoa! Don't invade my personal space!*

He's too close! And he reeks of alcohol. "C-could you please let go of me?" I try to wriggle out of his hold, when it occurs to me he might be trying to pick me up. *What? No way. Wow! I've never been hit on before!* All I had to do was come to another world, and a guy immediately hits on me!

I give his face a once-over. Besides the smell of booze, his teeth are yellow, he's quite a bit older than me, and he has a lot of stubble. To be honest, he's kinda ugly. But it's what's inside that's important!

He went out of his way to tell me that I'm not wearing appropriate attire for a

place like this, so he must be caring. And he said he'd teach me a lot of things and called me cute, so his face aside, he could well be a wonderful person!

But before we talk anymore, I need to call Kazuya back over. If this guy's going to tell me about his party, Kazuya will need to hear it, too.

"Uh, actually, I'm with someone. Can we talk when he comes back—"

*Huh?!*

I'm so stunned. This guy, who's casually coming on to me, is trailing his hand over my chest. So wait, this isn't a pick-up? He's just a molester? *What. A. Bastard.*

A second ago, I was excited at being hit on for the first time ever, and now it turns out he's a molester? That's so cruel.

I slowly, but firmly, put my hand on the bastard's shoulder and push him away from me.

"Hey, what? You... You're strong!" The pervert looks shocked. When he tries to bolt after realizing the sheer difference in our power, I tighten my grip on his arm. I'm not letting him go. I'll never forgive him for trampling on my innocence!

Suddenly, another person grabs the molester's arm, their hand near mine. It's a guy. He glares at the molester and says, "Aren't you ashamed to lay your hands on such a defenseless girl?"





His gaze is fixed on the pervert's terrified face, so I don't think he's aware that I'm gripping the perv's arm with so much force that his bones are creaking. But my white-hot fury and urge to destroy the bastard quickly subsides.

Because this guy, this guy right next to me, is blisteringly hot! He's blond, tanned, and his beautiful ice-blue eyes look pretty grim while he's glaring at the molester, but I can still tell his face is well-proportioned and handsome. Even though he's slender, his muscles are toned and his pecs are perfect. And most of all, he called me a 'defenseless girl'!

When I let go of the molester's arm, the handsome blond twists his grip harder and steps forward as if to protect me.

"Oi, damn it! That hurts! What are you doing?! Coming out of nowhere?! And hey, this woman's not defenseless!" the pervert protests.

So rude. Just being a molester is rude, but his words are beyond rude, too. He's the ultimate gross bad guy.

My hot rescuer doesn't bat an eye at the molester's lies, and releases him so curtly that the molester falls on his butt.

"You scoundrel! How dare you! Why don't you face me?" The molester's friend steps forward, but as soon as he sees the hot guy's face, he pales and freezes in place. "It's you? The Gold Lion?!"

'Gold Lion'?

"I think you should leave before you get hurt," the hot guy warns them.

The two losers look at each other, then scurry off, yelping "We're sorry!"

*What? Why'd they react like that? Is the hot guy famous or something? Yeah, he's so cool, he has to be famous. Maybe he's an idol? If he is, I should get his autograph. Wait, no, I mean, yes, an autograph would be great, but right now I need to thank him!*

"Excuse me! Thank you so much!"

"Please, don't thank me. I couldn't sit idly by and watch. Don't worry about it..." The moment the hot guy turns to me, his eyes widen, and his face goes red.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” I ask, curious at the sudden change. His face is bright red!

“Oh! Uh, um, nothing. I’m fine.” He shakes his head. He doesn’t look fine to me, but regardless, he recovers enough to ask, “Anyway, are you all right? You’re not hurt?” When he was angry, he seemed more mature, but now that he has a boyish smile on, he seems more youthful and awkward. Maybe one year older than me? Or close to my age, at least.

And he’s so hot. I bet he really is an idol! I need to get his autograph! I wanna shake his hand! “Yes! I’m fine.”

“A young lady like you shouldn’t be alone somewhere like this. Bad things can happen at the Guild.”

“Oh, um, I’m not alone.”

“Sakurako! What happened?!” Just as I’m about to point out that I’m with someone, Kazuya rushes up, flustered. Glancing around, I see that the ruckus has drawn a lot of attention. Whoops. All eyes are on us.

For some reason, Kazuya shoves himself between me and the blond and stares him down. Oh, no. Does Kazuya think the idol’s a baddie?!

*Down, boy!*

He’s just a very kind, hot idol! “Kazuya, hey! You’ve got it wrong. He saved me from a drunk.”

“What drunk?” Kazuya turns to me.

The hot guy cuts in. “...Good. You have someone with you.”

“Yes, um, but thank you so much! For helping me.” And for calling me a defenseless girl!

“It was my pleasure. If you don’t mind, may I ask your name? I’m Luke. I’m an adventurer with the Evenfall Lions party.”

Oooh, his name is Luke! And he’s an adventurer, so probably not an idol. Makes sense. If there are no TVs, how could there be idols? He was just so cool that I got mixed up. Now that I know he’s not famous, I feel more at ease and can look him in the eye again.

“I’m Sakurako! I’m an adventurer, too. Although I haven’t been on an adventure yet.”

“You are?! You’re an adventurer? Does that mean you are, too?” Luke turns to Kazuya.

Kazuya has been watching us warily this whole time. “Yeah, what’s it to you?”

*Aw. I wish he wouldn’t come off scary like that.*

Luckily, Luke brushes it off and looks at our outfits without judgment. “But your clothes are cloth, aren’t they?” Actually, no, he looks slightly worried. “Won’t it be hard to go out on an adventure dressed like that?”

“We won’t set out like this. Not that it’s got anything to do with you.”

“Kazuya! Don’t be like that!”

Kazuya looks down at me, seriously grumpy. He’s freaking me out!

“What’s all this, then? Luke! What are you up to?” Lo and behold, a flushed woman with a huge chest and a flagon in one hand drapes herself over Luke from behind.

Both me and Kazuya reel in surprise. You would, too. Because she’s wearing nothing but a bra and panties—no, a bikini? Lord knows why, but she’s in a bikini! With nothing but a black cape over the top?!

Her blond hair is luxuriously long and curly, and her eyes are a clear, pale purple like amethyst crystals. She’s a stunner.

And her big breasts are pressed against Luke!

“Nothing much. I just helped this girl who was being harassed by some ruffians, and it turns out she’s an adventurer, too.”

“Is she, now? And then what, you fell like a sack of bricks for her? That’s our Luke!”

“Don’t tease me! Ugh, you stink of booze!” Luke tries to shake her off, but she doesn’t budge.

She looks us up and down and smiles. “Well, well. Aren’t you two as cute as buttons! Tell me, what’re your jobs?”



“Um, I’m a cook. And Kazuya’s a merchant.” I answer for Kazuya, who’s still in shock at the sight of the bikini-clad woman. Her smile widens. She disentangles herself from Luke and steps closer to us.

Wow. Yep, it’s a bikini, all right. That’s all she’s wearing. A cape over a bikini.

“Perfect! Why don’t you join our party? We’re called the Evenfall Lions. We’ll teach you how to adventure. Leave. It. To. Us!” she says with a suggestive wink.



**JUST** like that, a beautiful woman invites us to a party, but Kazuya refuses. I absolutely wanna join them (and Luke! The hot guy!), so I beg and plead with Kazuya until he caves and lets us join the Evenfall Lions on a trial basis.

*Bless you, Kazuya. Thank you for indulging me.*

The beautiful woman introduces herself as Leila. There are more people in their party, but we’ll meet them tomorrow. For now we take our leave of Luke and Leila.

Kazuya is still grumpy while we walk around town, take in the area, buy a bag, and finally return to our room at Jabrin and Marie’s. I recount the day’s happenings to them over dinner.

They both look rather surprised.

“Goodness, really?” Jabrin says. “The Evenfall Lions are an A-ranked adventurer party that only came to town recently!”

“A-ranked?”

“That means they can defeat A-ranked monsters. In other words, they’re strong. You kids have luck on your side! What a windfall, joining a party as good as theirs!”

“They’re that incredible? You know, the guy—his name was Luke—was really cool.” I blush just remembering his smile.

“Luke? The Gold Lion?” Jabrin leans forward.

I nod. “Oh, yeah. They did call him that. Is he famous?”

“He’s one of the strongest swordsmen around. But he’s so strong that he

breaks every sword he uses as soon as he swings them. There's a rumor that he's trying to track down a powerful holy sword. Not bad, eh? I personally think he might be the chosen hero."

"Is that holy sword only for the chosen hero?" Kazuya asks in surprise.

Jabrin nods. "Yeah. I've also heard rumors that the Demon King—he's been quiet for years—might make a move soon. If you join the Evenfall Lions, you might get sent to take him on."

"The Demon King..." Me and Kazuya exchange a glance. That's a term we've only heard in fantasy stories. So it's real in this world?

Jabrin tells us about a hero who defeated the demon king twenty years ago, and some signs that show he might resurrect soon. For me, the tale is too out there. The idea that it's real is hard to believe. But Jabrin is serious, so maybe it's true. After all, there are monsters here. Maybe it's natural for there to be a Demon King.

After dinner, Kazuya and I go to our room. Kazuya insists on sleeping on the floor again, so I sit on the bed while he sits on the floor, packing the bag we bought today with things we might need tomorrow. I watch him absently, thinking back over the day. He really didn't want to join the Golden Lions' party. In the end, he only buckled because me and Leila put pressure on him.

"Kazuya, thanks for today. For joining the Evenfall Lions with me."

"Yeah... Well, it's a good deal. Jabrin's a former adventurer. After hearing what he said, I was just thinking that it'll be good to build up experience with a strong party."

"What? You think so? Then why didn't you want to join them earlier?"

"Because I didn't like Luke."

"Whaaat?! Why not? He's such a nice guy! He helped me out, too."

"...That's why I don't like him that much."

What does that even mean? How can you not like someone because they're nice?

I know Kazuya has a dark streak, but that's a twisted way to think about

people. I'm worried about his relationships.

"Kazuya, do you have friends?" I ask a simple question. The moment I do, he glares. Yikes. Adolescent boys are scary.

*Oh, well. I'll try again.* "C-come to think of it, don't you think Luke looks a bit like Tsuyoshi, that college student at my dojo? Y'know, the one with a mole just below his eye?"

"Does he? That reminds me, you said once that Tsuyoshi was cool. Is that your type?"

"Huh? M-my type?! No. I just think they're cool..." Remembering Luke's face, my cheeks heat up again.

Kazuya sighs. "You'd be better off not bothering with him."

"What? Why?"

"Granted, he's not bad looking. Compared to me, he's okay, I guess."

Oh no, he's back to talking about how hot he himself is.

"But remember Leila? Think about it. No normal guy would be calm when a girl in their party goes around flaunting themselves in a bikini all the time. No way."

True. I was curious about that, too. Leila's obviously big on skinship and was more or less pressing her big breasts against Luke. Fine, more rather than less. The most, even. But Luke didn't bat an eyelid. "I dunno, maybe it's normal for people in this world to wear bikinis?"

"No freakin' way. I haven't seen anyone else in them. And the fact Luke was so blasé about it means he's definitely a player. Anyone else would be tripping over themselves."

"R-really? Maybe it's weird at first, but once you get used to it..." Luke was being so cool about it...

"You're still not convinced?" Kazuya asks, exasperated, seeing right through my excuses to my impure motives.

"S-so what?" I ask timidly.

Kazuya sighs softly and squares his shoulders. “You say you want a boyfriend so badly, but you already have a guy who fits the bill in arm’s reach.”

*What?! E-easy, Kazuya!*

Someone nice waiting in the wings? I can’t do that! No!

“Absolutely not! Jabrin’s married to Marie already! They even have a kid together! I could never be a homewrecker!” I spell out the obvious issues to Kazuya, dead serious.

Kazuya draws back in surprise.

*Geez, he has unconventional views on romance. Well, he does like men, so it fits that he has different views about love in many ways, but c’mon, Jabrin has a wife and kid!*

Kazuya’s head drops in resignation. Good. Does that mean we’re on the same page now?

“I’m done. Go to sleep.” He wraps a blanket around him and flops down on the floor.

*Excuse me? It’s rude to turn your back in the middle of a conversation.*

I say his name several times, but he doesn’t answer.



**WE** get up early in the morning to meet with Luke at the Guild. Because it’s so early, there aren’t many people inside the building, but there are a few drunk men and women loitering around outside. Maybe the Guild is open twenty-four hours a day.

Leila, Luke, and two other people we don’t know are already seated at a round table toward the back of the Guild. *Uh oh. Are we late?! I hustle to the table.*

Leila sees me coming and waves at me happily. “Sakurako! Over here!”

“Right, sorry! Have you been waiting long?”

“No, you’re right on time! I’m so happy you came!” Leila jumps up and throws her arms around me. I catch a whiff of alcohol and feel the heaviness of her

ample chest squishing against my face. Um, I know we're both female, but it's still a bit embarrassing. I've never had my face buried in somebody's boobs before!

Is Leila the type of woman who's touchy-feely with everyone? Does she do this to Luke, too? Kazuya said he's probably a player, so I wonder.

An unfamiliar voice next to us interrupts my mild panicking.

"Best leave her be. She'll suffocate."

Released from Leila's chest, I see a man with a superb mustache. He has a huge shield strapped to his back and is pretty enormous himself.

I sneak a glance up at Leila. Man, are they big!

"Oh, no! So sorry! Did I hurt you? I was too excited and got carried away."

"Um, I'm fine!"

A skinny man, about 30 years old, pokes his head around from behind her with a warm smile. "So this is the girl Luke was talking about yesterday. Pretty cute. Luke's got surprisingly niche taste." His smile turns devious as he elbows Luke in the ribs.

"Wh— Ganzi! Don't make implications like that! Or grin like that!"

*What?! Luke was talking about me? What did he say? Something good? Or something bad?!*

"D-did you say something bad about me?"

"N-no!" Luke stammers. "Um, it's true I was talking about you, but no. Nothing bad... I wasn't being derisive or anything."

He's so desperately flustered that I freeze in surprise. I'm glad he wasn't complaining about me, but it's suspicious that he's this tongue-tied trying to explain it.

"Shall we get on with the introductions?" Kazuya cuts in grumpily.

"Y-yeah. Let's do that!" Luke says, and we turn our attention to the rest of the group.

"I'll start. I'm Leila, a mage and the leader of the Evenfall Lions! Call me Leila,

or just call me for dinner!” Leila’s smile is so radiant it even makes me, a fellow girl, weak in the knees. And she’s a mage! Awesome!

She catches me gazing at her in awe and winks at me. Damn, she’s cool!

“I’m Molozov, a shielder. Nice to meet you,” the big guy introduces himself stiffly. A shielder, huh? I remember the section on shielders in the Adventurer’s Handbook. Their role is to provide support by intercepting attacks that would hit their comrades. With his barrel chest and limbs like tree trunks, he definitely seems tough enough for that job.

“I’m Ganzi, a locksmith. It’s a pleasure!” The skinny man from before greets us with a cheerful wave.







“This is our current line-up. We have two other members, but one of them strained their back and the other is working their other job, so they’re on hiatus at the moment,” Leila summarizes.

The team members that we have met are all really kind. What a relief!

Now that they’re done, it’s our turn!

“I’m Sakurako. Um, we come from far away and this will be our first adventure, and our first job with the Guild, so I’m really nervous, but I’ll do whatever I can. I’m a chef.”

“A chef? Sweet! People with cooking skills don’t often think about going on adventures, so you’re a rare treasure!” Ganzi says happily.

Thank goodness. I was skeptical about whether I’d measure up, being a chef. I didn’t expect such a positive response. Phew.

“I’m Kazuya, and I’m a merchant. I told Leila yesterday, but I can use beginner-level support magic, including storage magic.”

“Sounds like you’re good with your hands. Being able to use storage magic is pretty accomplished for someone your age,” Ganzi says. “Which brings me to my next question—what relationship do you two have? We hardly ever see black hair in these parts. Are you siblings?”

“No, me and Sakurako are eng—”

“*Kazuya!* Geez!” I yank his arm before he can again doggedly claim we’re engaged, and he shuts up. “We’ve been friends since we were little. We’re like brother and sister.”

“Sakurako, you’re seventeen, right? Although you look younger...” Ganzi examines me. “Seventeen’s not much different from eighteen. That’s what Luke is.”

“No, I just turned nineteen,” Luke corrects him.

“Oh, right. You did. Well, seventeen’s great. You’re the same age as Luke. And looks like Sakurako and Kazuya aren’t together. Good for you, Luke!”

“Ganzi, I told you, please don’t say stuff like that.” Luke flushes.

Luke's nineteen? Why's it good that we're close in age? And why's it good for him that Kazuya and I aren't together...?

"Why do you keep bringing up Sakurako at the same time as Luke?" Kazuya speaks up, still in a bad mood.

"*Well.* It so happens that Luke spends all day, every day, exterminating monsters. I thought that was the only thing he was interested in, but yesterday he told us that when he met Sakurako, his heart was pounding like he encountered a powerful enemy! Ouch!" Ganzi winces and leans down to rub his shin. "Luke, you don't have to kick me!"

"What do you expect when you blurt out stuff like that! Why would you say that?" Luke glares at Ganzi, his face bright red. He glances at me to check my reaction and lowers his gaze in embarrassment.

*What? Could that mean...Luke likes me? Me?! No, wait. Ganzi said 'like he encountered a powerful enemy'. Does that mean Luke only sensed that I was a formidable opponent— Nope, not gonna dwell on that. I'm a dainty cook in this world. A weak cook.*

Before Luke realizes that I'm pretending—I mean, before his feelings change—I mean, as long as I'm weak—No, not that either. Um, what am I trying to say? Anyway, I'll just keep my hopes up.

"Wait a minute," Kazuya barks. "Are you letting us into your party because you have ulterior motives? Why don't you explain Luke and Leila's relationship? You look close; are you together? I'm sorry, but I can't believe you would try to mess around with another girl when you're in a relationship." He glares at Luke.

Luke's eyes widen and he goes rigid with shock, taken aback by the sudden hostility.

*Don't be so harsh, Kazuya...*

But yeah, Leila being in the picture does complicate things.

However, Leila splutters with laughter. "Oh my God! No way! Ha ha ha! That's gold, Kazuya! What are you talking about? I'm Luke's mom."

Deafening silence descends on Kazuya and me. This time it's our turn to

freeze.

*“What?”* we demand in unison.

*She’s...his mom? What?!*

“She’s my mom,” Luke confirms, ducking his head in embarrassment.

“Your mom?” we both repeat.

I swallow my stupefaction and look her up and down again. Her glowing and firm skin. Her curvy body. And there’s not even the faintest wrinkle on her face. How can she be any older than twenty? Yet Luke’s nineteen, so does that make her over thirty? At least? Is every woman in this world like this?!

Leila shoots me and Kazuya a stunning smile. “It just so happens that we’ve been looking for new party members, but couldn’t find anyone we could trust. Until Luke found a cute girl for us.”

“You’re making less and less sense. We just met. Why would you think you can trust us?” As always, Kazuya doesn’t mince his words.

Leila smiles placidly. “Anyone who Luke likes can’t be bad. Because he was born with a special skill... If Luke’s settled on you, then it’s fine.”

*Luke has a special skill?* I cock my head, curious.

“I can’t give you details on that yet. It really is special. Sorry I can’t tell you more, but would you like to join us anyway? All of us would love to have you.” Her sexy smile is on high beam.

Still wondering what Luke’s special skill could be, I turn to see Kazuya’s lips pursed bitterly. Has he changed his mind about joining the Evenfall Lions?

He slowly relaxes his jaw and speaks deliberately. “Okay. We’ll join you. But we’re not planning on staying with you long-term. Since this is our first Guild job, we just want to gain experience with a team of veterans. Once we get used to things, we’ll probably leave you. We’ll only join as long as you agree to those terms.”

“That’s fine. I’d love for you to stay longer, but that depends on how things shape up. If we prove to you that we’re worth sticking with forever, then there won’t be an issue, will there? I think we can do that.” Leila’s pleasant smile is

full of confidence.

Kazuya gives a thoughtful nod. Negotiations took a while, but we've managed to join Luke's party. My shoulders relax. Yay!

"That's settled, then. Okay, let's get to our quest." Leila cuts to the chase.

"Have you already got a quest lined up?" Kazuya asks.

"Yes, we've got our orders. We signed up to take out an owl demon. We were looking for specific support jobs that'll be good for this quest."

"Owl demon? I remember hearing about that somewhere," I say.

Kazuya nods. "That's the monster that showed up outside of town recently, correct?"

That jogs my memory. Right, the gatekeeper mentioned it when we entered town. Something about sightings of an owl demon nearby, and that we needed to be on guard.

"Yes, it's the talk of the town. Owl demons are B-class monsters, but depending on their size, they can be on par with A-class monsters. All hell would break loose if it attacked a rural town like Rosettebern. So we need to beat it before it comes here."

"By the way, what does an owl demon look like?" Kazuya asks seriously.

"It's got the body of a man and the face of an owl, and it's quite big."

Kazuya shoots me a troubled glance. I wonder why. What's he getting at?

*The body of a man and the face of an owl... Oh, yeah! That's exactly like the monster we came across right when we arrived in this world.* But as I recall, it only took one punch. It wasn't the type of monster a whole town should be on guard over. I probably defeated the henchman of an owl demon, like its assistant or something.

But Kazuya looks like he suspects it was an owl demon, so I shake my head and say, "Sounds strong, huh, Kazuya?" to imply that I think we defeated something else.

He sighs and turns back to Leila. No need for that attitude.

“To defeat it, we need to head out of town, I suppose. What happens if we can’t find it?”

“If we don’t, then we won’t be able to collect the reward from the Guild. But it’s never a total waste of time to go out past the town limits, because we can hunt other monsters and gather precious and expensive plants. In fact, since you two want to gain experience in different roles, I think you’ll gain more from doing that and learning to live outside, rather than from seeking a dangerous owl demon as our primary objective.” Leila’s rather persuasive.

Kazuya pretends to think it over, then says, “I understand, then. By all means, we’re on board with accompanying you. Are you leaving now?”

“Not today, but tomorrow morning. Normally, it’s one party per quest, but because this is an emergency, they’re letting a whole bunch of adventurers sign up for it. Everyone’s leaving tomorrow at the same time. So do what you can to get ready for it today! It’d help if you can get your hands on some armor with defensive power, but if you don’t have the gaul for that, come as you are. Merchants and cooks aren’t expected to fight, anyway.”

We nod. Kazuya looks very serious. No, it looks like he’s biting back words.

“Kazuya?” I prod. He looks me in the eye and blinks, resolute.

“L-Leila, does that outfit of yours have...defensive power?” he asks meekly, nodding at her clothes. Try as he might, he couldn’t help but be curious. I wanted to ask, too, but I didn’t have the nerve. I’m amazed he did. He has some serious guts.

Leila pushes out her chest and crosses her arms. “Oh, this? No, no physical defensiveness whatsoever, but sky-high magical defense. And it increases my magical power a ton. As a mage, I provide a lot of logistical support. So this is premium mage equipment.” She winks.

Aha, so there is rhyme and reason to her outfit. That bugbear’s solved.

Kazuya appears convinced. He crosses his arms pensively and murmurs, “So in this world you can legally wear bikinis anywhere?”

*Kazuya. You might think you’re mumbling under your breath, but I hear you.*

Geez, Kazuya's at that age where he can't ignore someone in a bikini... Oh. That's it! Kazuya likes guys, so he should be more hung up on people of the same gender. So the person he wants to see in a bikini is...a guy?

The image of 56-year-old, single, muscular Mr. Watanabe in a bikini sends a shudder through me.

## Chapter 3: Too Strong, but Cooking for Others

**WE** discuss things like armor and weapons, then set a time to meet up the next morning.

“Tomorrow, we finally get to go on an adventure,” I mutter, thinking back over everything Leila told us. I’d better get some utensils quick.

Kazuya nods at my side. “Mm-hmm. We need to buy you some cooking supplies to use as a chef, then. What should we start with?”

We leave the others and head to a market. We wander around until we find an ironmonger who lets me weigh up different options. Cooking utensils look the same in this world as in our old one—lots of different pots and frying pans in familiar shapes. In order to defeat the owl demon, we’ll be camping in the forest for a few days, so I’ll have to show my skills in the wild. That said, I haven’t cooked anything since we came to this world, which is rather worrying.

But since we’ll be saying a temporary farewell to Jabrin and his wife tonight, I’d like to do something to thank them for helping us out.

“Hey Kazuya, do you think I could cook dinner tonight? I wanna treat Jabrin and Marie. And I want to check if I can cook properly here.”

“Yeah, good idea. I haven’t had anything you’ve cooked in a while, either.”

“Then, after this, let’s go buy some ingredients.”

“Okay. Better choose your equipment already. I think this big wok would be good, since you can carry it on your back and still move freely. And this set of ladles.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point! Can we afford them? 5,000 gaul seems expensive.”

“I’ll cover it.” Kazuya chats for a minute with the ironmonger. Not only does he bargain the price down to 3,000 gaul, but the guy also throws in a cutlery set as a free gift. Kazuya’s got the golden touch.

“Is this thanks to your merchant skill?”

“Probably,” he says coolly. What a handy skill.

Armed with new cooking utensils, we head over to the produce section of the market to buy ingredients for dinner and preserved foods I’ll need from tomorrow. Leila gave us some gaul to pay for the latter, so I’m flush with cash. On my list of things to get are salt, bacon, cheese, dried vegetables, dried mushrooms, and dried fish.

All the food here looks the same as in our old world, including potatoes, carrots, onions, and apples. Occasionally, I see something unfamiliar, but I recognize most things and am relieved that my prior knowledge is still applicable when coming up with menus and recipes.

I beeline for ingredients I know. Just touching them sparks inspiration and I start to want this, and that, and that, too... Oh, but if I buy too much, our groceries won’t fit in our bag.

“Better make sure our supplies aren’t too bulky and heavy.”

“No, we’ll be fine. I charmed this bag with storage magic this morning.” Kazuya shrugs off his backpack and opens it to show me the inside.

*Whoa. That’s incredible. It’s extra wide and deep.*

“The magic expanded its volume, so it can fit a lot. No need to worry about how much stuff we get.”

“That’s an amazing spell. But doesn’t it stay heavy?”

“No, the weight doesn’t change. The bag won’t get heavier no matter what you add.”

“Cool! Then, let’s shop until we drop!”

*Wow. Kazuya’s getting more and more useful. He’s a regular Swiss army knife — Oh, hey!* “Can it keep things refrigerated?” I blurt. “Could we bring raw meat and eggs?”

“No, that’s probably impossible.”

Oh, right. Even Doraemon can’t do everything. But still, it’s handy to have a



backpack that can hold so much. I return to picking through produce.

After browsing for a while, I purchase preserved food for tomorrow's adventure and ingredients for dinner with Jabrin and his wife this evening.

They're sitting together when we arrive back at their home, so we tell them that we'll be leaving tomorrow for a few days or so. That gets them a bit down, but they perk up when I ask if I can cook for them. Even though they protest that I don't have to, they seem happy that I will.

With Marie's permission, I set up in the kitchen. Potatoes surround me after Marie piled them up and insisted I use them. *So many potatoes... What can I make that'll use a lot of them in one go?*

All right. I've decided on a menu.

"How's it going, Sakurako?" Kazuya asks as he enters the kitchen.

"Great! While the main course is baking in the oven, I think I'll make mayonnaise to use as salad dressing."

"Can you make mayo?"

"Yeah, all it takes is eggs, vinegar, salt, and oil, and we've got all of those." I put them into a bowl as I list them off.

"That's not what I meant. Don't you need to whip it thoroughly? We don't have a whisk."

"Nah, it'll be fine. I'll mix it with a fork or something. Wait there, I'll do it now." I pick up the bowl and hold it firmly, wielding a wooden three-pronged fork in my right hand. Here I go!

Whip whip whip whip *skrish-skrish-skrish-skrish!*

"Whoa! Your hand is a blur!" By the time Kazuya finishes that exclamation, the bowl is filled with mayonnaise.

"There, see? I did it! Not to brag, but I can stir over 5,000 times per minute. In fact, I daresay I stirred faster than that, because I feel really good."

"Yeah, you don't even need a whisk." Kazuya smiles in amazement and reaches out to touch my face. "You got some mayo on you."

He wipes my cheek.

“Oh, thanks. It must have splashed.” I look up and he’s stock-still. “What’s up? Is there still some on me?”

He shakes himself out of a stupor and draws his hand back in a hurry. “No, never mind. Can I help with anything?”

“Yes, please! The main course should be about ready. I’ll bring it in if you’ll take the salad, potatoes, and mayo to the table!”

“Got it.” He grabs the bowls and leaves the room.

*He was acting weird... Oh, well. Whatever.* I get back on task and peer into the oven, or furnace, rather. Perfect. It’s got a nice crust on it. I take the steaming pan out and get a heady whiff of the aroma of baked cheese. *Mmm! Looks delicious, if I do say so myself!* My potato quiche is all done! And because I sprinkled cheese on top before I put it in the furnace, it almost looks like pizza!

I tip it out of the pan onto a cutting board, and slice it into easy-to-eat pieces like you would a cake. Steam billows from each cut. It smells great! Now to plate it...

“Hey, all! Thanks for waiting! This is a potato and cheese quiche.” I set the dish down in the center of the dining table.

Jabrin and Marie cry out in admiration.

“Gosh, what a nice smell!” Marie says. “I’ve never seen this before.”

“You make it by baking potatoes, vegetables, and bacon together with eggs and fresh cream. It’s really yummy. And the crust is a mixture of potatoes, flour and cheese.”

Quiche is a nice, stylish tart that is perfect for showing off a girl’s cooking ability. I’d place it in the top ten most popular dishes for girls to cook.

My heart is in my throat as I watch Jabrin and Marie carve into their slices with forks and bring the quiche to their mouths. Being freshly made, it’s piping hot, so they huff while chewing. I’m on tenterhooks, praying they like it.

They both break into smiles.

“Wow, it’s great! This is brilliant, Sakurako! It’s as good as you’d find in any restaurant in the neighborhood!” Jabrin praises me. “It’s like firm stew. The creamy texture melts on your tongue, and the potatoes in the batter are crispy on the outside and fluffy in the middle, which is irresistible!” He sets his fork down and grabs the slice in his hand instead. One munch, two munches. Cheese spools in a string from his lips to the quiche.

Marie smiles next to him, cradling her cheek in her hand as she savors every bite. “Yes, it’s delicious! Who would’ve thought that boring old potatoes can taste like this?”

Phew! I take a bite. Although I made it myself, I have to agree it’s easy on the palate. The potatoes are hot and buttery, and the cheese is rich. Blending the two makes for a flavor bomb!

Jabrin and Marie then turn their attention to the steamed potatoes. I couldn’t put all the potatoes Marie wanted me to use into the quiche alone, so I steamed some as well. But I bet they haven’t tried them with mayonnaise before!

“I noticed you usually have steamed potatoes with salt, so I’ve gone with mayonnaise tonight,” I say, cutting crosses in the tops of the steamed potatoes before I put them on everyone’s plates. When you slather them in mayo, they turn a simple dish into one that’s super delicious. “Try them with this. You can also use it for salad dressing!”

Marie’s interest is piqued by the mayonnaise. She takes a small spoonful of it. “What a complex taste! It’s sour, sweet, and most of all, mellow in a way that’s hard to describe.” She spreads some on her potato and takes a bite. Her eyes go wide. “J-Jabrin! This! This *mayonaize* is incredible! You have to try it, too!”

She dumps mayo onto Jabrin’s potato with gusto.

“I’m still dealing with the *keesh*. The harmony of cheese and potatoes is sublime...” Jabrin hesitates before obediently taking a bite of potato and mayo. His jaw drops, and he shoves the rest of the potato into his mouth. “This is... Sakurako, this is too good! I don’t even know what to say; it’s addictive! The mild yet refreshing tang lingers, it’s too much, too much to cope with!” He raves excitedly, alternating chews between the potatoes and mayo, quiche, and

salad.

Marie smiles blissfully, too, and keeps complimenting the food as she eats all three dishes.

*Thanks, guys!* They really are nice people. Yay, they praised me a ton! It counts extra because they both have good taste! Ha ha.

I'm over the moon that the two of them are enjoying the food. I turn to Kazuya, expecting him to be digging in as well, since I already know he likes cheese and my cooking, but he's just staring at his half-eaten quiche in disbelief. "Wh-what's wrong? Don't you like it?"

"No, it's great. It's just... It makes me feel like I need to say something."

"It does?"

"Yeah. Just a feeling..." Kazuya looks at Jabrin, who's still extolling the sort of positive review you'd expect from a food critic. His gaze drops back to his quiche and he heaps some more on his fork. "Never mind. Forget it, I'm okay. Anyway, if you don't eat up soon, there won't be any left."

Ack, I was too busy watching everyone's reactions! I hastily start eating, pushing whatever's going on with Kazuya to the back of my mind. *Mmm, potatoes rule! Yum!*

"The potatoes are only this good because they're from your family's farm, Marie!" I say, munching happily.

"Thanks! I'll tell my father!" She beams.



**THE** next morning, while we're bidding Marie and Jabrin goodbye, Jabrin gives me my school uniform back. I could have let him keep it as a thank-you gift, but then it'd be like our previous world never existed... Jabrin must've noticed that it had sentimental value. Not only does he return it, he thanks me for lending it to him. He's such a nice person.

Also, Marie loads us up with potatoes. They're such a lovely couple.

Like Leila predicted, a lot of other parties are already gathered at the place we agreed to meet the Evenfall Lions. A crowd of mighty warriors mill around the

town's gate, all armed and ready to slay the owl demon. Employees from the Guild are assigning which party covers which area of the forest.

"We've been assigned the deepest part of Kakinefil Woods. I hope we don't have any trouble finding the owl demon there," Leila says.

"Which direction is Kakinefil Woods?"

"To the west side of town. It's full of monsters, but it's a famous hunting and gathering ground, because it has an abundance of rare medicinal herbs." Her tone turns serious. "The further in you go, the more likely you are to encounter strong monsters."

Ganzi surveys the scene with a grim expression, scratching his head. "Still, the Guild's letting any random party join in. There's an E-class party over there. They'll be wiped out if they chance on the owl demon."

"Indeed, the Guild's tackling this job in a lax fashion. We'd better find the owl demon and take care of it before anyone gets hurt." With those grave words, Leila walks tall toward the gate. I trail close on her heels.

Our first adventure! I'm kinda excited... No, it's dangerous; I shouldn't get excited. But it's been a long time since I've been on a camping trip. When I was little, my family and Kazuya's used to go camping in the mountains. One time, my dad—he adored the outdoors—was like, 'Let's all go bear hunting!' We had bear hot pot that night. I love that memory.

Next to me, Kazuya covers his mouth with his hand, his skin pale.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Uh, the forest is reminding me of when we went camping that one time ages ago, and you popped up in front of me covered in blood, waving a bear corpse around. You hacked it up right in front of me, and then we had to eat it... Ugh."

"Really? It was delicious!"

"I don't remember how it tasted. All I remember is you looking gory." Kazuya frowns with a shudder. He's so sensitive.

"Sakurako!" Leila calls me, and I whip around to see handsome Luke immediately in front of me.

*Ack, my face is heating up! I can't help it, he's so hot!*

"Er, seeing as this is your first quest, if you don't mind, I could teach you anything you want to know, if you want," he says falteringly.

Luke's not an illusion, is he? He's not a product of my imagination? I feel just as shy as I ask, "Is that okay?"

He nods, smiling. "Sure! If we don't come across monsters on the way, we'll have plenty of downtime, and we'll probably take breaks often, so I can definitely teach you whenever we're free."

Hooray! Luke's so cool and nice! How's a girl supposed to keep her heart from fluttering?! *Squee!*

I guess I wasn't subtle, because Kazuya steps between Luke and me. "Ahem. Luke, we don't especially need you to teach us."

"It'd be our pleasure, Kazuya!" Ganzi joins the conversation, locking Kazuya in a headlock from behind. "I'll take you under my wing, since our roles are similar. I'll teach you what spells you can cast."

"No, I don't...need..."

Ganzi steers him away.

Luke's nose twitches and his grin fades to a pained smile. "That Ganzi... He always makes things awkward." Luke glances at me, his eyes swimming, then stammers again. "S-so if there's anything you'd like to ask me about, feel free, anytime."

"O-okay." I blush in sympathy. His face is bright red! *Does he like me? Really?* He must, right? It's like that? This conversation would make no sense if he didn't! Aaah! What a cliché! Spring's finally here for me!

Before now, all that's happened when I make eye contact with guys is they run away or shrink in horror. I'm overjoyed that I came to this world!

Kazuya's sharp voice raises in volume behind us. I look over my shoulder to see him arguing with Ganzi. Those two are getting along famously. Kazuya hardly ever lets his guard down to show his true personality.

Is there a chance he's...crushing on Ganzi? Ganzi's got a decent face and is a

full-grown adult, which could well be Kazuya's type. Spring has sprung for me, and I want it to come for Kazuya, too. I'll be in his corner if he's in love.

I shoot him a warm smile.

For some reason, he glares back at me with genuine disgust.

*Eeep.* It's enough to send a chill down my spine.

## Chapter 4: Too Strong, but in a Support Role

**“LUKE!** It’s coming this way!”

“I hear you!” Luke swings his massive sword down on the big-eared monster hopping toward us, splitting it open from the top of its head to its chest. It perishes and turns into a puff of smoke, leaving a small crystal lying on the ground.

Ganzi picks it up. He holds it up to the sun to appraise it. “Another little one. Oh, well. That’s what you get from a killer rabbit.” He nimbly drops the stone into his chest pocket.

The Evenfall Lions are real veterans. They act in perfect harmony when monsters appear, beating them without issue. Kazuya and I watch from a safe position behind Molozov.

Luke is extremely strong. He can swing a sword as tall as he is with ease. That alone is amazing, but he also moves quickly without leaving any opening for his opponent. Leila and Ganzi are good fighters, too, but they nearly always assist from offside, leaving Luke to stop the monsters for good.

It’s like... Luke is the only one who’s on a different level. He whooshes his great sword through the air to shake the blood off, then slips it into the holster on his back. So cool!

“The grove up ahead looks like a good spot to rest. Shall we take a lunch break there?” Leila asks wearily. The other members answer in the affirmative. Leila doesn’t seem that strong, and I’m picking up that she’s already tired. She’s out of breath and her face is flushed. Maybe from alcohol? She keeps a bottle of booze permanently in one hand, which she constantly swigs from.

Still, she stays in the lead while the party hunts monsters and collects rare medicinal herbs on our walk through the forest. When a small spring comes into view—presumably the grove she mentioned earlier—we happily and hungrily agree to her suggestion to break here for lunch.



“Here, I brought food for us!” I take out lunchboxes from the backpack Kazuya was carrying. I got up early this morning and made more of the same quiche, haha!

“Whoa! A lunchbox! Now we’re talking!” Ganzi is the first to come over, and I pass him a box wrapped in a large leaf. He grins like a little kid when he opens it.

“What is this? Pie? No... I don’t know, I’ve never seen it before.” He cocks his head at the slice of quiche I carved earlier. “But it smells great... Wait, how are we going to divide it up between all of us?” He looks genuinely worried.

“No worries! I made enough for everyone.” I take another box from Kazuya’s backpack, then another, then another.

For some reason, Ganzi’s eyes go wide at me. No, at the backpack. Actually, everyone’s staring in astonishment. Why? I take out the last lunchbox and pass it to Kazuya.

“H-how did you fit all those in that rucksack?” Ganzi demands. “It’s way too small to hold all that food!”

Oh, they’re surprised by how much the backpack holds.

Kazuya turns to him. “What’s the big deal? I told you I know storage magic.”

“Yeah, I know, but I didn’t think you could store this much! How high is your skill level?!”

The scale of his surprise gives us pause. I catch Kazuya’s eye and lean close to whisper.

“Do they seem too surprised to you?”

“Yeah, they’re too stunned. Does that mean my skill is high? Is it because God promised to give us a lot of skills?”

Ganzi interrupts our private conference by saying in an awed tone, “You must be destined to help him after all.”

I turn to ask, “*Destined to help who?*” But Ganzi is wearing his usual happy-go-lucky smile. Maybe I imagined it.

“I, for one, am glad you’re skilled rather than not,” Leila laughs with joy. “You’re something else, Kazuya!”

“He really is! Well done!” Luke says energetically. “You’re a brilliant merchant, Kazuya. Do you come from a long line of merchants?”

No one digs too deeply. I’m happy they’re praising Kazuya, but he might be feeling modest because he changes the subject with an “Enough, it’s all good, let’s eat up.”

He’s such a shy guy.

“It’s nice to have a cook at mealtime. Normally, we just nibble on biscuits and salted meat.” Ganzi stuffs his mouth with quiche. “Whoa! This is beyond good! What do you call this?! It’s mouth-watering! Leila, try a bite.” Even though Ganzi has his quiche in hand, he leans over and takes a bite out of Leila’s quiche, too. What a greedy-guts.

Everyone is tucking into the quiche with gusto. I’m ecstatic they’re all enjoying it.

Molozov, who was slowly and silently chewing his food, stands up abruptly. “Not only is the potato delectable, but the saltiness of the cheese brings out its heavenly taste. Though the dish is nearly indescribable, I declare it is ambrosial with a perfect blend of flavors. Truly a magnificent achievement!” He shouts.

The rest of us stare at him in shock. The thing is, Molozov has been quiet all this time. I thought of him as a big, taciturn bear of a man. I dunno what made him snap, but, um, I have to say I appreciate all the compliments.

“M-Molozov, what’s going on?” Leila asks timidly.

Molozov sits back down, looking startled by his own behavior. “Sorry. I got a little overexcited.” He returns to eating quiche.

...I wonder if he’s a little eccentric.

“Er, I know how you feel. Sakurako’s food is exquisite. Maybe it’s not just delicious, but has some other charm, too?” Ganzi says, frowning.

Luke turns to him. “What do you mean?”

“Look at this. I scratched my elbow on a branch while we were walking

earlier, but it's healed already."

"It has? You mean because of this food?! It has a special power?!" This time it's Leila who yells in excitement.

I'm confused. Kazuya says to me under his breath, "Remember that cooking spell that worked for you and not me? Will you try casting it on this quiche?"

"That spell? Okay." I do as I'm told. "'Sizzle sizzle, bubble bubble, tap, tap, tap'."

A silent voice echoes in my head: *Potato and cheese quiche. It has the following effects: physical recovery (small), energy recovery (small), and confession (small).*

"Oh, I just heard a voice say the quiche has the effects of physical recovery (small), energy recovery (small), and confession (small)."

Leila grabs my hand, grinning. "Wow, Sakurako! You can make dishes with effects! And three! Your cooking skill level must be quite high?"

"Is it? Huh. Heh heh." All this praise is making me feel a little bashful. I can't believe that cooking, which I only picked up to help me be popular, is proving useful in this situation!

"It's amazing is what it is. What was the last effect, again? I don't know if I've heard of that one." Ganzi cocks his head.

*Yeah, I wonder what a confession effect is, too.*

Kazuya explains. "It probably makes people say something about the food. I ate this yesterday, and I was itching to say something. That's probably why Molozov..."

We all turn to look at Molozov.

Morozov ducks his eyes, embarrassed by his uncharacteristic eloquence.

Leila giggles like it's hilarious. "*That's* what that was about. I bet the effect only works on people with a low resistance to magic, like Molozov. Next time we need to crack his steely shell to find something out, we should feed him Sakurako's food!"

The mood stays buoyant throughout the rest of the meal. It's so lively, I wonder if it's because of one or more of the effects. Why would there be effects in the first place?

*W-wait, is it because I want people to tell me their impressions of my cooking?* Like, yes, of course I want people to say my food is delicious! But I'm ashamed of creating an effect that forces people to do so!

"I have to say, Sakurako and Kazuya, you two are a strange pair," Leila says. "Kazuya's storage magic is, to put it mildly, better than a beginner's, and Sakurako's cooking skills are sky-high. Normally, cooks would have to study and eat cuisines of many different countries to be able to cook like you do."

That's something to think about. In our previous world, even a schoolgirl can eat food from all over the world whenever she wants, and books and the internet let me learn a lot about foreign cooking. Is that why?

"I knew it. You two are..." Leila says under her breath. She spots me looking at her and lifts her head to turn to me with a smile. "This is superb, Sakurako! Honestly the best!" She polishes off the remainder of her quiche.

I'm curious about what she was going to say. I get the feeling she changed the subject. Regardless, our fun lunch wraps up without incident.



**THEN** it's back to traipsing slowly through the forest while learning about various useful plants from Ganzi. Thanks to Luke leading the party and staying on guard for monsters, Kazuya and I are able to stroll along at ease.

Ganzi teaches Kazuya a new spell called 'monster analysis', which is more advanced and tells you more information than monster identification magic. He also tries to teach me botanical appraisal magic so I can get information about plants, but the spell won't work for me. I'm jealous... Kazuya is having a ball casting new spells on all the monsters and interesting plants we happen upon. *Grrr!*

He's casting it again on a plant with small purple flowers, when he looks at me with a surprised smile. "You'll recognize this vine."

"Which vine?" I inspect the plant. "Hey! It's kudzu!"

It is! Seeing something from home warms my heart. Not to mention, I happen to have a lot of fond memories of kudzu. Kazuya and I often went camping in the mountains with my father, who loved to survive off the land with food we scrounged up in the wild. Because you can eat every part of kudzu, it was a family favorite. The flowers and leaves are edible as is, and the roots make kudzu powder.

All the plants that Ganzi says we can sell to the Guild are things I've never seen or heard of before. Combustible grass that ignites when you shake it, a weed that can heal minor injuries if you rub it on them, a detoxifying herb that you drink in a broth to flush poisons out of your body, and illuminating grass that lights up when you blow on its flowers. After a slew of new things, I'm extra-relieved to see something familiar.

"Do you two know kudzu?" Ganzi asks, seeing our excitement.

"Can we sell this for much, too?"

"Uh, well, it's edible, so some places will take it, but it doesn't pay well. It grows everywhere."

"Oh." What a shame.

"Ganzi, want me to put the medicinal herbs you're carrying in my backpack?" Kazuya asks. Ganzi's arms are overflowing.

"That'd be great. Do you mind?"

"Not a bit. There's tons of room."

"Your storage magic is really useful. Your bag's almost bottomless. It makes traveling a breeze. I'm serious."

Since the others found out about Kazuya's tremendous capacity for storage and that he doesn't get weighed down either, he's been our designated baggage carrier.

"How do you feel using the magic I taught you?" Ganzi asks him.

"I'm grateful, but are you sure it's okay? I thought you shouldn't share magic spells that simply."

"Normally, I charge people to learn. But you're in our party, and besides, your

magic levels are nuts.”

“Speaking of which, what other spells do you know?” Kazuya says cheekily.

Ganzi grins. “I’ve taught you as much as I can for now. Maybe I’ll tell you more if you sign on to stay with us forever.”

“Okay, then.”

“Like I’m gonna buy that!” Ganzi laughs and boisterously claps Kazuya on the shoulder. They’re getting along famously.

Hmm.

Perhaps... Just as my imagination starts to wander, Luke calls, “Pardon, Ganzi! We’ve come to a fork in the road. I need your input.”

“Sure,” Ganzi replies lightly and scoots over to Luke.

I fall into step with Kazuya. “You and Ganzi look like you’re getting along.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Kazuya’s eyes narrow. “Are you getting a weird misunderstanding again?”

“Wh-what do you mean?” I pause before continuing. “I won’t think any different of you. As long as you’re happy, I’m happy!”

“Could you *please* quit seeing things through that lens? Ganzi’s roles are similar to mine. That’s the only reason he’s teaching me these things.” Kazuya hangs his head, discouraged and fed up.

*Okay! Fine.*

Leila joins us, looking clammy. “You’re keeping up well, Sakurako. Lucky you, being physically strong.”

I wonder if it’s common for mages to lack physical strength. Leila’s face is fairly red, too. Because she’s drinking? She seems too out of breath, though...

“Leila, are you okay? You look like you’re struggling—” Before I finish my question, Leila’s knees buckle. I throw out my arm to support her at her waist and find she’s boiling hot to the touch. She doesn’t gain consciousness even when I yell next to her, “Leila! Are you okay?!”

“Mother?!” Luke tears back to us, panic-stricken. There was no reply from

Leila. All we hear is her painful breathing. “Sakurako, what happened to her?!”

“I don’t know! She just collapsed. And her fever is off the charts!”

Molozov takes Leila from me and sweeps her into his arms in a princess carry. “There’s a river not far from here. Let’s take her there to rest.” He sets off ahead with her immediately. Luke follows hot on his heels, his face distorted with worry.

“Lady Leila, you pushed yourself too hard... I should’ve noticed,” Ganzi mutters behind us. He hustles after the others, frowning deeply.

“Ganzi’s never referred to her as ‘Lady’ before,” Kazuya murmurs to me.

I nod. It feels like the Evenfall Lions exist in a bubble the two of us can’t penetrate. Just like Kazuya and I have our own circumstances, they have a backstory, as well. Right now, though, we’re more concerned about Leila, so we rush after the others.



**MOLOZOV** laid Leila down on a piece of cloth by the river. Her eyes are still closed.

Ganzi holds her wrist, taking her pulse like a doctor. “This insect bite on her side was probably caused by a safflower bug. The symptoms it causes have worn her down to an awful state.” He scratches his head harshly in frustration. “I thought she was hitting the bottle hard lately. Maybe it was to dull the pain? She didn’t let any of us know. Damn it, I should have noticed!”

So it wasn’t alcohol that stained her cheeks red?

“What happens when a safflower bug bites you? Is it serious?” I ask.

Ganzi doesn’t take his eyes off Leila while he replies. “Yeah. The worst of it comes and goes in time, unless you overdo it. Then you can weaken and even die. The symptoms include high body temperature, fatigue, nausea, and major loss of strength.”

It sounds like what happens when you have a cold. “Is there medicine you can give her?”

“There’s an antidote for the bug venom, but she’ll stay debilitated for a while.

She needs to rest.” Ganzi takes a bottle of liquid from his pocket. I recognize it as medicine he made from a detoxifying herb he showed us earlier. He pulls the cork stopper from the bottle with his mouth, lifts Leila up with an arm around her shoulders, and carefully places the rim of the bottle against Leila’s mouth so she can drink it.

“Lady Leila, this is an antidote. Drink up, won’t you?” he pleads.

Leila’s eyes flutter open. “It’s okay, Ganzi. I’ve already had some. I don’t have any toxin in me anymore.”

“I knew it. It doesn’t matter if you just take the antidote. If you don’t rest, it won’t cure you! Why’d you hide this?! Well... We’ll have to head back to town as soon as you’ve rested.”

“No!” Leila protested. “I’m...fine! Besides, we need all of us...to defeat the owl demon... We have to...beat it.”

“Lady Leila! Now is not the time to argue!”

“He’s right, Mother! Stop pushing yourself! I can beat an owl demon by myself if I have to!”

“No! I’ll never let you go alone!” Leila glares at Luke with bloodshot eyes.

Everyone’s at a loss for words.

“Enough selfishness. You’ve put us at a disadvantage by hiding your illness. Now you want to cause more trouble?” Molozov says quietly but clearly.

“Excuse me?!” Leila looks furious at the rebuke, but soon drops her gaze and nods. Her eyes are misty when she says, “Sorry.”

“All you can do now is rest. Please, Lady Leila. Anyway, we’re far from town. It’ll be hard for you to make it back. Let’s set up camp here until you recover,” Ganzi suggests. “Does that sound good, Luke? We’ll see how Leila’s managing and reassess whether to move forward or return.”

Leila’s ragged breathing pierces the oppressive atmosphere. Why would she want to defeat the owl demon so badly that she’d risk her life?

Luke turns to me. “Sakurako, can you make her something nutritious? Something with a recovery effect?”



“Yes! Of course! I can do that!” I don’t know how to give food a recovery effect, but I’ll do my best for Leila! “Can I have the backpack, Kazuya?” I rummage through the bag he gives me. People with a cold need food that’s easy to eat. It’s also got to be nutritious, easy to digest, and a cold buster...but pretty much all we brought in the backpack is preserved salty and hard food. Jam’s good, but not nutritious on its own. What can I use for a cold?

I catch a glimpse of kudzu in the corner of my eye. “Hey, Kazuya, is that kudzu?”

It was growing everywhere on our way here, and here it is again in clumps.

“It sure is. What are you thinking, kudzu soup?”

I nod. My dad used to refine kudzu roots into powder when we all went camping together in the mountains.

“That’s impossible. You know that, don’t you? It takes ages to break the roots down into powder and starch. We can’t do it here.”

“I can, no problem. I’ll whip some up in no time, but I need your help. Would you mind?”

Kazuya nods, looking dubious. I let Luke and the others know I’m going to go start cooking a short distance away, and Kazuya and I trudge into the depths of the kudzu thicket. I scrounge around until I find where the colony originally sprang from and settle on a single huge root as my target. It looks perfect.

“Kazuya, can you help me dig up this root?”

“Sure, but we don’t have a shovel...”

While Kazuya’s still asking, I cup my hands together like a shovel and tap the soil at even distances around the root. Doing this softens it so I can pull out a couple of bundles of stalks. Great! Easy!

“Did you even need my help?” Kazuya asks, incredulous even after watching the process with his own eyes.

“This next part is what I need your help with.” After cutting the stalks so I’m left with only the roots, I hand the roots to Kazuya and ask him to hold them out in front of him with both hands.

Then I pull the big wok out of the carrier I have strapped around my back, put a layer of cloth in it, and place it underneath Kazuya's outstretched hands.

"Sakurako, are you going to chop these roots with your bare hands?!"

"Uh-huh. Hold them steady."

Kazuya winces in trepidation, but this is an emergency. Every second counts.

"*Ha! Ha! Ha!*" I yell as I swiftly bring the side of my hand down on the roots. They snap and splinter to pieces and rain down in a pile on the wok below.

Kazuya's face is pale, even aside from the white coating of kudzu powder that must've blown up on him. "That was too fast. I could see afterimages of your hands."

I hurriedly wipe his cheeks with my hand. "Sorry, some powder flew up on you."

"Don't worry about it. I mean, it *is* worrying that this is how you cook, but so far so good, I guess. But it's not like we can separate the starch from the root as easily to keep it from tasting too bitter."

"Nah, that won't be an issue." I fill the wok with river water, which quickly turns brown thanks to the roots in the pan. I lift the corners of the cloth I spread beneath the roots and lift it up so that the murky water pours through the makeshift filter and fills the pan, leaving me with fibrous kudzu roots inside the cloth. I would've preferred to wait for the silty starch to sink to the bottom by itself, but time is of the essence.

I grab a leather pouch filled with potatoes out of Kazuya's backpack, tip the potatoes out, and pour the brown juice into the pouch. I pull the bag's cord to seal it shut, tie a tight knot to make extra sure it's waterproof, and exhale to center myself. No worries. I can do this. I'm me. So I can do it.

"S-Sakurako, are you planning on...whirling that around like a human centrifuge?" Kazuya asks.

Gripping the cord of the bag in my right hand, I begin swinging it around at arm's length. Round and round, *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*. Not fast enough. I need to step it up.

*Boom boom boom!*

Just when I'm about to break the speed barrier, I sense the leather pouch starting to come apart, so I stop. I think we'll have enough, anyway. I unknot the cord and open the pouch to find fine brown powder settled at its base below silty water. It worked!

I still need to remove more silt, though, so I pour out the brown juice and replace it with clean water before repeating the same process a couple of times. Eventually, the sediment at the bottom of the bag turns clean white. Kudzu powder!

"I finished!" I call to Kazuya in excitement.

"Oh, you are?" He pauses, washing the wok in the river behind me to look up in exasperation. "Cool. Can't wait to see you pull out all the stops to cook up a delicate meal, too."

"What's wrong? Are you sneering because you didn't get to help as much as you expected?"

"No, but put yourself in my shoes. How would you feel if you were a guy and the girl you liked starts wielding her arm like a maniac out of nowhere."

"What are you talking about? Never mind. It's time for the main event!" Forget his hissy fit! We made kudzu powder, now the rest is up to my cooking!

I take back the clean wok from Kazuya and we returned to Luke and the others.

"I thought you'd already started cooking," Luke says, puzzled.

"Um, all I've done so far is prepare ingredients. Now I'm going to make a cold-busting soup, but I'm still a novice cook, so I can't promise it'll have a recovery effect."

"Er, nevertheless, thank you for doing what you can. I trust you," Luke says.

I nod and hang a pot full of water over the bonfire. When it starts to simmer, I use a ladle to scoop out some water and pour it into a bowl, then mix in freshly made kudzu powder and a spoonful of citrus jam. Soon, a sweet and sour aroma fills the air, and my thick, translucent kudzu soup is ready.

But plating is also important, so I scatter a few small reddish-purple kudzu flowers on the surface of the soup. Every part of the kudzu plant is edible, including the flowers.

“Thanks for waiting. Here’s my cold buster! I call it ‘Fruity citrus kudzu soup garnished with kudzu flowers’!”





“Kudzu soup?” Ganzi asks. “I’ve never heard of it, but it smells good. And even sick people can eat soup easily. But does it have any effects?”

I cast a spell and hear the voice in my head say: *Fruity citrus kudzu soup. It has the following effects: physical strength recovery (small), alleviate symptoms of illness (large, immediate effect), and confession (small).*

“Oh, excellent! It does have effects. Apparently, it has physical strength recovery (small), and alleviate symptoms of illness (large, immediate effect)!” I pass the bowl to Ganzi.

“Thanks, Sakurako!” Luke says. “I’ve never heard of ‘alleviate symptoms of illness’ before, but I’m glad it has effects. Quick, Ganzi! Give it to Mother!”

“Got it. Leila, can you lift your head?” Ganzi supports Leila’s head to prop her up. He blows on a spoonful to cool it down, then holds it to Leila’s lips. It dribbles in while she’s still unconscious, and her throat soon starts moving to swallow it.

Her eyes flutter open, and she takes the bowl from Ganzi. She tilts it against her mouth to drink it faster, but chokes on the piping hot mixture. “Ah, it’s hot!”

“S-stop, you idiot. Pace yourself! Fool!” Ganzi snatches back the bowl, flustered, and rubs her back.

“B-but the drink just now...! Please, Ganzi, gimme it back!”

“F-fine, you can have it back so long as you drink it slowly!” Ganzi hands her the bowl along with the spoon.

Leila blows on a spoonful to cool it down this time before popping it in her mouth. “Yeah! This is delicious! It’s so sweet and refreshing! It melts in your mouth and soothes like a lozenge! Amazing! Geez! Astounding! And uplifting! I feel like I was never fatigued at all!” Leila drains the bowl in no time, huffing as she eats to let heat escape. When she reaches the end, she sighs in contentment and raises her bowl with a broad smile. “Can I have another helping?”

“L-Leila, you were unconscious a moment ago. Please settle down!”

“No, I think I’m all better already. I’m not tired in the slightest, and my thoughts are clear. More than that, I’m hungry.” As if to confirm her words, the rumble of a tummy purrs in the air.

“Oh, no! Excuse me!” It was *my* stomach! How embarrassing!

Kazuya doubles over laughing. He’s so mean.

“Haha. Mother, you seem fine!” Luke’s smile is heart-warming. “Your cooking is truly amazing, Sakurako! With that weight off our shoulders, I’m quite hungry myself.”

His grin buoys me. “Oh, then I’ll cook something for all of us! I know a kudzu recipe I want you to try!”

“Thank you,” Luke says sincerely. “Thank you also on my mother’s behalf. I’m glad you’re here.”

His bashful smile makes my heart throb. He’s so gorgeous! I’m head over heels! Feeling uplifted, I start cooking immediately with the kudzu flour and potatoes we have. I have to use the latter, considering I used the leather bag they were in to make kudzu powder. Also, although Leila seems fine now, she’s still recovering from illness, and all I have on hand that’s easily digestible is potatoes.

I steam and mash the potatoes, knead salt and pepper into them, then roll them into small patties with cheese in the middle of most—cheese isn’t easy to digest, so Leila will get the ones sans cheese. I then wrap the patties in kudzu leaves and sear them in a pan for a minute.

“All done! I call this ‘sticky potato with cheese wrapped in kudzu leaves’!” I put them on a plate for everyone to pass around.

“Wow! What’s with this texture?! Oh my God! It’s addictive!” Ganzi exclaims.

“The way the cheese melts is lovely. It’s wonderful,” Luke adds.

*Yay! It really is an ego boost to hear that your cooking is yummy. Woohoo!* I’m stoked to have leveled up my femininity!

*Oh, wait. Um, the reason my dishes have a confession effect is because I desire praise.* I should take it easy... But I’m allowed to indulge just this once, aren’t I? I



shoot a glance at Molozov.

He leaps to his feet. "It's delicious! The sweetness of the potatoes is subtle and gentle on the stomach, and the thick cheese stretches like elastic. Above all else, its chewy texture is its greatest strength, producing the ultimate waltz between potato and cheese with every bite, the rhythm of which is slow and light-footed. All while the kudzu leaves watch over their first dance like doting parents... Yes, this is indeed a jewel of a dish!"

Ah. Whoops. I think he fell prey to the confession effect again. He slowly sits down, looking mortified.

*I'm sorry, Molozov. I didn't do it on purpose.*

"Yep. It's so delicious that you wouldn't believe it was made with brute force." Kazuya takes another bite of his chewy potato with a sadistic smile.

*You, zip it and eat.*

"I've honestly never had anything like this before. It's sooo yummy! I've never eaten something so simple yet exquisite, not even at the castle."

Castle? Me, Kazuya, and the others look up sharply.

"L-Leila, what do you mean 'castle'?"

"Calm down, Ganzi. You found out long ago. You called me 'Lady Leila' when I collapsed, and Luke started calling me 'Mother'."

The two of them sheepishly drop their gaze.

"I picked up on that," Kazuya admits. "Are you the daughter of royalty or something?"

Leila smiles. "It's a sorry tale. I was only an apprentice mage who served the castle. But, yes, I was too pretty an apprentice mage, and the king was taken with my beauty. He fell for me and made me his seventh wife."

"You're a queen?!" I cry. "Then, is Luke..."

"A prince, yes. But as the child of the seventh wife, he had next to no right to succeed to the throne, so despite being a member of the royal family, he lived freely until he turned fifteen. It's customary for royalty to go to the temple at

that age to assess his skills... It was there we learned he has the title of 'Chosen Hero'."

"What's that?" I ask.

"It means he is the destined warrior who'll battle the Demon King when he resurrects. He has a birthmark on his thigh, too—the hero's quest. The king was delighted. He rejoiced that his child would be a hero, which frightened the other queens and princes vying for the throne. Ever since, the other heirs have targeted him. He's been poisoned, had assassins sent after him..." Leila trails off.

"Th-that's awful! Isn't Luke special if he's a chosen hero? Won't it be a problem if he gets killed?"

"Of course, if the Demon King returns and attacks the country. But nearsighted powermongers are more afraid of a prince who was born a hero than the Demon King. So we ran. We dressed as adventurers and set out on a journey. As soon as we learned Luke was a hero, we knew we had to travel to defeat the Demon King, anyway, so we needed to leave the castle sooner or later."

"Oh..." I don't know what to say. I wonder how it feels to be forced to leave the place where you were born.

"Are those people from the castle still trying to kill you?" Kazuya asks sternly.

Leila nods. "Most likely. The vindictive First Prince still sends out assassins. And the king is looking for us. He doesn't want to let go of the glory that comes with having a hero in the royal family."

Kazuya's face turns harder. "Why'd you tell us this? And why invite others to join your party if this is the case? What if we were pursuing you?"

"I knew at first sight that you guys are greenhorns. You give off a strong impression that you're new to all this, and I don't picture you as the castle's hired guns."

This humbling assessment is a bitter pill for Kazuya to swallow.

Leila smiles in amusement at his reaction. "Besides, heroes are drawn to

those who share their fate. They're supposed to come together in order to defeat the Demon King. I had a hunch you two might also be Chosen Ones, and after witnessing your powers, I'm convinced. You two are special. You were born to defeat the Demon King with Luke." She concludes in full seriousness.

Kazuya huffs a small sigh. "I doubt either of us is that big of a deal. Of course, we're not assassins or anything, either."

Leila flashes a small smile before turning serious again. "I have a request for the two of you."

"What do you want us to do?" I cock my head.

"You're with us on a trial basis, but I'd like you to join us formally. I'm not asking you to commit forever. But I want you to stay with us until we vanquish the Demon King."

"Until..." Kazuya gapes. "No, we don't have the right roles for that. We're not combat classes."

"No, your menial magic skills and Sakurako's cooking skills are high. They're vital for journeys like ours. Like just now, if it weren't for Sakurako, I'd still be immobilized. Worst case scenario, I might have died. We're known as an A-class party, but that's only because we have Luke. He's the reason we can fight A-class monsters. The rest of us, myself included, may or may not be able to defeat C-class monsters. We can take on an owl demon, but if a stronger monster were to appear, it'd be tough for us with our current members. We're not as strong as Luke. Not good enough to really assist him."

"Mother, that's not true!"

"It is, Luke. You know it is. We're no match for you. No match for a hero. I never made it past apprentice level as a mage. Molozov was a knight of the royal guard, but he doesn't have innate special strength like you. And while Ganzi's skillful across the board, he wasn't born with special skills, either. We're not Demon King material. But with you two here, things will change. You're both beginner adventurers who aren't accustomed to traveling or fighting. But your outstanding skills are on par with Luke's."

Leila's serious face is so beautiful that I can't help but stare at her.

She continues, “I know it’s arrogant of me to appeal to you after telling you all that. Why would you want to come with us after learning we’re on the run from assassins? But I still want you to join us. Just until we defeat the Demon King.”

Kazuya and I are too overwhelmed by her plea to say a word.



**THE** following day, we continue our adventure once we’ve confirmed that Leila has fully recovered. When she asked us to stay with the Evenfall Lions until they defeat the Demon King, we couldn’t answer immediately, so she told us we could let her know after this quest is over.

Kazuya and I appreciated the break. Her story was a lot to take in. I still don’t fully understand this world and, to be honest, I don’t really get the whole deal with the Demon King. I like Leila and the others, but the word ‘yes’ isn’t on the tip of my tongue.

However, it does feel like the wall between us and the Evenfall Lions has crumbled a little. And something else has changed, too. I’m not sure why exactly, but Kazuya politely asked Luke to teach him how to fight.

Luke was surprised by the request, but immediately smiled. “Sure, but I don’t think I’ll be that good a teacher. I don’t have any experience teaching others.”

That notwithstanding, the two began to practice every break. When they did, Leila would look on and say things like, “Nice work, you two!” and “Must be nice being so young.”

We wandered without finding the owl demon and, after a few days, Luke and Kazuya became closer as they trained. I’m wary of getting in the way of a striking blow, so they let me make a nuisance of myself by observing from a safe distance.

It confirms for me how strong Luke is. The muscles he uses to heft his sword are pin-up worthy and, even better, his steely core is unshakable. The cherry on top is his superhuman strength. The teddy bear God told us that there’d be people in this world who are extra-strong, and I have no doubt Luke’s one of them. He’s so special that he’s known as a hero.

So he’s only toying with Kazuya. Kazuya stopped practicing at my dojo after

the accident, but before then, he was a student there. He's no match for me, but his muscles are good and he's as talented as other veteran students I taught. Even so, Luke has to treat him with kid gloves. He's so strong. I wonder who's stronger, me or him...

I follow his movements with my eyes, sure I can only do so because he's not putting his heart into it yet. If we were to have a match here—What?! No! Why am I thinking like I'm starved for a fight?!

I'm a petite, dainty cook in a new world. I don't want to test my skills! Even if every time I see the two of them practicing, temptation almost lures me to jump into the fray!

It makes no difference who's stronger. I don't care! Ignore me! It's fine that Luke's stronger! If he is, I'll be the weak girl I've always wanted to be. A cool, princely lover will protect me! My eyes blur looking at the ground as my imagination races.

What if Luke finds out that I'm not weak? What would he think?

He's nice to me. He's kind. He takes care of me and jumps in front of me when monsters appear. I'm positive he only treats me that way because he thinks I can't defend myself. And sometimes he gets that shy look... Maybe he only looks at me like that because I'm weak.

I don't know why, but I feel depressed. I'm not trying to deceive him, but say he learns I'm not weak and it leads him to dislike me—I don't want that. I don't want him to stop smiling at me bashfully. I don't want him to stop looking at me with passionate glances that make me wonder if he *like*—likes me.

"Damn you... You're a beast," Kazuya says, knocked to the ground again.

I push my thoughts about Luke deep down and turn to watch them.

"You're stronger than I expected you to be, too," Luke addresses Kazuya. "Enough that it's surprising, to be honest. Why are you a merchant? Of course, your magic is powerful, but you seem suited to a combat role."

Kazuya looks up cockily from where he's sprawled. "Different people are best suited to different things. In a combat role, I'd only ever be average."

“Oh? Are you planning to become a leader of merchants?”

“A leader of merchants? That’s small potatoes. I’m going to take over the merchant class globally. I’ll lead the leaders. I’ll be the merchant world’s equivalent of the Demon King.”

“You’d be a tough one, I’ll give you that. I doubt I’d be able to beat you.”

“That goes without saying.”

The two of them banter while attacking and defending against each other. They seem to have reached common ground, somehow. Maybe this is what friendship between guys looks like.

Although Kazuya can be stand-offish when he wants, for some reason, I notice that he’s being considerate when chatting with Luke...

.....

Wait a second.

*Kazuya, are you kidding me? You fancy Luke?!*

My imagination explodes as a scene writes itself in my head.

*“Kazuya... I feel strange when I look at you,” Luke says with a blush.*

*“Oh, you feel weird? Tell me how you feel, exactly,” Kazuya says with a wicked smile. He slams his flat palm into the wall beside Luke, pinning him. That’s right; it’s a wall-slam!*

*“How?” Luke pauses, then says, “I don’t know. I’ve never felt like this before...”*

*“Want me to show you?” Kazuya asks, then whispers, “Luke...”*

*Kazuya smirks and plants his foot heavily between Luke’s legs, up near his crotch. The bang of his stomp echoes in the air. It’s a crotch-slam!*

*Shockingly, Kazuya goes so far as to clasp Luke’s chin between his thumb and forefinger to tilt Luke’s face towards his own.*

*A triple-combo! A wall-slam, a crotch slam, and cupping his chin! Who wouldn’t go wild for that!*

*Their faces draw closer and closer...*

No! Stop! I can't take this any further!

Just as I'm about to get dragged under by wave after wave of dangerous fantasy, Luke interrupts me.

"Sakurako? Can I have a word?" He's standing in front of me with an energetic smile, covered in sweat. Just beyond him I see Kazuya slouched on the ground, drinking water from a canteen to perk himself back up.

Yikes! I was too caught up to realize they'd finished sparring!

"Yes!" I blurt out.

"I'm thinking of taking a dip," Luke says.

"Taking a...dip?"

"Yeah, there's a spring near here. I'm sweaty after that workout and could use a wash. What do you think? You're welcome to tag along, or you could join the others." Luke wipes the sweat from his forehead.

I see. We're a hundred feet or so from where the others have set up camp, so Luke's just asking if I wanna go with him or go back. But if I go with Luke... That means I'd see him naked!

*Ack! No, no, no, what am I daydreaming about?! That can't be what he meant!* I shake the image of Luke half-naked out of my head. "Um, I'll go back to Leila and the others."

"Don't peep at us!" Kazuya pipes up with a knowing smirk.

"I would never peep!"

*Damn it, Kazuya! Don't tease me like that in front of Luke!* What if he thinks I'm shameless enough to peek at people while they're bathing? Granted, I am curious what Luke looks like all stripped down. I bet he's muscular all over. I'd love to see—

"S-Sakurako?" Luke says, slightly bewildered by my stare boring into his pecs.

*Whoops.* Sorry. My thoughts got away from me again. I draw on all my mental reserves to pull myself together and take off, yelling 'farewell' over my shoulder.

Anyway... Kazuya and Luke had a ball together. But I thought Kazuya had a thing for Ganzi! I didn't expect him to switch to Luke! I don't wanna be Kazuya's rival in the fight for Luke's affections. Kazuya's got game. Everyone in our neighborhood thinks he's an angel, but I can't help but shudder at how big the difference is between how he acts most of the time and how he really is when his mask slips.



## Intermission: Kazuya's Take

"**KAZUYA**, you don't seem to like me very much," Luke points out, wiping spring water off his face.

I give an annoyed sigh. "Obviously. Don't ask me why. You already know."

Luke laughs apologetically. "Yeah, it's to do with Sakurako."

I say nothing. My hands prickle from the cool water when I dip them in the spring.

"You like her, too," Luke mutters, cutting through my silence.

'Too.' That makes it clear he likes Sakurako. I knew, but it pangs me to hear him say it out loud. Eventually, I murmur, "Yeah. I've always loved her." I clasp my hands together underwater. Like I'm squeezing it out—the words, and the coldness of the spring.

I've always loved her, and probably always will. But at this point, I'm certain it's going to go nowhere.

"You two grew up together, didn't you? I envy you."

"No, it's not actually a good thing." I meant it. Countless times I've thought that if Sakurako and I had met some other way, she might've been more conscious that I'm a regular guy.

"Are you sure?" Luke says. "From what I see, I'm right to be envious. You've known her since she was little, so you've got a special bond that no one else can undermine."

Even if that were the case—No, precisely because that's the case, that bond is



the reason I can't change our relationship for the better. I mutter bitterly, "We're too close. She doesn't see me as anything more than a brother, and likely never will."

Luke peers at me, his brow furrowed. "I doubt that."

"I don't. I have no chance."

"How can you be so sure about that?"

"Because...I wished for that myself. I threw myself at her like a little kid, because I didn't want to be left alone."

If it wasn't for the accident...the bus that killed Sakurako's parents and mine...

As neighbors, we have been together since we were in diapers. Bubbly, cheerful, kind Sakurako was also unfathomably strong and clumsy, and I could never leave her alone. I was in love before I'd realized it. Naturally, she never picked up on my feelings, but I still thought the day would come when she'd understand how I felt. Because, before the accident, she didn't used to treat me like a little brother. I figured that once I became a man worthy of her, I could confess how I long for her.

Until I cried to her.

She was unconscious, in critical condition, her face covered with a respirator in a bleak hospital room.

The bus we were all on together collided head-on with a drunk driver in a car. Both my parents and hers died instantly. I was the only one among us who was virtually unharmed. With my mom and dad ripped away from me, and terrified of losing even Sakurako, I begged her to stay, "Please don't leave me. I've lost my whole family."

Her eyes opened at once. She fumbled for my hand, turned her face slightly toward me, then spoke through the plastic mask. "I won't leave you. I'm here. I'll be your family."

Her incredible recovery speed puzzled doctors, but they discharged her after a few weeks. After that she started treating me like a baby brother; I suspect because of how I'd appealed to her in that moment. She tried to become my

standin family. From then on, no matter what I said, Sakurako stopped thinking of me as a potential partner. Which only makes sense, considering how I am.

Sakurako got hurt in the first place, while I made it out with nothing more than bruises and scratches because she protected me. I should've been the one to shield her, but in that split second, I was too scared to move. I didn't know what was going to become of us, only for her to swoop in—

“Kazuya?” Luke interrupts, worried.

I lift my head and look him over. His face is so perfect, even a straight guy like me can tell he's blessed. Plus, he's genuinely nice. I've hung around him enough to know that. I know he's serious about Sakurako and will take good care of her. On top of that, he's strong. Strong enough to measure up to Sakurako. He has the strength I've always wanted... He's way better suited to Sakurako than I am. If I really were Sakurako's brother—not to be a dinosaur, but I'd probably be willing to entrust my sister to him.

I hate that. If he was a powerless womanizer, I wouldn't step aside no way, no how, even if I thought he'd never back off.

*Stop it.*

Stop showing up out of the blue to take away what doesn't even belong to me. Stop stealing the most important person in this world and any other from me.

“Why do you like Sakurako?” I spit out, trying to confine the hatred threatening to swallow me up. Despite my efforts, my words bear a hint of resentment.

“I don't know how to answer that. From the moment our eyes met, I couldn't look away. Every little thing she does is adorable and compels me. She helped my mother, and when she smiles, she's more beautiful than anyone I've ever met. When she's around, I want to protect her, so I find myself trying harder than usual.”

He wants to protect her? And he says it so casually, being in the dark about her phenomenal strength. I can't help but snicker. What would he think if he knew she's way stronger than him? Would he write her off as impertinent for

hurting his pride? Would he lose interest?

“What’s wrong?” he asks with that handsome face of his, the type that Sakurako clearly likes, and which I therefore can’t stand.

“Look,” I begin without thinking. “If—and this is purely hypothetical—but if Sakurako weren’t as weak as you think, how would you take it?”

Luke holds his breath, confused.

*Damn it. I know I’m being antagonistic, but the only reason I’m asking is because if he laughs off the possibility a girl could be stronger than him, or admits he’ll lose interest if Sakurako’s strong, then it’ll be a colossal weight off my shoulders.*

Finally, Luke says, “Can she fight? Sometimes, she seems formidable like that, or something.”

I look up in surprise. I didn’t want him to ask that. “No, no, it’s hypothetical, I don’t mean anything by it.”

Luke continues, ignoring my blustering, “I think I’d still be attracted to her whether she was strong or not. I’ve never felt like this about a girl before, so I can’t say for certain, but I doubt my feelings would change that easily.”

I can’t help but avert my gaze from his sincere stare. “Even though the person you want to protect would be stronger than you?”

“Just because she’d be stronger than me wouldn’t stop me from protecting her. I want to protect her because she’s important. You think so, too, because you care about her, don’t you?”

I bite my lip. He’s exactly right. I keep trying to protect her, to the extent that I can. When she was struggling to maintain her dojo, I studied long hours to wrap my head around accounting, management, and law. I know that strength can’t guard against everything, and I want to protect Sakurako from whatever else may trip her up. Even since we came to this other world, I’ve been desperately trying to protect her so she won’t go hungry or feel lonely. “...That’s right.”

It took a newcomer spelling it out in black and white for me to remember that. *Ugh, I’m so stupid.*

Sakurako might like Luke already. If not yet, then I'm sure she'll fall in love with him someday, because he's a good guy.

"I said earlier that I like watching Sakurako, but there are times when it becomes painful, like when the two of you are acting close. Yeah... I am jealous of you." Luke smiles sadly. Clearly he still doesn't understand a thing about our relationship.

"Am I in your way?" I mutter, self-deprecating.

Luke's eyes widen in surprise. "I'd be lying if I said no, but...I really want you to stay in our party."

"To help defeat the Demon King? I'm telling you, I'm not cut out for fighting."

"That's not true. You may have low self-esteem for some reason, but your ability to fight is as good as any full-fledged adventurer's. And I think having both of you will help us. I think we need you as much as we need Sakurako."

"Is storage magic that useful?"

"Yes, but that's not all. I enjoy practicing with you. This may sound strange, but I'll just say it. I don't have any friends my age, so I don't know anyone else like you. It's fun being with you, even if I get jealous sometimes. I can talk to you plainly, and we like the same girl, and I think we have a lot of things in common. I feel like we'll get along really well. What do you think?" Luke asks straight-faced.

My head hangs and I stare at the ground, poisoned by secondhand embarrassment at his brazen confidence. He's so self-assured; he's the star of his own elite world. I thought guys like him were extinct in this day and age. Maybe they're everywhere in this world.

"Yeah, I don't think so. I don't think I have much in common with someone who can be that cringe without batting an eyelid."

"Did I say something odd?" Luke's smile is so flawless, it enrages me.

*No matter how handsome you are, no matter how nice you are, no matter how much Sakurako likes you...I still won't step aside.*

I don't want to give up. One day, I'll push things with Sakurako as far as I can

take them. I feel that inevitability in my bones. But once I do, we won't be able to go back to the way things were.

While I hate my position as her oldest and closest friend, I'm afraid of losing it. That's exactly why I'll always be a coward. That's why someone like Luke will be able to take away the love of my life with ease. I know. I know every angle of my situation, from every direction.

Yet I still don't have the guts to say, *I love you*.

## Chapter 5: Too Strong, but I Want to Be Seen as Cute

“**HEY**, did you two end up bathing together?” I stealthily pounce on Kazuya to confirm it as soon as they come back washed and clean.

“As if we went in together. Gross. I just washed my face; he jumped into the pond,” Kazuya quibbles, clearly bothered by the question.

*Aw, Luke jumped into the pond? Just like a little kid! It's cute that he's so innocent! Hold up. Does that mean Kazuya saw him naked?! He saw Luke in the nude?!*

Yikes, easy, easy. I need to get a hold of myself. If I let myself get carried away by imagination, I'll turn into a total pervert.

“What?” Kazuya asks, picking up on the fact I wanna ask something else.

“Hey, Kazuya. Luke's cool, isn't he? Don't you think so, too? But I never expected I'd turn out to be, like, your rival or anything like that.”

“Rival in what?”

“You know! *That!* C'mon, you know what I'm talking about, don't you?!”

“I think you've got a screw loose. Sakurako, you're a menace to common sense.”

“Why? That's so mean!”

“Put a sock in it. I'll say it once and for all. I don't like guys!”

*Excuse me? He doesn't?*

“But I thought you liked Mr. Watanabe.”

Kazuya said he liked someone much stronger than himself, so who else could it be except for the long-time member of my dojo, Mr. Watanabe?

“No. Why would you think him of all people?”

“Because you told me that you like someone and that they're stronger than

you. So it has to be him.”

“Can’t you think of anyone stronger than Mr. Watanabe?”

I ponder for a moment. “No. Who?”

Kazuya strides off ahead at a brisk pace.

Is he in a bad mood?



**SINCE** that conversation, Kazuya’s been acting weird while we walk through the forest. He keeps looking at me meaningfully as if he’s about to say something, but ends up staying silent. What’s up with him? If he has anything he wants to say, he should come out with it. After all, we’re family.

Eventually, we come upon a large tree that bears huge, deep scratches in its trunk.

“Look,” Ganzi points out nervously. “A monster did this with its claws. Maybe the owl demon we’re looking for. The scratches are fresh, meaning it’s close by.”

The marks do look like claw or talon scratches. If they are, the demon must be quite big.

Kazuya frowns at them and mutters to me, “Didn’t we see an owl demon as soon as we got here?”

So he still thinks that the monster I killed when we first arrived in this world was an owl demon, even though I’ve told him it couldn’t be because it was so weak. I’m taken aback that he doesn’t believe me.

“Where do we go from here? Can you tell which way it went?” Leila asks Ganzi.

“Yeah. These footprints show it was here not long ago. If we follow them, we’ll meet up with it sooner or later. When we do, we should strike first.”

Everyone nods at this suggestion.

“I don’t know. These scratches look too large for an owl demon,” Leila says uncomfortably.

Luke nods and says confidently, "Right, it may be an extra-large one. But we'll be okay. We can beat it."

Ganzi lets out a small sigh. "Uh-huh. Either way, we have to beat it. Let's go."

We set out, following the footprints. Ganzi leads, then Luke is in front of me and Kazuya after telling us to stick together in the center of the path, followed by Leila, then by Molozov in the rear.

Ganzi creeps forward slowly, fixed on the footprints. The terrain isn't tough, but I'm nervous and tire quickly because everyone's so wary of our surroundings. The others look exhausted, too.

"Wait here," Ganzi says and scales a tree. He stops with his foot on a sturdy branch near the top of the tree and looks into the distance using an apparatus like binoculars. "There," he mutters, and climbs down. "I saw it not far from here. There's no doubt it's the one that left these prints."

"Let's go, then," Leila says. "We can launch a surprise attack."

"No, we can't. It isn't an owl demon... I think it's an Owl Demon Lord."

*Owl Demon Lord? What's that?* Kazuya looks as confused as me, but the rest of the Evenfall Lions draw sharp breaths.

"But that's an A-class monster," Leila mumbles, dumbfounded.

Ganzi's lip curls. "It could be the monster that's caused all the damage that got reported in town, or there could be an owl demon *and* an Owl Demon Lord out here."

"Either way, we don't have any choice but to take it on now," Leila retorts.

"But it's an Owl Demon Lord!" Ganzi argues.

Leila returns his glare. "We're an A-class party. We can beat it!"

"We only made A-class because we had Gale and Holly with us as a healer and sorcerer. They're gone, and we aren't prepared to fight an A-class monster. I won't let you endanger yourself and Luke."

"It's now or never, Ganzi. I'm not a queen anymore, and Luke isn't just a prince, but a hero. There's no turning back for us. Not to mention, we're the



only powerful party who stands between that Owl Demon Lord and the town.”

“But...” Ganzi’s protests are losing steam.

“I’ll go. Let me go. I can beat it.” Luke puts his hand on Ganzi’s shoulder, a smile spreading on his face. “To tell the truth, I’m sick of only killing monsters that don’t stand a chance against me. I’m grateful for this opportunity.” His smile is different than his usual gentle one. This one is hard and a tad terrifying. Maybe he’s pumped for a shot to test his strength.

It makes Ganzi gulp. He nods. “Fine, but don’t overdo it. We’ll do what we can to give you the advantage in battle.”

“Good, that’s settled. What’s the monster doing now?” Leila says. “It’d be perfect if it were asleep.”

“Can you lend me those binoculars?” Kazuya asks Ganzi. “I’ve got appraisal magic, as well. I might be able to examine the monster in more detail if I can see it.”

“You can appraise from a distance?!” Luke starts. “Your magic is...something else.”

Kazuya coolly ignores Luke’s shock, grabs Ganzi’s binoculars, and ascends the tree. Once he’s near the top, he turns in the direction that Ganzi was facing, puts the binoculars to his eyes, and casts a spell. A minute or so later, he descends smoothly, his face as casual as ever.

“It’s sleeping right now. I appraised it and saw ‘Status: Sleeping’. And I can confirm its name is ‘Owl Demon Lord’. It’s the kind of monster that spawns naturally.”

“Oh. Th-thanks, Kazuya. You can tell all that from this far away? Wow.” Ganzi takes his binoculars back, looking shaken.

“It was nothing. I’ll make a map so we can come up with a strategy to slaughter it safely.” Kazuya shrugs off his rucksack, takes a piece of paper from it, and casts a map magic spell. In no time, a map appears on it, which Kazuya passes to Ganzi.

Ganzi looks even more astonished. “Thanks. You really can do anything, can’t

you? From now on, whenever I'm stuck, I'll come straight to you."

"Go ahead, but I'm a merchant, so it'll cost you."

"Can't you gimme a friend's discount?" Ganzi jokes before the two of them get down to business with the map. "This red dot is the monster. And this... Does this mark show its status?" Ganzi places his finger on a 'Z' shape next to a red dot.

Kazuya nods. "It shows things as they are at present, meaning there's a high chance it's asleep. In the unlikely event it wakes up now, this mark would disappear."

Luke whistles in admiration. "Wow. This is the first time I've seen a map this advanced. So it shows whether monsters have noticed us or not? Huh. Your magic's both useful and off-putting... Ahem."

"We appreciate this a lot, Kazuya. This'll give us the upper hand in the attack." Ganzi points a few inches away from the red dot. "First off, we should head here without being noticed, where Leila can launch a pre-emptive all-out assault. Can you do that, Ma'am?"

"Sure can. I'll slam it with all my might!" Leila gives a cocky smile which soon falls. "But I don't think I can defeat it with my magic alone."

"I know, but it'll at least weaken it. Luke and I will finish it off in melee combat."

"Wait," Luke said. "I can finish it off by myself."

Ganzi shoots down this strategy with a composed nod at Luke's sword. "That's a no. Luke, if we give you space to rush in alone, you'll go all out against it and your sword won't be able to take it. If your sword breaks at a crucial moment, we'll lose."

Luke's face contorts with frustration, but he reluctantly nods. "All right."

Having watched Luke wield his sword against smaller monsters, I have to agree it won't last long against a real monster. He's beaten a ton in the time we've been in the forest and had to hold back his power each time, either because they weren't worth it or because he was worried about breaking his

sword. I'm not trying to be mean, but his sword is more of a blunt object than a sharp one at this point. It's covered in chips and looks one strike away from splintering.

Leila claps her hand on Luke's shoulder. "We really need to get you a sword that'll match you." She turns to Molozov. "Molozov, would you mind watching out for Sakurako and Kazuya?"

"Um, w-we can help, too! You all keep protecting us during battles, but we don't want to burden you," I say.

Luke smiles kindly. "I'd rather you stayed clear of the battle. I don't want you involved. Please leave it to us."

"But..." *To be honest, I might be pretty strong.* I bite back the words, worried about what he'll think. I don't want him to dislike me, nor do I want anyone to call me a monster and say I have superhuman strength like people used to. But this is a crucial moment, so it's now or never—

Kazuya puts his hand over my mouth and murmurs, "Let's let them take the front line. We aren't combat classes. Besides, they say it's on their level and they're up for the challenge, so they'll be fine. It's okay to take a backseat and chill every now and then."

"Kazuya..." I mumble back, still lost as to what to do.

"Thanks, Kazuya. You, too, Sakurako. Just your offer to fight alongside me makes me happy. But I can show my full potential so long as you're a safe distance away, so I'd prefer that."

"Oh, I'll be in your way otherwise? Sorry," I apologize, flustered. Now that I think about it, I'm not used to playing in a team. Martial arts are always one on one. I haven't fought a major monster before either, so I'd probably be a hindrance.

"No, that's not what I mean. How can I put it? I feel stronger when there's someone I'm trying to protect." Luke hits me with his usual passionate gaze.

Which makes my heart pound, like I'm a normal girl—Uh, ignore that; I mean, I *am* 100 percent a normal, fragile girl!

The party devises a detailed strategy, then we head to where the Owl Demon Lord is sleeping. As we creep into a position with a good vantage point where we're hidden from its eyesight, everyone shuffles so nervously that the tension is suffocating.

The Owl Demon Lord must be reeeally strong. Its name alone has 'Lord' in it!

Finally, we reach a point where we can see the monster clearly. I lean forward through bushes until I see it... Um... It looks a lot like the monster whose body I put a hole in. It's got an owl head and a humanoid body, but a point of difference is that this one has wings stretching off its arms. Its hands are capped with big, sharp talons.

And it's *tall*. The monster I defeated was about six-and-a-half feet tall and brown. This one is ten feet tall, and its wings are silver. More significantly, its talons are enormous, and it has two large horns growing out of its head. It looks very strong.

What's especially weird is that it's not moving and seems to be asleep, but its eyes are wide open. I wonder if it gets dry eyes, sleeping like that.

Ganzi spreads out Kazuya's map and double-checks that the 'Z' mark is still there.

Leila nods and starts casting. "'Fire, burn all to ashes. Let us all fall at once in the Goddess of Fire's embrace. Burn along with all reason in the world, leaving naught but sweet silence.'"

Heat erupts in front of her and I raise my hand to block the blast of hot wind coming from her so I can still see what's happening.

"Fire Lance!" she cries and sends a fireball hurtling toward the Owl Demon Lord.

"Gaaaugh!" A pained cry signifies a direct hit, but the monster doesn't die. When the flames dissipate into smoke, we see it standing, its body scorched. "Aeeeeeeee!" it screams.

Leila raises her staff and Luke and Ganzi step forward. Molozov steps in front of me and Kazuya, blocking us from harm with his shield.

“If anything happens to Luke and Ganzi, I’ll go help them. If I do, hide behind this shield. In the worst-case scenario, run away.” The usually taciturn Molozov says a mouthful, then turns his watchful stare on the monster.

The worst-case scenario? No one’s mentioned that yet. Guess this means that monster might be that strong.

The scorched monster has suffered burns to most of its body, so it’s moving in awkward, jolting, probably pained motions. But despite its slowness, Luke and Ganzi can’t launch a decisive attack because conditions around it are weirdly windy... Yeah, gusts of wind are blowing around the monster.

Ganzi grips the ground to avoid being blown away. He can’t get any closer, so he throws a dagger at the monster instead. The wind blows it off course.

There’s no mistaking it—this wind is blowing around the Owl Demon Lord as if to block Luke’s attack.

“Damn it, it’s got permanently activated wind magic!” Ganzi says in disgust.

So this is what wind magic looks like.

Ganzi can’t get closer, but Luke resists the wind and swings his sword at the monster. Although his speed and strength have been halved, it by no means makes him an easy target for the monster, and the two commence a protracted one-on-one battle.

Kazuya casts a spell next to me, then says, “It’s using wind magic generated by its wings. If we wet its wings, it’ll halt the wind temporarily.”

“Did you just analyze it?” I ask.

Kazuya nods. “That’s how we can beat it. Leila, can you shoot water magic over its head?”

Leila sets her jaw grimly. “I can. Why? To soak it so it can’t use magic? How can we get water close enough with all that wind?”

“Look at it closely. The leaves of the tree are whirling around the monster like a tornado, so it’s likely there’s a dead zone above its head, like the eye of a vortex. We should be able to drench it if we pour water down from there.”

It does look how he explained it. The wind’s like a mini tornado blowing

around the Owl Demon Lord.

Leila nods firmly. “O water, O intangible, pour down at my bidding, like a flowing, writhing python, acquiesce! Water ball!”

A sphere appears like a bubble just above the monster’s head and drops, dousing it. It clenches its eyes shut at the sudden deluge, and the wind ceases. Right at that moment, Luke hefts his great sword high and swings it down. It strikes the monster’s shoulder and slices through it vertically like it’s made of soft cheese. It slowly falls to the ground and fades into mist, leaving a fist-sized green jewel and a smattering of feathers.

“You did it!” Ganzi yells with glee and pokes Luke in the ribs.

Leila runs to hug Luke, who’s frolicking like a little boy. “Well done! That’s my son!”







We've hung around the party for a few days now, but for some reason it doesn't feel right for me and Kazuya to join in, so we hang back. After a few seconds, I notice Molozov is also hesitant to go join them.

"Go ahead," Kazuya tells him, and Molozov gives a brief apology, drops his shield, and enters the celebrating circle.

Good for them. I dunno, accomplishing a big task together looks kinda fun.

"That guy's seriously brilliant. He cut it in half!" Even Kazuya sounds like he can't believe it. I turn to see him smiling excitedly. Oh, yeah. He and Luke have been on good terms lately. Maybe he's happy his friend knocked it out of the park.

"He's cool, isn't he?" I ask.

Kazuya's smile clouds over at once like I just chided him and he replies curtly after a pause, "Yeah."

"You were cool, too," I say. "You're the reason Leila stopped the wind magic." I mean it. Kazuya's amazing. He always knows things I don't and comes up with all kinds of stuff. Nothing like me, who always acts first and asks questions later.

Kazuya looks startled. "I swear, it's because you say things like that sometimes..."

Luke cuts him off with a hug. "Kazuya! I heard you're responsible for stopping the wind magic! Thank you!"

"Ugh, get off of me!" Kazuya protests, but he seems to enjoy the praise.

Those two get along so well. I smile fondly, happy that Kazuya's made a friend when he usually struggles to. Luke meets my gaze and lets Kazuya go, then comes over to me and hugs me as well.

*Wha—...?! Wh-whaaat?! L-Luke is h-h-hugging me right now?!*

"Sakurako, thank goodness you're safe." He pulls me closer.

*What?! I'm not used to this sort of passionate embrace! My heart's gonna explode!* "L-Luke, my chest!"

Kazuya hooks his hands on Luke's shoulders and peels Luke off of me. Oh my

God, my poor heart! It's beating like a bat out of hell. I've got palpitations and can hardly breathe!

"Look, Luke, we weren't raised in a culture where people just hug one another," Kazuya gives an impromptu, stern lesson on Japanese etiquette, in complete contrast to his happy attitude a minute ago.

Luke hurriedly takes his remaining hand off my shoulder. "I'm sorry, both of you. I just couldn't hold back... I really am glad you're safe, and I was able to beat the monster because you were watching, Sakurako. I got stronger than usual when I thought how I had to protect you." Luke shoots me a shy smile.

*Ack! What do I say to that?* I'm over the moon. No one's ever worried about protecting me before.

Yeah... I think I might like him. Luke, I mean. But what would he think if he knew I wasn't actually weak? Would he not want to protect me anymore? Does he only think of me as worth protecting because I'm little and fragile?

"Sakurako? I-I'm sorry, please don't be troubled by it. I'm sorry I hugged you out of nowhere," Luke says, worried by my sudden silence.

I anxiously shake my head. "I'm not bothered! I was surprised, but I'm fine now! Really!"

"No, I apologize. I'll be more careful from now on." Luke smiles softly. Man, he's cool!

"Let's send up a signal to show the quest's over," Ganzi says happily.

"A smoke signal?" Kazuya asks.

"Yeah. Once you complete a quest successfully, you need to send up blue smoke to let everyone else know it's over. Although our original target was an owl demon, it's possible people mistook the Owl Demon Lord for that, so we'd better clear things up as soon as we can." Ganzi rummages through his bag and takes out a powdery blue rock. "Kazuya, do you have a flint?"

Kazuya is peering grimly into the distance. "Hey, Ganzi. You said blue smoke indicates a quest is over, right? What does red smoke mean?"

"It means you're dealing with a monster that's out of your league, or your

party's about to be wiped out. It's an SOS signal."

Kazuya raises his arm and points at the sky. "So that's bad."

A thin trail of red smoke is rising in stark contrast with the blue sky.

Ganzi's frown matches Kazuya's and he mutters in a low voice, "Yeah. That's bad."

## Chapter 6: Too Strong, but I Want to Fall in Love

**WE** run toward the rising red smoke.

“Maybe there’s an owl demon out here, too? And the information the Guild acted on to start this quest was accurate?” Leila puffs as she runs.

“What’s the chance it’s another Owl Demon Lord?” Kazuya asks.

“No chance whatsoever. You never see that with any monsters higher than C-class,” Ganzi answers. “Strong monsters get territorial toward monsters on the same level, so it’s not possible for two Owl Demon Lords to inhabit the same woods. Of course, it might be a sub-species of owl demon.” His tone brightens as he adds, “If that’s all it is, we’ll be able to handle it even if the other party’s down.”

Kazuya remains unconvinced.

“What’s wrong?” I ask him.

“You already beat one owl demon, so that should’ve been the end of it. It was C-class, so it should’ve been the only one here. Which means we’re probably heading toward a whole different kind of monster. One more dangerous than the others expect.”

*What? When did I beat an owl demon?* Oh, right. Kazuya still suspects that’s what we killed when we first arrived in this world. But that’s impossible, because it was such a lightweight. At least, I hope that’s the case...

Thinking back, I’m not so sure anymore. The Owl Demon Lord we defeated earlier was supposed to be a higher order species of the owl demon I beat way back when, which looked quite similar.

Screams pierce the air, followed by the roar of violent wind. Is someone getting attacked? Even the smell of blood is in the air. I hold my breath, picturing the worst.

“We can hardly see anything through all the tall trees,” Ganzi grumbles.

Heavy footfalls thud toward us. With Luke in the lead, we ready ourselves to take on whatever's coming, only to see a man and woman tearing our way, crying and screaming. The woman throws herself at Luke, clinging to him like her life depends on it.

"Help us, please! It's still attacking our friends!" she cries.

"Are you the ones who raised the red smoke signal?" Ganzi asks.

The woman wails and nods, unable to put into words the terror her face is conveying.

"Meirin! Forget them! No one can save them now," the man snaps at her. "We need to get further away! It's gonna catch us!"

"B-but, Augen!" Meirin protests.

"Hold on, tell us what's going on!" Ganzi says. "What's over there? An owl demon?"

The man frowns, clearly not wishing to remember. "It's not an owl demon! It's one of *those*—" A tremendous blustering wind interrupts him. "It's coming! We're done for! There's no way you can beat it. It's..." The rest of his moans are drowned out by the wind.

*What's coming?* I search for Kazuya, and when I find his hand, I grab it. Kazuya squeezes back.

I have to protect Kazuya. I *will* protect him.

The wind stops, and I sense something bad overhead. Looking up, I see what looks like a beautiful man floating in the sky. It has long brown hair tied in a tight, slicked-back ponytail, and it's staring down at us with its arms crossed. On closer inspection, I see its arms are more like wings, the skin of its feet is scaly, and its hands and feet have talons instead of nails...which are dripping with fresh blood. It's a monster.

Kazuya begins casting a spell. My hand trembles in his.

"It's an Owl Demon God," Kazuya tells me under his breath, his voice hoarse with nerves. "It's an S-class monster."

"Wh-what on earth is an Owl Demon God doing here? What's going on?" Leila

yelps.

“No! It’s caught up already!” Augen shouts bitterly.

Meirin, who is still hanging onto Luke for dear life, looks up and turns as white as a sheet. “L-look, see what’s in its claws? Those are Celas’s clothes! No, no, I can’t, no!”

Her frantic shrieking compels Augen to grab hold of her. “You lot, get out of here!” he says to us. “Hurry! There’s no way you can beat that thing!”

But just as they turn to run, the monster dives after them.

Luke reacts in a flash, leaping in front of them and shielding them with the broad side of his sword.

“Luke!” Leila shouts.

Luke has stopped the monster, yes, but it’s gripping his sword with its feet so hard that the metal creaks. The two are in a power struggle, but the monster has the upper hand. His arms are still crossed, and he has a sly smile on his face.

Luke doesn’t take his eyes off the monster as he yells to Augen and Meirin, “Get away from here! Now!” His shouting hides Leila’s voice as she chants a spell. “Mother! You go, too, while I’m buying time! Same goes for the rest of you!”

“What are you talking about?! We could never leave you!” Leila pauses her casting to argue.

Luke struggles to push the monster back, his sword being yanked this way and that. “Please! Leave already. We aren’t enough to beat this guy... Ganzi!”

Ganzi looks pained, but he obediently holds Leila back to prevent her from rushing over to Luke.

“Ganzi?! What are you doing?!”

“We can’t, Lady Leila. Sakurako and Kazuya need to leave, too.”

Just as we’re about to make a break for it, a booming sound cuts through the wind.

Molozov springs in front of Leila and Ganzi and slams his shield into the

ground to block the impact of the shockwaves. Despite that, all three are blown away into trees. They collapse heavily on the ground.

“Leila!” I shriek. “Ganzi! Molozov!” I want to go to them, but Luke’s desperate shout stops me.

“No, don’t! Sakurako! Run, now, even if you’re the only one who makes it!” He glares grimly at the monster, his sword still caught in its talons.

In stark contrast, the monster wears a brazen, relaxed smirk. It spreads its wings once more, then claps its hands together as if praying, sending a sharp wind hurtling toward Luke.

Luke grits his teeth and ducks his head behind his sword to block the wind. Small, fresh cuts appear everywhere that’s exposed, but he holds out.

Did that monster cause the wind? Is it using wind magic? So that wind blew the rest of the Evenfall Lions away?

“Sakurako, go! I can’t hold it back much longer! Kazuya, Sakurako...!”

I can’t take my eyes off the two of them. Luke’s sword is starting to crack. It’s seconds away from shattering, but for some reason, I don’t care. It doesn’t matter to me.

I’m delirious with anger. All my rage is rushing to my head. Luke’s voice sounds far away.

“Sakurako,” Kazuya sounds worried about me, but he feels distant, too. Why’s his voice so faint?

I can’t speak a word. I’m afraid that if I say anything, I’ll curse the monster so loudly that it’ll burst everyone’s eardrums.

I motion for Kazuya to get behind me.

The monster moves his arms, and the roar of the wind is deafening. *Uh-huh. I knew it.* That’s how it sent those three flying.

I approach it and Luke, step by step. Although it waves its arms again, focused on me now, I pay it no mind. My hair whips in the wind as it frowns, confused.

*What, thought you could blow me away with a breeze that wispy?*

“No, don’t! My sword’s about to—” Luke yells in a panic.

*Kah-KSSH.*

Luke’s sword finally gives up. He loses his balance when it shatters and falls to his knees. But the monster’s moved on. It glares at me, spreading its arms wide again and sending another gust my way.

If it thinks that’ll make me flinch, it’s got another thing coming. Now it’s starting to look flustered. It flaps its wings to climb higher.

*Nope. You’re mine.*

I lunge at it before it can escape into the sky, grab one of its long, bird-like legs, and hurl it back into the ground. It groans in agony, then claps its hands together again. What a sore loser.

The wind it sends forth makes a tree collapse behind me. Just from that? The trees in this world are so feeble.

“What are you trying to achieve? Cut it out. You’re messing up my hair.”

The monster slides on its backside, struggling to retreat as I draw closer. I come within arm’s reach—near enough to hit it—when it lies back fully and kicks its leg up, barely missing me.

“Nice kick.” I grab the leg before me, swing the monster’s whole body into the air, and slam it back into the dirt. Releasing its leg, I straddle it and raise my fist.

The monster sucks in a draught of air and spews flames out of its mouth. I bend at the waist to dodge them.

“Look out. You could really hurt somebody,” I say.

The monster twists to break free, but I won’t let it. I flex my thighs and hold them tense to stop it from wriggling. A muffled groan doesn’t cover the sound of crunching. I think I might’ve crushed a few ribs, but it manages to get an arm loose and starts swinging it around.

With every wave, I hear whistling and thunderous breaking—maybe of trees being mowed down behind us. Besides the noise, I don’t notice anything in particular, but man, it’s loud.



My hair's a mess and I'm sick of the cacophony, so I snap his forearm.

Having lost the use of its arm, the monster breathes in again to blast me with fire.

"Somebody'll get hurt if you do that." I hold the monster's chin and clamp its mouth shut.

Its eyes dart around in alarm before its throat glows red and the smell of burning flesh permeates the air. When I release its chin, black smoke pours out of its mouth.

"Did you burn your own throat? I told you someone'd get hurt."

Although it's scorched its own mouth, I gotta say, it's resilient. The arm I just fractured is jolting and bucking back into place. Is it healing itself? Does it have a healing ability?

Its crushed pelvis and ribs feel like they've hardened and healed, too... Not good. At this rate, it's going to end up suffering for a long while. I don't want to bully a creature weaker than me. I'm no sadist. I'll put it out of its misery right away. I raise my fist and breathe in, focusing.

"Eeep!" the monster squeaks in terror. It looks kind of pitiful, but I won't forgive it for hurting Leila, Ganzi, and Molozov. I hope they're okay. They only got hit by the wind, so they ought to survive. It even put Luke and Kazuya in danger... I'll never forgive it for hurting my friends.

"This is for the Evenfall Lions." I bring my fist down hard.





A boom ricochets off the ground so loudly that it sounds like an earthquake. A huge hole opens where the monster's navel used to be, its eyes look like they're about to pop out, and its skin turns ghostly white.

"I'm sorry... Demon King..." it croaks, then goes still.

I'm pretty sure it's dead. How pathetic. I was planning to whack it for scaring Kazuya and for breaking Luke's sword, too, but it's done and dusted.

As I stand up, sighing with relief, the monster glows and disappears. It leaves behind its wings, talons, and a beautiful emerald-colored jewel the size of a human head.

I shake myself out of my attack stance. I'm more tired than I thought... Rather, I'm hungry. Maybe it's because I haven't exercised in a while. Oh, I packed some homemade cookies for the party! They have a skill effect that enables recovery from fatigue, so they'll hit the spot. I bet Leila and the others are tired, too. We should eat together.

My temper, which was white-hot a moment ago, cools down. I breathe deeply and look around. For some reason, the terrain looks entirely different. Tall trees are lying on their sides like plucked and discarded flowers, and I'm standing in a sort of crater.

Did the monster cause this?

Oh! Where's Kazuya?! And what's become of Luke, Leila, and the others?!

My head goes blank. I only remember being furious. Did I do all this? When I fought the monster?

"Sakurako!"

I whip around to see Kazuya. His clothes are a little ragged, but he's in one piece. "Kazuya!"

He slides down the rim of the crater to meet me.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I lost track of my surroundings! Are you injured? Is anyone?!"

"No, everyone's fine. Things were definitely dangerous, but I was ready for it,

because, well, it's you we're talking about. Luke took me and carried Leila and the others a safe distance away to protect them."

"He did?" I look up to the edge of the crater again and see Luke staring down at me, dumbfounded. When our eyes meet, I involuntarily drop my gaze.

Oh, no. No, no, no, *no*. Did he see what happened just now? He must have.

I went on a rampage without regard for everyone nearby, and wreaked havoc on the woods. He had to have seen it all. Now he knows I'm not some weak girl. I've really done it now. Right in front of Luke...

*Please don't hate me.*

I don't wanna be hated. I don't want people to say they don't like me anymore. I don't want Luke to say that. I don't want to be called a monster and told I have superhuman strength. Please don't hate me!

"Kazuya!" I grasp Kazuya's hand. "Let's make a run for it!"

"What? Run from what?"

"C'mon, just come with me!" I pull him along and set off climbing up the side of the crater opposite where Luke is standing.

"Sakurako?" Luke calls anxiously as we run.

*I'm sorry, Luke.*

But I don't want this. I don't want him to hate me. He's always treated me like a real girl. At times, he gazed at me passionately... He made me feel like I was normal. But I know for sure he won't look at me like that anymore. He might call me a monster, or a girl who's too strong! I don't want him to say that!

"Sakurako! Where are you going?!" He chases after us.

I desperately don't want him to see me, so I pick up a big fallen tree and place it in the middle of the path to block his passage. "I'm sorry, Luke! And, um, thanks for everything!"

I pull Kazuya into a sprint.

We keep running until we can't hear Luke calling our names anymore. He can't leave Leila and the others alone while they're unconscious.

*I'm so sorry. I wasn't lying, except by omission.* I don't want to see Luke's face anymore. If he looks at me frightened instead of looking enamored like before... I hate the thought of never being on the receiving end of his gentle smile again.

I thought that with Luke—Luke, whose face turns beetroot red with only a few words, so much so that I get swept up in secondhand embarrassment—I thought I might be able to fall in love for the first time.

I want to fall in love like a normal girl. I thought I could. Yes, I wanted to fall in love... I wanted that so badly.

I thought I'd never have the kind of romance you see in stories, but then the possibility was dangled in front of me in this world. I thought that if people weren't afraid of me and treated me like a normal girl, then maybe love might be in the cards.

But did I just want to fall in love, and it didn't matter so much that the other person was Luke? Did I just use him to fulfill my desires because he was nearby?

It occurs to me that I haven't been properly focused on Luke. If I really liked him, surely I wouldn't have run away. Am I just using him? I stop.

Kazuya bumps into my back.

"Ow! Hey, don't stop without warning," Kazuya pants.

"K-Kazuya." I turn to say something to him, but I don't know what to say, so I keep opening and closing my mouth.

After Kazuya regains his breath, he cocks his head. "What's wrong? No, first tell me why you ran away from Luke."

"Because I was scared... I don't want to see Luke if he's afraid of me."

"Why do you think he'll be afraid of you?"

"Because! He made me feel like a normal girl. I was so happy; I'd never felt like that before. But now that I think back on it, maybe I was just in love with love." I honestly don't know how I feel about Luke. I thought I liked him, but now I'm not sure at all. I wanted to fall in love and went for the first guy who fell for me.

But even if that's true, I must have felt more for him than that, because it

hurts me to imagine him no longer looking at me kindly. It hurts to think that he'll hate me. Fear me. Avoid me.

"If he hates me because he's scared, it'll break my heart."

Kazuya pauses, then says quietly, "I think you'll be fine, then."

"How will I be fine?"

"I mean...he's not..." Kazuya trails off. "Forget it."

"You can't stop in the middle of a sentence. I wanna know!"

"I said forget it. You know I can be a jerk."

*A jerk? Why is Kazuya suddenly insulting himself?* "You may have some bad points, but I wouldn't say you're a jerk."

Kazuya smiles faintly. "That's only because I act on my best behavior around you. Anyway, which way should we go now?" He changes the subject.

Uh... I brought us deep into the woods without a plan. "I dunno. What do you think?"

"No idea." Kazuya chuckles and smiles kindly. "But that's okay. If you continue going straight, we'll hit a town called Riesdane. I think it's pretty big. Let's go there."

"Okay! Thanks, Kazuya. You always go out of your way for me. I'm glad you're here."

Kazuya stares at me, taken aback by the sudden compliment.

"What?" I ask, tilting my head.

Kazuya reaches out to touch my hair. *Oh, no.* I bet it's a bird's nest thanks to that monster. I reach up to comb or pat it back into shape, and Kazuya grasps my hand.

"Hey, Sakurako. Do I really have no chance?" He stares at me, more serious than I've ever seen him.

I start to get nervous, not sure what's coming. I timidly ask, "What are you doing?"

“I’m saying...” Kazuya opens and closes his mouth several times, like he can’t bring himself to speak. He gulps and finally squeezes out, “What am I to you?”

“What? You’re family. And I treasure you. Don’t you know that? You’re like my brother.”

“But I’m not your brother. We aren’t related.”

“Wh-Why are you asking me this? Oh, I know what’s wrong. Are you angry with me for dragging you away from Luke? I know you were good buddies. I’m sorry, I didn’t ask before pulling you—”

“No! That’s not it. That’s not it...”

“Then what? You’re my family. It’s only us two. I think of you as family, and you’re very important to me. I thought you felt the same about me.”

“Yeah, you are important to me. You’re the most important thing to me.”

“Then we’re on the same page. You’re the most important thing to me.”

“No. Our feelings are not the same.”

“Yes, they are!”

“They’re not! That’s why I want to tell you...” Kazuya’s face suddenly draws near. So close that I put up my hand by reflex to stop him.

“Wh-why are you trying to bop me on the head?” Kazuya grumbles unhappily when I grab his cheek.

I recoil in astonishment. “Did I say something to make you angry? I never expected you to try and headbutt me.”

“I wasn’t trying to headbutt you! I was trying to kiss you! Get a clue already!”

“Kiss me? Wait, did you want to be like an American family that hugs and kisses each other?”

Kazuya heaves a great sigh and says emphatically, “No.”

Then what?

“...Sakurako, there’s dust on your bangs.”

“Ack, really?!” My hand flies to my bangs.



A shadow blocks the light in front of me and something soft connects with my lips. I freeze in shock when Kazuya slowly and deliberately pulls back.





“Huh? K-Kazuya, did you just...” Did he...kiss me? I’m too embarrassed to double-check, so I fail to finish my question. I’m staring at him in a daze when, for some reason, he kisses me again. It takes me a while to regain my senses and push his chest back. “Whoa, no, stop. Kazuya, you—... You’re only supposed to kiss someone special to you. Not even Americans kiss their family on the lips!” Heat stings my cheeks, so I must be glowing bright red. But gimme a break! This is my first kiss!

“You are special to me. Please at least understand that much. I’m sorry, Sakurako. Did you hate it?”

“I-I didn’t not like it. I’m just reeling...” My answer confirms for me how I feel. I’m surprised I’m not put out—rather, my face feels like it’s burning brighter and brighter. What can I do to stop it— “Wait, what do you mean I’m special?”

*What does he mean by ‘special’? I’m special? And he kissed me?* In other words, Kazuya...

My face is on fire. I look down to hide how red I am, and Kazuya wraps his arms around me, resting his chin on the top of my head. I’m frozen. I can’t even breathe.

Kazuya, meanwhile, chuckles happily above me. “If I’d known you were going to react this cutely, I would’ve done this earlier.”

“A-are you making fun of me?”

“No. I mean it.” His voice echoes gently in my ears and our lips meet again.

I don’t find this weird at all. In fact...it makes me feel happy.

## Epilogue: Too Strong, so the Demon King Wants a Piece

**WE** knew we wouldn't reach the next town by the end of the day, so we set up camp for the night instead. Being covered in sweat, I feel a bit gross, so I take some boiled water and a cloth to a stump away from the bonfire Kazuya's stoking, blocked from his view by trees. I sit on the stump and wipe the dirt off my body, but I can't think straight.

I mean, me and Kazuya, we kissed! Not only that, but on the l-l-lips! And not a chaste kiss like you see in American sitcoms! Ugh, it's messing with my head. It's all I've thought of the whole day, ever since it happened.

I'm supposed to think of Kazuya as my little brother. And yet... I murmur how I feel to the night sky. "I was okay with it."

Which means that I feel, I dunno, a little nervous camping alone with him. Because of the kiss. We both acted awkwardly after it and could hardly look each other in the face while trudging to this grove.

We barely said a word to each other, either—Well, that's not exactly true. I had a feeling Kazuya was trying to talk to me, but it went in one ear and out the other.

Because we kissed! WE KISSED!

And not on the forehead or cheek! Right smack on the lips!

Are you telling me Kazuya likes me? Like, y'know, in the romantic sense. So much happened today with Luke and everything, but ever since the kiss, all I can think about is Kazuya—

"You, woman. Have you seen someone strong around here?"

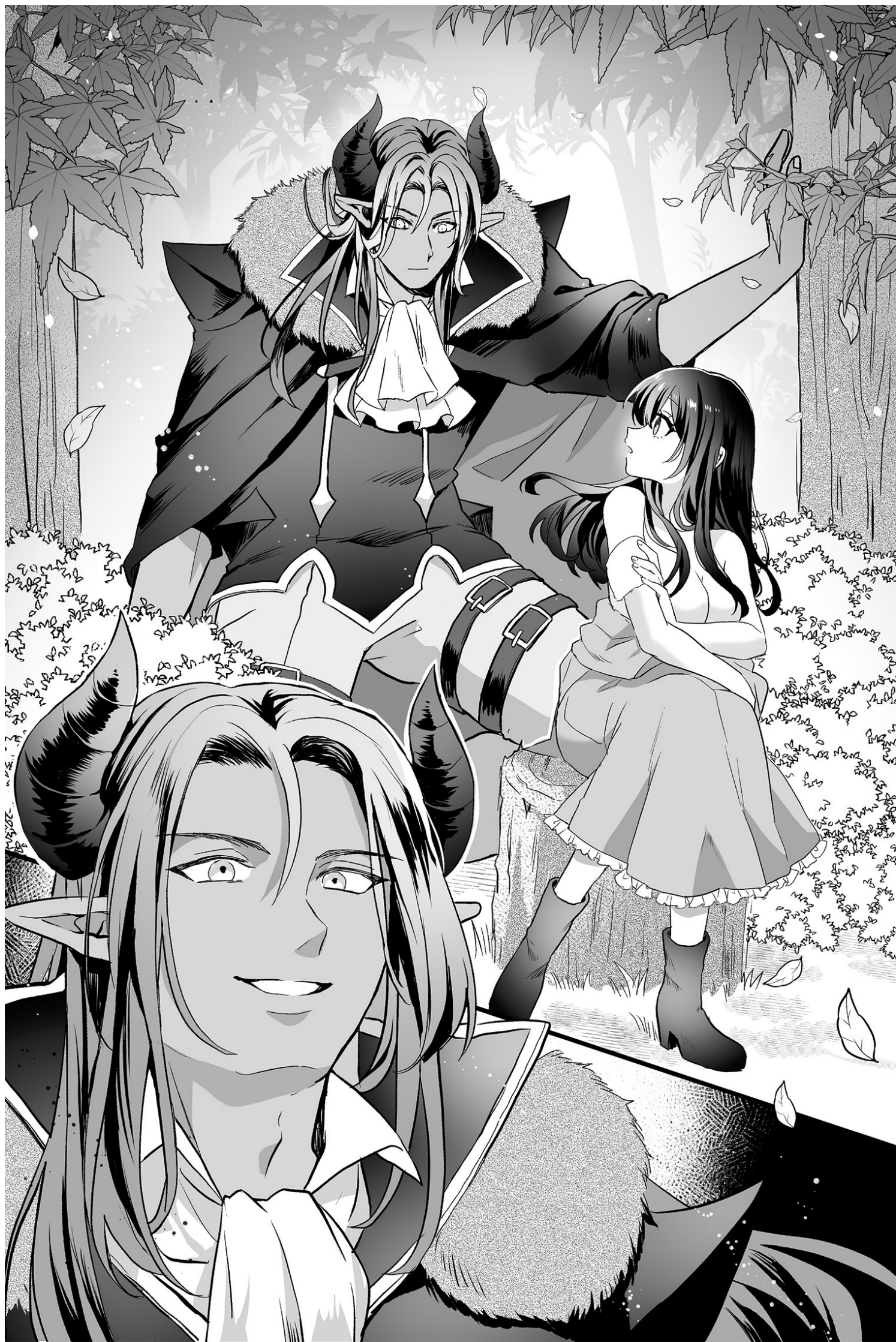
My head snaps up at the interruption. "Wh-who are you?!"

There's a brawny guy standing a few feet in front of me, staring down at me. No, wait, maybe not a 'guy'. I can see the color of his eyes even in the dim twilight. They're as red as flames. Are they shining? Hey, are those horns on his

head?

I was so wrapped up in thinking about Kazuya that I didn't notice someone sneaking up on me!







“Hmph, I don’t have a name that is fit for use by lowly mortals, but you may call me Gweldeian Asterious.”

He just said he didn’t have a name, then hit me with a confusing one! And I wasn’t focusing hard enough to remember it. I tremble with nerves, unsure whether I should ask him to repeat his name again.

He sneers. “Don’t be so frightened. Well, it’s only natural for a lesser creature to quiver at the sight of an absolute ruler.”

*Um, the only reason I’ve gone pale is because I committed a social faux pas.*

The thing’s wide, reptilian eyes bore into me. “Wench, where is the hero?”

“H-hero?” *When he says hero, does he mean Luke? Does this beast know Luke?*

“My subordinate was killed in this forest. As one of the Four Divine Kings, he belonged to a fairly strong class of monsters. Only a hero could have done the deed. Normally, the Demon King would never come here to see, but I deigned to drop in to satisfy my curiosity.”

“Subordinate? Demon King?” Who is this guy?

He looks like a man and can obviously talk, but he has horns on his head. And despite the dying light, a close look shows his skin color is a blueish-black. Is he a monster? Is he the Demon King, as in the king of monsters...?

“How long are you going to stare at me dumbfounded? Tell me what I wish to know, human woman. Or are you trying to tempt me by exposing yourself so?” He throws back his head, laughing.

*What? Exposed?* I glance down at myself. Oh my *GOD!* I forgot I was in the middle of washing myself! I’m topless!

“How dare you! Ew! You pervert!” By reflex, I shove the possible Demon King away from me with both hands, then cover my breasts as best I can.

I’ve *never* been accosted so openly by a sexual harasser before! What an awful man! I’m an unmarried teenager!

I fight back tears, ready to glare daggers at the bastard...only to find nothing

but empty space all around me. I only meant to push him away, but I was so panicked I forgot to control my force.

Now I remember hearing a grunt, like, “*Ngyuh!*” the same moment I sent him hurtling away. A slew of snapped trees ahead topple, crashing down onto the ground one by one. Um. Whoops. I was too strong.

“H-hey! Sakurako! What was that noise?!” Kazuya rushes into the clearing.

I grip my breasts to cover them, even more flustered now. “D-don’t look at me!”

“Oh, sorry!” Kazuya turns away.

I scramble to grab my shirt. He almost saw me half-naked! Actually, maybe he did catch a glimpse! I guess we did bathe together when we were kids... Nope, that counts for nothing anymore. I’m mortified!

My shaking fingers fumble to button up my shirt. Once I’m fully clothed and have taken a few deep breaths, I finally feel more put together and calm down a little.

Which brings me to my next problem. What happened to the molester? Is he okay? I turn in the direction he went flying, but can’t see anything besides toppled trees stretching into the distance. I guess I went too far.

Kazuya will save the day; he always does. I run over to him, where he’s still facing the other way to protect my privacy.

“Kazuya, I messed up! A guy with a confusing name showed up, and he might be a Demon King, and he saw me naked, and I blew him away!”

Kazuya frowns, puzzled. “Who had a confusing name? The Demon King? I’ll be honest, I don’t really follow, but if you’re saying those trees fell when you hit someone, they’ve got to be dead for sure...” He starts walking through the path cleared by the fallen trees. “We’d better go see.”

At the end of them, we find the guy I had encountered earlier lying on the ground.

“Somehow he’s still alive, but barely breathing. I think the fact that he survived you hitting him means he must be very tough.” Kazuya’s brows knit,

troubled, and he turns to me.

“Did you say he’s a demon?”

“No, Demon King.” As I’m explaining, the guy stirs and slowly raises his hand. A faint ball of light appears in his palm.

“Look out, Kazuya!” I yell, and kick the Demon King in the stomach.

*“Buwah!”* His body shoots up into the sky, then falls back to Earth with a thud.

*Uh... Has he passed out again?* No, he’s groaning, so he’s still alive and mostly conscious, if dazed.

Kazuya’s face turns hard. “Wow. He’s still alive? For now, let’s restrain him so we can hear him out. If that kick of yours didn’t kill him, he might well be the Demon King.”

We tie the guy up with rope. I get the sense he’s already recovering from the damage I inflicted. Man, he’s resilient.

After a while, he slowly comes to and opens his eyes. His panicked gaze darts around until he spots me and freezes. He’s looking deep into my eyes as he spills one word: “Gorgeous.”

*What? Was that about me? Did he just call me gorgeous?* No one’s ever even described me as beautiful before, so my heart twangs.

Kazuya barks in an unusually gruff voice, “Don’t run your mouth. Who are you?”

The Demon King shifts his gaze to Kazuya, next to me, and his eyes narrow. “Hmph, show some respect, you lower lifeform. You introduce yourself first.” Despite looking like a worm what with all the rope binding him, he’s acting so haughty.

“Can’t you see who’s holding all the cards here?” Kazuya asks in exasperation.

I can understand how Kazuya feels, but the guy just looked at me and blurted out that he thinks I’m gorgeous. No one who says that could be a bad person, no way. Not when I’m so touched!

“Take it easy on him, Kazuya,” I admonish him. “We can at least tell him our

names! It's impolite to ask someone's name and not give your own."

"Why are you giving lessons in manners all of a sudden?" He turns to me quizzically.

"My name is Sakurako," I say to our prisoner. "I'm an adventurer, and more specifically, a cook."

"A cook...? The word 'cook' used to mean one who cooks food. Are you telling me you aren't a hero?"

"No, not at all," I reply.

Hearing this, the guy starts crying. His eyes open wide and gush like waterfalls.

*What?! Why?! Why is he crying?!*

He sniffles. "I didn't think humans would grow this strong while I was hibernating! I can't even defend myself against a mere cook!" The combination of his dripping nose and limbs all bound with rope makes him appear so pathetic...

Kazuya must pity him, too, as his tone softens, "Uh, look, we're sorry you're crying, but who are you exactly?"

"Yeah, sorry. I should've said before. I'm the immortal Demon King who's supposed to rule this world from hereon. I'm all about strength and bringing forth the chaos that arises from adoring strength above everything else, *i.e.* monsters, destruction, despair—Think of me as the father of all that is terrible.

"Since I'm the beast who'll bring fear beyond all reckoning, the King, Knight Commander, and the chosen hero all want my head on a plate. Except now I'm so weak that I can't compete with one little cook... However, because I'm immortal, I can't perish, either. I'm just a tragic clown who will have to live as a weak being from now on, lasting all eternity.

"My signature attack is a destructive ray that's meant to annihilate everything in its path. My weak point is my horns; my power suffers when they crack. Yes, these horns here on my head. Look at the right one! It's hanging on by a thread thanks to the first blow the lovely Lady Sakurako dealt me. I suspect it'll break

fully if it gets hit again.

“Anyway, having admitted that I’m a weakling who’s no match for human women and spilled all the beans possible, I shall now say that my name is Gweldeian Asterious Rheinbacker Enderwine. Charmed, I’m sure.” His tragic introduction ends with him collapsing into tears.

“Gweldeian Asterious Rheinbacker Enderwine? Your name’s a real mouthful.” Kazuya rolls his eyes.

Meanwhile, I’m amazed Kazuya was able to repeat the Demon King’s name in one shot.

“So what are you going to do with me? I, who was once called Chaos and terrified all who laid eyes upon me, am apparently weak as can be. Is there any reason you can’t leave me alone as I am?”

Good question. I gingerly ask Kazuya, “Wh-what should we do with him?”

“It’s not really my place to say. That said, it’d probably be better to kill him like we would any other monster. But I don’t really want to, because not only does he look like a person, he talks like one, too.”

“Yeah, and he’s been crying for a while now. I feel sorry for him.”

The Demon King whines through his nose, “I was only acting up earlier because I was cocky. I’m the Demon King, after all. I’m supposed to be invincible. That’s why all these damned heroes set on me every time I wake up and seal me away. That’s the only way to keep me from threatening the entire world.”

“Fine, but we don’t know how to seal you.” Kazuya heaves a long, annoyed sigh. “I know you were due to appear and everything, but meeting you now is a real pain in the ass.”

“Why don’t we bring him with us to town for now?” I suggest. “Maybe the townspeople will teach us how to seal him.”

Kazuya tilts his head. “I doubt they’d know how, but we may as well.”

*Great! It’s settled.* But Kazuya continues to frown.

“If I may, Lady Sakurako, I have but one request,” the Demon King says, his

tears finally drying up.

“What is it?”

“Just this. I’ve fallen in love with your strength. I want to make a deal with you. To demons, strength is beauty, and you are beauty personified. I am but a sad clown, but let’s live together.”

*What?!*

“What?! What are you talking about?! Who in their right mind would propose to someone when they’re tied up with rope?!” Kazuya splutters.

The Demon King shrugs. “What difference does my appearance make? Love trumps all.”

“What?! You love me?!” I squeak. *I-I could never! He’s a Demon King. He has horns! Then again, he’s basically human in form, and his face is handsomely symmetrical!* My heart leaps involuntarily. This is my first proposal!

Kazuya slings me a sharp glare that lets me just about read his mind. He’s pointing out that only a moment ago, my head was filled with thoughts of him.

*Sorry. I was only kidding. I’m not excited at all. Pardon the slip.*

“Hey, Sushi Roll,” Kazuya addresses the Demon King. “I won’t let you have Sakurako. She’s spoken for.”

“Oh? Have you already sealed the deal?”

“She’s been the only one for me for a ridiculously long time. I’m not going to yield to some loser who drops in out of nowhere.” Kazuya faces him down, dead serious.

*My heart throbs. What? Kazuya’s thought about me for a long time? That means he’s in love with me...*

How do I react? I think I love him, too. I don’t know for certain, but he does make me nervous in a very particular way.

The Demon King snorts in derision. “Right. Well, I know one thing.”

He grunts, then strains and flexes his muscles, which swell until the rope we bound him with snaps. Immediately, he takes off into the sky. Black wings like

those of a bat beat on his back. “Lady Sakurako is the only human with the power to defeat me. My eyes are omniscient and see through everything. In the brief period you had me captured, I was able to observe the activities of other humans in this world! I was worried for a moment that they’d evolved, leaving me the inferior species, but given that doesn’t apply, I won’t be sealed without a fight!” The Demon King turns to me and bows his head. “Oh, but you are wonderful, Lady Sakurako. I do hope we meet again sometime.”

With a flap of his wings, he leaves so casually that we don’t stop him. Or rather, I’m so thrown by how everything’s unfolded that I don’t react in time to stop him.

“He got away. What was his deal?” Kazuya mutters in sullen resignation. “What do you want to do? Go after him?”

I glance at him.

“What?” he asks, cocking his head.

“Hey, Kazuya. I think there might be something wrong with me.”

“How so?”

“We have a lot of things to think about, including the Demon King and Luke, but all I can think about is you. And like, I’m nervous?”

Kazuya’s eyes widen slightly, and he breaks into a smile. “Well. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, it is. To me, it is. You say there’s something wrong with you? There’s been something wrong with me for a very, very long time.” Kazuya moves closer to me.

*Oh, he’s going to kiss me again...I think...*

A shadow darkens the sky above us. “Indeed, it is dangerous for a boy and fair maiden to travel alone together. I believe I shall accompany you.”

The Demon King has returned and is towering over us, his hands on his hips.

“Y-you damn...! Nice timing!” Kazuya glowers at the Demon King.

The Demon King doesn't pay him any mind. "Lady Sakurako, you are to be my wife one day. I can't allow you to galivant around unchaperoned."

*What?! I'll be his wife one day?! Are you kidding me?! I can't stop my heart from pounding all on its own. C'mon, I'm not used to being flirted with like this!*

"What do you think you're saying?! Fat chance. I'm gonna seal you away for sure!"

"Young man, don't get yourself in a tizzy. From now on, the three of us shall journey together. It's been a long time since I've been on a sojourn with anybody else, so let's try to get along, you amoeba."

"How am I supposed to get along with someone who calls me an amoeba?!"

They descend into a ridiculous argument, and I giggle. Looks like we're about to start a three-person trip, then. Maybe we'll gather even more people to travel with us. I know the atmosphere will be animated like it was with the Evenfall Lions, and I get to walk alongside Kazuya like I always have. But I have a feeling things won't be quite the same as before, because I'm 100 percent sure Kazuya loves me.

"Hey, Kazuya. I think it'd be good to have him along."

Kazuya looks genuinely appalled. "Why?!"

"Because..." I turn my back to him, unable to say this to his face. "If it's just the two of us, I don't think my heart can take it," I mumble. I'm only just starting to realize how I feel, yet my heart's already pounding out of my chest. If we're going to be together forever...how will I manage?

"What? What did you just say?" Kazuya asks. I guess he didn't catch what I said.

But I honestly can't say it again, so I only smile.

"I feel like I missed something important," Kazuya groans.

"Ho ho. Treating me as a third wheel to spice up your love life? What a player you are, Lady Sakurako," the Demon King says, impressed.

I laugh out loud. We're on track to start a fun and thrilling journey!



## Extra Chapter: Too Strong, but the Journey Goes On

**ME**, Kazuya, and the Demon King travel for a while, until we reach a town. I gather that Kazuya is looking for a way to seal the Demon King here, but first things first—we're hungry!

We settle on a restaurant. Before long, our round table is full of scrumptious dishes, including Peking duck, a big fish grilled with herbs, simmered vegetables in a red soup, and a fruit platter. Considering we've been sleeping outdoors and only eating camping meals, I'd have thought Kazuya would be more than content, but...

"Who said you could sit with us?" Kazuya glowers at the Demon King seated next to him.

"Heh heh, you've got it backwards, but it's only natural for you to be overawed in my presence. 'Tis I who deigns to permit you to be near me!" In contrast to Kazuya, the Demon King is in a fine mood. He takes a sip of his alcoholic drink and beams. "Now, this is tasty! To think it was made by a lower lifeform!"

"Stop calling humans a lower lifeform. Besides, *you've* got it backwards. We're the ones letting you hang around us! We are!"

"Bwa ha ha ha ha! Bring it on! I see you're in the mood to earbash me tonight!"

"It's impossible to have an actual conversation with you!"

They've been bantering like this the whole trip. At first, I had fun listening to the two of them ribbing each other, but...

"Kazuya, you and the Demon King have gotten really close. You look like you're enjoying yourself..." I mutter.

"In what way? How have I ever shown that?" Kazuya looks skeptical.

*He said he likes me, but...*

“It makes me wonder if the Demon King is your type.”

“Sakurako, are you okay?” Kazuya replies, genuinely astonished.

I can’t help but pout.

But wouldn’t you? Kazuya (in my brain) and Luke (in my brain) also got along like a house on fire, and that turned into them flirting over every little thing nonstop! If Kazuya keeps being pals with the Demon King the way he is, then before long Kazuya (in my brain) and the Demon King (in my brain) will start flirting as well! Then what’ll happen to me? That’s why I’m worried!

“Oho, I see what’s happening. The lower lifeforms are pretending to be crabby to get my attention. How adorable!” the Demon King says with a nod.

Kazuya’s eye twitches with disgust. “Like hell! Stop it. I can’t take being the straight man in the group anymore! What is wrong with you two? Can’t anyone else here be normal?!” He pauses for a second, then puts his head in his hands. “Or am I the one who’s weird here?”

*Sorry, Kazuya.*

None of this is his fault. It’s my bad for feeling uneasy over this, even though he told me he loved me... Wait a second.

Now that I think back on it carefully, I don’t think he ever actually said those words.

He called me important and special and stuff, and kissed me, but he didn’t say *I like you* or *I love you*!

“Hey, Kazuya... Just double-checking, but—”

“Sakurako!” Right at that moment, a pleasant voice fills the air, calling my name.

Reeling, I turn to see where it’s coming from and see a familiar face at the entrance to the restaurant.

“Luke...”

There he is. Bewildered, we both stare at each other.

“Found us already,” Kazuya mutters.

“Sakurako, at long last I’ve found you.” Luke’s long legs bring him to our table in no time, where he stands directly in front of me.

Looking into his blue eyes, I remember the adventures we had together. All that time that I was in love with love. How my chest would grow tight whenever he smiled.

Luke takes my hand in his, almost clinging to me, and kneels on the floor.





“Why...Why did you disappear before?” He seems about to burst into tears as he looks up at me.

I’m at a loss for words. He’s asking why I ran away... *Why did I?*

Oh, it was because I didn’t want him to call me a monster. I couldn’t bear to see him disillusioned and scared of me after I ruined his ideal of me being a fragile, normal girl. But now that I think about it, running away was so selfish of me...

Kazuya interrupts my confusion by brushing Luke’s hand away from mine.

“I’m sorry we left you in the lurch all of a sudden. However, we have no intention of traveling with you anymore. We never promised to stick with you long-term, anyway.”

“Kazuya...” Luke’s eyes waver with dismay, until he examines Kazuya’s face. Then, he furrows his brow. “No. I can’t give up. Sakurako, I want to stay with you.” Luke’s words spill forth slowly, like he’s squeezing them out.

“What?” My eyes widen in surprise. “With me?”

Luke takes a moment to answer. “I do not wish to be separated from you.”

“B-but you do realize I’m not the weak girl you thought I was?”

“That makes no difference to me. It took losing you to know for sure, but I love you. I want to be with you.”

“What?! You love me?” Heat floods my face. I’m sure I’ve gone red. But oh my God, he loves me! The word “love” is pretty unambiguous! And he loves *me*? Even after he saw the way I get sometimes?! He’s still saying he loves me?! I stare back at him, my heart pounding.

Kazuya steps in between us. “All right, that’s enough gazing at each other! Luke, I’m sorry, but give up. Sakurako and I are basically together now.”

“Is that so?” Luke asks Kazuya, then turns to me. It’s like he’s checking with me.

*Geez, he’s good-looking.* My cheeks suddenly feel even hotter.

Luke turns back to Kazuya. “No, based on her reaction, I feel like I still have a

chance.”

“Give it a rest! Fine, I get that sense, too, but stop it! C’mon man, how long do you think I’ve been in love with Sakurako? Fall back already!”

“I don’t think the length of time a person has been in love has anything to do with how deeply they’re in love.”

“Maybe so! That could well be so!” Kazuya howls sorrowfully.

Feels like Kazuya has been yelling a lot lately.

“Well, well. It appears another strange person has thrown his hat into the ring for the fair Lady Sakurako. Attracting suitors far and wide, that’s my Lady!” the Demon King says with a chuckle.

Luke spots the Demon King. He looks him up and down strangely. “Who’s this?”

“Uh... Yeah, him...” Kazuya scratches his head, embarrassed. It’s obvious he forgot all about the Demon King for a minute.

Come to think of it, Luke is a hero. Isn’t the whole point of his journey to seal the Demon King away? I wonder how this’ll pan out.

Before we entered this town, the Demon King used magic to disguise himself. His normally dark blue demonic skin is currently brown, and there’s no trace of the horns on his head. Still, maybe Luke can sense it.

“Heh heh, since you ask, lower lifeform. I shall introduce myself!”

Before the Demon King can give his name, Kazuya claps his hand over his mouth and turns to Luke with a smile that screams ‘keeping up appearances’. “This is our new traveling companion.”

Luke’s eyes narrow sadly, and his voice betrays bitter regret. “New traveling companion... In other words, you don’t mind traveling with somebody, you just don’t want to travel with us? Is it because we’re weak?”

“Luke! What was all that about? You said you felt Sakurako and went running off!” A familiar voice cuts through the tension.

We turn to the restaurant entrance to see... “Leila!”

It's Leila, standing out in her bikini as always!

"Oh, my! Sakurako! Is it really you?!" she exclaims.

Molozov and Ganzi appear behind her. I thought we'd never see their party again, but our reunion has undeniably come about quickly.

"Who would've imagined we'd meet again so soon? We must be destined to be together, after all!" Leila says happily.



**WE** move to a large table so we can all eat lunch together.

"Um, what's brought all of you to this town?" I'm curious.

Leila smiles. "We heard that Merlin, the hero of magic, is here. Those who bear the title of 'hero' must join forces if we're to have a hope of sealing the Demon King."

"The hero of magic? And you're going to seal the Demon King..." I mumble, panicking a little. I mean, the Demon King is right here!

I dart a glance at him. He's happy enough, busily drinking, and doesn't seem to be listening to our conversation.

"Speaking of which, do you know how to seal the Demon King?" Kazuya asks.

Oh, right. We came to this town to find a way to seal the Demon King, too. None of the townspeople we've asked have been able to help us so far, but Luke might know! He's a hero!

Unfortunately, Leila and the others all cast their eyes down at this question.

"We have no idea," she says, "but the hero of magic should know. That's why we've come to try and find him."

"Oh. The hero of magic..." Kazuya rests his chin in his hand, thinking. He always does this when he's thinking about something complicated. I've seen him do this a hundred times, but...I don't know why, but he looks a little different than usual. I guess I'd describe him as more...sparkly? I wonder why.

"Sakurako! To reiterate my request, I'd like you to come with me."

I jump, hearing my name, and turn to Luke. He looks very serious. "B-But...I..."



I don't know how to continue. I ran away because I thought Luke was going to hate me. But instead, he's flipped the script and is saying he loves me.

I had a lot of fun being with him and his party. So why is it that, for some reason, I'm finding it impossible to get particularly excited about teaming up with them again?

"Excuse me, Sakurako. The thing is...I don't remember much of what happened, but was it you who defeated the Owl Demon King?" Ganzi asks, slightly frightened.

"Um, that's... That's right," I answer meekly, shrinking back into my seat. To be honest, I don't remember what happened that well, either. My head went blank, like I was in a daze. By the time I snapped out of it, everything around me was smashed to pieces.

*Oh. Huh.* The reason I don't feel like rejoining Luke and the others is probably because I'm scared that I'll hurt them all if something like that happens again.

Ganzi is trembling in what I hope is amazement. "Are you a hero, Sakurako?"

I shake my head lightly. I can't be that big of a deal. At least, I don't think so...

"No, you can't not be," Ganzi argues. "The strength you showed was completely out of the ordinary. Only a hero could be that strong."

"Ha ha ha ha ha! Lady Sakurako a hero? Stupid lower lifeform. As if such a puny label as 'hero' could define my Lady Sakurako! Gah ha ha ha ha ha!" The drunk Demon King bursts into laughter. I guess he's tuning in and out of the discussion.

Ganzi's eyebrows shoot up. "Uh, and you are?"

"Heh heh heh, well since you ask! I shall introduce myself!"

"Aaaand that's enough of that! All done! Zip it. Sorry, Ganzi. This guy has a running joke where he says he's the Demon King. He's getting a bit long in the tooth. Best to just pity him," Kazuya cuts him off, annoyed. He looks around the table at everybody one by one. "I'm sorry, but I have no intention of going back to your party. Is that okay with you, Sakurako?"

I nod. He's right. I don't feel like things will ever go back to how they were.

Ganzi, Molozov, and Leila are all acting normal, but I can see a hint of fear in their eyes when they look at me. I get how they feel. How could they not be scared of me after I went on a rampage?

“Wait! Kazuya! Why? Just tell me the reason,” Luke makes a desperate appeal, and my heart twangs.

*I’m sorry, Luke.* It’s my fault for being too strong. I wanted this life of mine to be different, to be one where I was ‘too cute’ instead of ‘too strong’, but in the end that wish came to nothing...

“Well, well. I was just searching for you in inns and restaurants like this one.”

Out of nowhere, a lanky gentleman has come up to our table. With his long, flowing black robe and almost-as-long light blue hair, he’s the epitome of a magician.

Ganzi glares at him sharply, on alert. “Who are you?”

The man smiles. “Well, well. I do apologize. I’m Merlin, the hero of magic. I’ve been looking for you, hero of the sword.”

“The hero of magic?!” Leila’s eyes widen in surprise.

“You’re the hero who might know how to seal away the Demon King!” Kazuya suddenly perks up, seeing as he wants to seal away the Demon King ASAP.

“I beg your pardon, but can you prove you are who you say you are?” Molozov asks quietly.

Merlin pulls back his collar to reveal the top of his chest. Just beneath his collarbone is a red birthmark in the shape of a teddy bear.

“That’s the mark of a hero!” Molozov confirms.

*Huh, so that’s what birthmarks look like to signify if you’re a hero? Pretty cute!*

“And if you’d like more proof, will this do?” Merlin pulls a horn-like object out from a pocket inside his robe. It has to have come from an extremely strong monster.

“I-is that...the horn of the Ancient Green Dragon?!” Ganzi exclaims.

“Does that satisfy your query?” Merlin asks.

Everyone’s convinced. Not only does he have the birthmark, but he’s also beaten a strong monster.

Luke stands up. “Merlin, your reputation precedes you. We heard you were in town and came here to search for you, but we didn’t expect you to be looking for me. Oh, I’m Luke, the hero of the sword.”

Merlin smiles. “I know. I too was on the hunt for a hero to accompany me. I had a strong sense you were nearby, but crossing paths like this is a stroke of luck. Herewith, we shall fight together. What say you to that proposal?”

“Yes, of course! Thanks very much. Well, these are my party members—”

“No, I have no interest in the names of anyone other than you.”

“What?” Luke stiffens.

*I’m surprised, too. That’s mean...*

“Are you saying you don’t need us?” Leila asks sharply.

Still smiling, Merlin nods. “Indeed I am. Alas, only the strong are needed for this quest. It helps that you have the good sense to understand that.”

*Whaaat?! L-Leila’s party has to disband?!*

“Hey! You can’t make that decision on your own! They’re not weak. They’ve been with me forever. What greater proof do you need that they’re strong?”

“Luke, stop it,” Leila silences Luke’s protestations. She rises from her chair and bows her head to Merlin. “I trust you’ll look out for him.”

“Mother! Why?!” Luke rushes to her side.

“Say no more, Luke! We’ve gone as far as we can go. We’ll only weigh you down now. This is a great opportunity for you,” she says coldly, then takes Merlin’s hand. “Luke is a very strong boy. Just a bit lacking in areas, so please guide him well.”

“You can count on me for that. I swear, as the hero of magic.”

“Thank you. And if you don’t mind, I’d like to speak to Luke. May we say our farewells?”

“Yes, of course. Have at it.” Merlin turns to Luke. “I’m staying at the Foxtail Inn in town. When you’re ready, come find me there.”

With that said, Merlin does a brusque turn and leaves in a dashing manner.



**WITH** that settled, Luke and the others shift into solemn mode to bid farewell to each other. Kazuya and I stand offside by the wall to give them some space, but the Demon King keeps drinking at the table without a care in the world.

But it breaks my heart to watch Luke thanking his party members for all they’ve shared up to this point. He looks like he could start crying any moment, which makes me feel like I’m about to cry, too.

“Ungh... Nnf!” Actually, I *am* crying. I can’t stop crying!

“Hey, Sakurako. Aren’t you going a bit overboard?” Kazuya hands me a handkerchief.

“I can’t help it!” I take the handkerchief and wipe my nose with it. This is such a crying matter! I mean, they’re supposed to be a big happy family—Leila, Ganzi, and Molozov, too! How can family split up?!

I can’t stop crying just from watching Luke give Leila one last hug while Ganzi and the others look on sentimentally.

Suddenly, Luke’s gaze meets mine.

“Oh, Sakurako...” He comes over to me. “I’m so sorry. I just asked you to come rejoin us.”

“That’s okay! D-don’t worry about me.”

“Then again, considering how powerful you are, I think Merlin will accept you,” Ganzi pipes up.

Leila’s head snaps up. “Yes, he must! Tell me, Sakurako, would you like to go with Luke?”

“Huh? But I...” This is an unexpected turn of events.

Leila grabs my hand. “Don’t worry. Luke is strong. You won’t hurt him, even if you go all out.”

My eyes go wide.

“You didn’t want to rejoin our party because we’re weak, correct? You thought you might hurt us, so you kept your distance. Am I wrong?”

“Um...” She hit the nail on the head. I was hesitant because I know that if I go on a rampage again, I might hurt her. I didn’t expect her to have picked up on that.

“Sakurako, I’d like you to come, as well,” Luke interjects from beside her, deadly serious. “I’ll show you how I can become even stronger. So I...want you to stay with me.”

*What a line!* He’s as cool as ever...and I can’t tamp down the spark that’s stirring in my heart.



**AFTER** I tell Luke that I have to think over his invite to join him and Merlin on their quest to quell the Demon King, everyone splits up. Luke heads to where Merlin is, with a final plea that I come later if I feel like it.

I ponder this with my head on the table. We’re in the room me and Kazuya have booked in a nearby lodging. “What should we do... Maybe we should go with Luke?”

Kazuya is sitting cross-legged on the bed, making something out of mysterious liquids and plants with a super strong smell that are scattered around him. “Okay, say we do. What are we going to do with them?”

“Well, the plan is to seal the Demon King in order to protect people from the threat he poses.”

“What threat? There’s nothing to worry about there.” Kazuya gives a flask containing green liquid a gentle shake.

“Isn’t there?”

*It hits me. Oh, yeah. The Demon King is right here!* He’s lying on the bed next to Kazuya, snoring, his face red. It’s true; he’s probably not a threat anymore.

A soft pop echoes in the air and a puff of smoke billows from a vial of liquid Kazuya is holding. In a flash, it’s turned from red to green.

“Sweet, all done,” he says.

“Uh, what are you doing, Kazuya?”

“Oh, this? When Ganzi and I were mixing medicines, he showed me how to create chemical explosions to make potions. I guess I have a knack for it, so I’m confident I can come up with something pretty cool.” Kazuya picks up another bottle and pours a mystery powder into it.

“You like fiddly work like this, don’t you?”

“I don’t dislike it.”

“So... what do you think? Um, about going with Merlin and Luke.”

“Merlin sounds interesting. And even though the Demon King doesn’t pose any threat, I want to seal him away as soon as possible, so I’d like to find out how to.”

“What?! You want to join up with Luke and Merlin?!” I would’ve thought Kazuya would be the first to refuse.

In other words, Luke will still be around... Hmm, how am I going to handle that? I might get a little nervous—I think Kazuya notices me swooning, because his eyes narrow immediately. *N-no need to glare that hard...*

“My answer is that I’d rather not join their party, if possible. I just want to find out from Merlin how to seal the Demon King.” Kazuya puts the vials he’s just filled into his rucksack one by one, then hops off the bed. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Go? Where?”

“I just told you, to Merlin. I only want to know how we seal this guy.” He smiles, satisfied, with a nod toward the Demon King.



**MY** head is throbbing so hard it feels like it’s going to shatter. No, not just my head. I’m aching all over my body. And I can hardly breathe.

*What... happened?* The last thing I remember is sharing a meal with Merlin to celebrate us meeting...

My recollections are hazy as I open my eyes. Orange lamplight hits me with a

glare, and I can't help squinting.

"Finally awake, Luke?"

My eyes widen at the familiar voice. It never occurred to me that he'd be here. "What are you doing here...?!"

The bearded face of my older brother is peering down at me, grinning. He's leaning against a chair with a backrest. The firstborn prince. A man who wants both the throne and my head on a plate.

*Why is he here?* Come to think of it, I don't remember anything after dinner with Merlin.

Never mind. My biggest issue is that I can't move freely. I'm lying face down on the ground, and... my limbs are all tied up with rope. I wriggle to try and roll over, and make it onto my side to see... Merlin is standing a bit further behind my brother.

"M-Merlin... What is this?"

Merlin gives a nasty laugh. "What an idiot. I'm not Merlin, nor am I a hero of magic. Even this birthmark is fake." He pulls back his collar to show the teddy bear-shaped mark.

"Fake? No— Ugh!" A lightning bolt of pain strikes my cheek when my brother kicks me in the face. Blood wells in my mouth, and I spit it out, then look up to see him smiling sadistically.

I've been deceived. This is all a grand scheme my brother set up. All of it. Merlin is a fake, an assassin he sent to kill me. He must've also spread the rumor that Merlin was in this town to lure me here.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! You look like hell, Luke! And I gotta say, being on the ground suits you! Yes, this is how you should've looked your whole life! Nothing about you is heroic! Nothing about you screams 'master swordsman'! Forget you, you pathetic lump. *I'm* the one who's incredible! I'm the one who's born to be king!" he shouts, laughing like a madman, and kicks me in the face and stomach again.

"Why would you... How can you do this? Without a hero, the Demon King

will...”

The firstborn prince squats down by my head, grabs my hair, and yanks my face up to see him. “Imbecile! Who cares about the Demon King? Me not being king is a bigger problem!” he spits, then gives another maniacal laugh.

There’s no reasoning with him anymore. He changed after our father, the king, said I would inherit the throne. He’s tried to kill me time and time again...

Listening to him laugh, I gather my strength and flex until a snapping sound tells me the rope binding me has broken.

The firstborn prince stops laughing immediately. He looks shocked. “Y-you...!”

“Can’t you give it up already? I’m tired of running away from your assassins.” I pull myself to my feet and raise my hands into a ready position. I may not have a sword right now, but knowing my brother’s sub-par level, I can take him on bare-handed.

“Hold it right there. If you go on a rampage here, who’s to say what’ll happen to her?” Merlin interrupts.

I look over to see Merlin spin around a large chair so that it’s facing me, and see—

“M-Mother!!”

My unconscious mother is limply propped up in the chair to which she’s tied with rope.

“You... What have you done to my mother...!”

“Just taking her hostage for a while. She won’t come to any harm as long as you do what you’re told,” the fake Merlin says, pressing a knife to her neck. If I oppose them, he may kill her.

I bite my lip. How could I have been caught in such a simple trap? Thinking back on it now, I can see that none of us—not me, my mother, Ganzi, or Molozov were in a good state of mind. We got surprised by an Owl Demon God, an opponent we couldn’t compete with, and not only was I powerless to defeat it, I lost to it in front of Sakurako. I’d failed to keep my head straight in the face of overwhelming might. That’s why I was lured so easily when I thought another



hero had sought me out.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Useless moron! What, did you think for a second you had the upper hand? There’s no way we wouldn’t fully secure ourselves against a monster like you! You hear me? Get on your knees! Now!”

My brother’s cackling rattles around my head, making it pound more. I’m stuck. I have no choice but to do as he says.



**“WHAT?** Is this really where Luke is?”

“According to my map magic, without a doubt. I’ve gotten good at working out the rough whereabouts of people I know. But what’s he doing somewhere like here?”

Me and Kazuya are walking through a gloomy, poorly lit part of town with a disconcerting atmosphere to it, completely different than the neighborhood we came from where our inn is. We haven’t seen any trace of other people for a while now. Is this really where Luke and his companion are?

“All right, we’re here. This is the place.” Amid all the buildings lined up, Kazuya gestures to a particularly suspicious-looking mansion. Crows caw on its eaves. Very creepy.

“Let’s take a look at a more detailed map.” Kazuya says. He casts a spell, and with a flash and a soft pop, a map appears in front of us.

Yep. There’s definitely a person mark on it labeled “Luke”. There are also three other marks showing there’s four people in the building in total.

“Oh? Leila’s here, too?”

“Looks like it. Plus two people we don’t know. I bet one of them is that Merlin guy, but I don’t know who the other person—Hmm.” Kazuya’s face hardens grimly.

“What’s wrong?”

“This is weird. Luke and Leila’s marks have debuffs on them.”

“What? Does that mean...”

“Let’s get a move on. We don’t have time to take it easy.” Kazuya shoves the front door of the mansion. It isn’t locked and opens with a heavy creak. The foyer is empty, pitch black, and reeks of dust.

“Do you think this place was abandoned years ago?”

“Maybe. Luke and the others are this way, underneath ground level. Hurry.”

I nod and follow Kazuya to a hidden basement. We stand at the top of the stairs looking down at another door when—

“Ah ha ha ha!”

A shrill cackle pieces the air, followed by faint thudding. It sounds like somebody’s punching or kicking someone else.

I hear Luke groan.

For a split second, my head goes blank. Then I break into a fierce dash to race down the stairs.

“Hey, what are you doing?!” Kazuya shouts after me. He mustn’t have heard the voices just now.

But I can’t stop. There’s no way.

At the bottom of the stairs, I hurl open the door.

Having come from darkness, the sudden light given off by a lamp in the room is dazzling and makes me squint. I can’t risk a moment not taking in the scene, though, so I keep peering.

There’s a guy half-crouched, half-lying in the room, covered in blood. It’s—

“Luke!”

I bolt toward him.

“Sa-Sakurako... No, don’t come... Not you...”

It’s impossible not to go to him when he’s all battered and telling me not to! I run to him anyway, but before I reach him, a block of ice hurtles onto the ground in front of my legs with a clatter. I take a step back to dodge.

“Stop, or this woman will die,” somebody says.

I turn to face them, only to see Leila tied to a chair, with Merlin—the so-called hero of magic—pointing a knife at her.

*What's going on? What the hell is this?*

“They’ve taken Leila as a hostage so that they can torture Luke to death. Luke’s the main target here, meaning this is related to the troubles in their kingdom. Merlin was a fake; they used him to trap Luke,” Kazuya explains. He entered after me, but he’s grasped the situation faster than me.

*...They took Leila hostage?*

“Who’s this, then? This girl. She your girl, Luke?” someone else says.

I turn to see a man trampling Luke with his foot while sweeping his gaze over me from top to bottom, like he’s checking me out. He has a stupendously creepy vibe... but never mind that.

*Get your foot off of Luke.*

“I don’t know if she’s Luke’s girl or not, but I’m pretty sure these two were with him before. They’re in his party.”

“Hmm. She’s not too bad. Don’t mind if I do...” the gross man says, licking his lips lasciviously.

This appalls me even more. Luke is hurt, they’ve got Leila, and this guy... It’s making me light-headed. I’m so furious, I’m about to lose my mind.

“Sakurako, calm down. Right now, our top priority is ensuring Leila is safe,” Kazuya says.

“I know!” I snap in response. *Sorry, Kazuya.* But I can’t control my temper enough to talk normally.

My yell causes Leila to stir and slowly open her purple eyes.

“Huh? What’s going on? Where are we...?” Although she’s dazed, the instant she catches a glimpse of Luke in her line of sight, her eyes fly wide open and she screams, “Luke! Luke! What have they done to you?!”

“M-Mother...” Luke lifts his head slightly.

“Well, well. Look who’s gone and woken up. Be a good hostage for me,

please, or else I'll cut your neck," the heinous mongrel who called himself Merlin says.

Leila freezes. She looks down to see the knife he's holding to her neck, and her face twitches with terror as she comprehends the situation.

*What do I do?* As things stand, neither Kazuya nor I can make a move. If we don't do something soon, we won't be able to help Luke and Leila. But if we do something... I'm at a total loss!

Leila's lips quirk upwards in a smile. "Oh, I see. I understand. It's been a while, Prince, you useless firstborn." She glares at the man who is crushing Luke with his foot.

Firstborn prince? Oh, come to think of it, Luke told us his brother was trying to kill him because he was chosen as a hero. Is this who he mentioned?

"Ah ha ha ha! Too late waking up now, Leila! You're all doomed!" the scoundrel firstborn prince laughs brashly.

Every single thing he does grates on my nerves, making my rage-meter keep ticking up.

"You couldn't hope to win against Luke without taking me hostage. I'm flattered you've stooped to committing an act so unbecoming of royalty."

"Silence, commoner! You're nothing more than a plebian who took advantage of my father's temporary infatuation!"

"Ha. Perhaps it was an infatuation, but I saw to it he took full responsibility for us. I hated him for a while, but I've forgiven him now, because of the treasure he gave me—The one and only Luke." As she speaks, Leila grows more and more radiant, until she is the most breathtakingly beautiful woman I've ever seen.

I have a hunch she's gearing up to do something, when she turns to me.

"Sakurako. The rest is up to you. I'm...sorry." She twists her body, thrusts her head forward, and plunges her neck down onto the knife that Merlin's holding against her throat.

From that moment, everything starts moving in slow motion. The blood that

splatters forth from Leila's neck dyes my vision deep red.

"M-Mother! Mother!" Luke shrieks.

"Ugh, she went and did it herself," Merlin mutters, the knife still in his hand.

"Stupid woman. I was planning to have fun with her later," the foolish, wretched firstborn prince says. "Well, Luke's already at death's door. We don't need a hostage anymore anyway."

Everything feels far away.

"What a stupid woman," the fake wizard repeats with a sigh, and delivers a hard kick to Leila's chair while she's still tied to it with blood flowing from her neck.

I steady the chair before it falls over.

"Wh—...?! When did you get there?!"

Bastard. He's nothing to me.

With a light swish of my hand, the fake wizard soars through the air and slams against a wall with a resounding crash. I feel absolutely zilch for him.

"Kazuya! Can you help Leila?!" I cry. It looks like Leila is breathing faintly.

He rushes to us, quickly checks her over, nods, and fishes a vial out of his pocket. "There's still a chance we can save her. So calm down, Sakurako."

*Calm down?* I'm completely calm. I couldn't get any calmer. I'm cooler than an icy-cold cucumber.

"Hey, Lagoras! Is that all it takes to blow you away? A single shot from a feeble little woman?!" the reprobate firstborn prince yells.

The moment our eyes meet, the firstborn prince begins trembling. He stares back at me with abject terror.

I know that look well. Everyone always looks at me like that when I get angry.

"S-stop right there! D-don't come any closer!! Don't come near me!" He swings the rope whip he was using to hit Luke and takes a step back, then another and another, trying to put some distance between himself and me.

But suddenly, he trips and lands on his butt. Luke has caught hold of his leg.

“It’s all... over... my brother...” Luke struggles to catch his breath, close to death.

“You asshole, Luke! Let go of me! Let me goooo!” The firstborn prince uses his free leg to kick Luke’s hand off of him, then tries to scramble away.

I stand in his path and crush his foot.

“Gyaah! AAAAAAAAAAH!”

“How could you do this? To your own brother? How could you do something so tragic?” I keep asking questions, but for some reason the asshole just keeps crying, without answering.

*Why don’t you answer? Can’t you hear me?*

I try to take another step closer so he can hear me clearly, but find myself stuck in place. I look down to see my feet frozen to the floor.

“Trapped you in ice! You monster!” The fake wizard I sent flying into the wall says, flicking what looks like a magic wand at me. *Oh, is this ice encasing my feet magical?* Crystal tendrils of it climb up my calves, then my thighs.

“My ice magic is on par with the real Merlin’s!” the wizard sneers. What do you know, he’s not a hundred percent fake. He too is grating on me more and more.

My mind starts to slip away.



“**PFT**, ha... ha, ha...” Dark laughter wells up in me at the sight of the impending ruin that’s about to unfold. Every time I laugh, pain tears through my beaten torso, but I can’t stop.

Sakurako’s fighting the wizard.

At first, the ice nearly swallowed her, but one punch of her fist shattered it. Then she turned that same fist toward the magician.

Mages are all about defensive magic. They can’t really launch attacks. No matter how many times this wizard casts a spell to reinforce his defensive

barrier, Sakurako keeps cracking that barrier with ease. I can't help laughing; it's hilarious.

I don't know how much mana the wizard has stored up, but as soon as he runs out, it's lights out for him. He's shivering, his face as white as a ghost, cowering beneath the colossal existence that is Sakurako.

My brother, who was able to crawl to a corner of the room, is trembling with arms wrapped around his head.

"Easy. Are you out of it, too? Now's not the time to laugh. Here, drink this."

I feel the glass rim of a bottle being pressed to my lips, and liquid slides down my throat. Was that Kazuya? Is this a healing potion, maybe?

Thinking back, I suspect Kazuya dragged me to the wall so I could sit up when Sakurako started fighting the wizard. If I'd stayed where I was, I probably would've been a casualty of their battle.

I manage to swallow the liquid, and my pain miraculously subsides. A moment ago, even laughing was excruciating, but somehow, I've recovered enough now to feel like I might be able to get up. The healing potion he gave me has a powerful effect.

"Kazuya, I...didn't know you had a healing potion as good as this... Where's... my mother?" I wriggle to turn a little and see Mother lying nearby. That wizard cut her throat with his knife. I thought she was done for...

"Right now, she's in shock and unconscious, but I used some medicine to stop her bleeding. I gave her a healing potion, too, so she'll probably be fine."

Relief sinks into me. Her complexion doesn't look so bad anymore. And I hear faint breathing, meaning she's breathing properly. He saved her!

"Thank you. Kazuya... Thank you." I bow my head low with endless gratitude.

"Don't mention it, really. And it's not like I saved her for you."

A loud crash echoes through the room.

"St-stop! Stay baaaack!" the wizard wails miserably. He's depleted all his mana, and the final remnants of his defensive barrier have splintered into a million pieces.

Sakurako's face in profile shows no emotion, but the stance of her body emanates rage. The seething of her palpable anger even reaches me, giving me goosebumps.

That wizard is damned. Sakurako is going to kill him. Followed by my brother.

My brother has always been my enemy, and it was he who hurt my mother, so he absolutely has it coming. My lips twitch into a smile as I imagine the scene that's about to unfurl.

"God damn it. She's gone off the rails. I've got to go grab her now." Kazuya pulls himself to his feet.

I stare blankly. *Why is he standing up? Is he going over to Sakurako? If so, he'll only get in her way.* "Are you going to help Sakurako? She doesn't need any help. You'll only weigh her down."

Kazuya glares at me. "Obviously, I'm going to stop her for her sake."

"You're going to *stop* her? Why?"

"Don't you know? Because she's a normal girl!"

My eyes open wide. A normal girl? *What are you talking about, Kazuya?* She's special. Uniquely strong. I don't know what he means by calling her normal. "Normal...? She's not normal."

He reels in shock. "What would you know? She might be a bit too strong, but she's a normal girl with normal wants and needs. If she kills someone... Even if they're bad guys, I guarantee you she'll regret it afterwards. Because that's how kind she is!"

Kazuya leaves me and runs to Sakurako's side. Watching his back grow smaller as he moves further away, I feel unmistakable, definite defeat.

I adore Sakurako. I love her. That's the reason I told her how I felt as soon as we met up again. I thought that no one else could possibly ever love her more than I do.

But now I know. I am head over heels in love, drowning in hatred, and pathetic for never once trying to understand her, whereas Kazuya is the one who understands and loves Sakurako more than anyone else. And that's just



how it is.



**WELP**, looks like I've finally broken the annoying invisible barrier that was keeping me from laying my hands on the guy who hurt Leila. All that's left for me to do is annihilate him.

"Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me, I beg you..." the wizard says, shaking his head.

*C'mon, don't do that. You're acting like I'm in the wrong here.*

I haven't done anything wrong. He's the one who hurt Leila, right? I clench my fist—

Suddenly, Kazuya cuts in front of me. "Stop, Sakurako! That's enough! These losers have given up already."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Don't rush in like that, Kazuya, it's dangerous." I almost punched him!

"Leila and Luke are safe, so calm down."

"...What? Leila and Luke?" I blink a few times, and my vision gradually becomes sharper. The hatred that was overflowing in me evaporates like a puff of smoke.

"There, see? Over there."

I look where Kazuya is pointing. Luke is sitting against the wall, next to Leila, who's sleeping on the floor.

"Y-you saved them? But there was so much blood?!"

"Yeah, they'll be fine. You can tell by looking at them. Besides, I told you before I could probably save them. You just didn't listen, and took off on your own again..."

I shrink at his exasperated chiding. *Yeah! He did tell me that, I think!* But I still let the blood rush to my head...

"Oh! What about the bad guys?" My voice quivers. "Did I, by any chance, k-kill them?" I don't want to kill anyone. But since we came to this world, it's been

impossible to rein in my strength!

“They’re fine. Well... They might be dead on the inside.”

I look around. The wizard and the prince are sprawled on the ground. Each have thousand-yard, vacant stares, and they’re bruised and battered, but other than that, they look healthy enough.

*Phew!* Yep, it’d be awful to kill anyone. It’d leave a way worse aftertaste than this.

And seeing as both Leila and Luke are safe—Wait.

“How did you save Leila and Luke? I thought she was a goner.” I mean, her neck had been sliced open and there was so much blood pouring out.

Kazuya smiles proudly and takes a small vial full of green liquid out of his bag. “With this!”

“Is this the elixir you were working on making earlier?”

“Uh-huh. It’s a super-strong healing potion. All you need to do is drink it or pour it onto a wound, and it’ll heal almost everything.”

“What?! That’s awesome! That’s amazing! Kazuya! I’m so glad Ganzi taught you how to make stuff!”

“Yeah. Well, I figured it’ll probably be vital for us from now on, when we go traveling.”

I cock my head. “What do you mean, vital for us?” To tell the truth, I was never one for drugs when I lived in Japan. Does Kazuya want to live large?

“I mean, I can use it when you go on a rampage, like today. If I get caught up in your battles, I’m going to need a maximum-strength panacea.”

“Huh?! I wouldn’t let you get caught up! No way would I ever hurt you!”

“You say that, but when you lose your temper, you tune out of everything around you,” he points out.

That shuts me up. He’s exactly right.

*I’m sorry.*

“Still, I knew I was pretty good at compounding, but this potion exceeded my expectations. I wasn’t sure it would work, since this was the first time using it in actual combat, but watching it do its thing with my own eyes... It was almost scary.” Kazuya looks a little frightened as his fingers close around the vial.

I can’t help but smile. He’s worried, even though he was the one who made it!

But more than that, I’m overjoyed. Both Leila and Luke are unharmed, and things wrapped up without me killing the bad guys. If Kazuya hadn’t stopped me, I’m a hundred percent sure I would have slaughtered them, so I feel a huge amount of relief.

Kazuya said that he made the healing potion for himself to use if he got injured, but I bet there was more to it than that. I bet he thought that I’d need a potion to help anybody I might hurt out of anger, like I almost did this time. He knew that I’d be sad if I hurt people without meaning to, even if they were bad guys.

*Thank you, Kazuya.*

All along, I thought I was the one protecting him, but he’s the one who’s always protecting me. I wonder why I didn’t notice until now. He protects me so that I can be myself.

My heart throbs. It’s different than the heart-pounding feeling I get when I see Luke.

Maybe I like Kazuya much more than I thought.



**WE** hand over the bad guys to the town’s authorities, who take over the case to wrap it up. The paperwork seems like it could turn into a hassle, so Kazuya and I skip town quickly. We only came to find out how to seal the Demon King, and seeing as nobody we asked knew, we’re going to try our luck gathering information elsewhere.

Oh, and Luke didn’t ask me to rejoin his party again. But as we were parting, he said, “As I am now, I’m no match for you. But when I’ve matured as a hero, a man, and as a human being, I’d like to court you again. I’d appreciate it if you’ll wait for me until then.”

*What?! Court me?!*

Does that mean he was courting me before?! Luke's already mature. If he matures any further before he comes to court me again, I'll waver for sure!

I was already starting to feel myself waver when Kazuya glared at me.

*Sorry. Sorry, Kazuya.*

But can you blame me? Luke's so upfront with his affection. I've never experienced that before, so of course I'd get happy. Because Kazuya won't go so far as to admit he likes me...

I walk behind Kazuya, who's keeping a brisk pace. The sight of his back curled over as he looks at a map bugs me. I'm so torn and frustrated. Meanwhile, he's always perfectly calm. Do I waver as to whether or not I like him because he's hardly ever upfront? Probably.

I pout, glaring at him.

He suddenly turns around. "Hey, Sakurako. It looks like there's another big town ahead..." He frowns. "Why are you looking at me like that? You look awful."

*Saying I look awful is awful!* I pout even more.

"What? What's wrong? Are you angry?" He's so oblivious, I can't stand him!

Kazuya's eyebrows shoot up, like he's just thought of something.

"Are you sulking because you can't be with Luke? I didn't really do anything to cause that. He left of his own volition, saying something like once he grows up, he'll court you...or something."

*No, that's got nothing to do with why I'm pouting.*

But Kazuya's on a roll. He starts mumbling, embarrassed. "But whatever, right? You have me."

*Huh?*

"What do you mean by that?"

"What? What do I mean by what?" Kazuya replies, bewildered.

“I said, what do you mean by, ‘You have me?’”

For some unfathomable reason, he looks like he’s desperate to say something, but the words won’t come out.

Well, words are coming freely to me! “By that, I mean what do you think about me, Kazuya? What am I to you?”

He winces, like he didn’t expect to be asked such a question. Then, he steps closer to me and cups my cheek in his right hand. “What? What’s wrong? Don’t you already know exactly how I feel about you?”

His face draws near mine, looking worried.

I worried him by asking that out of the blue. But give me a break, I asked it because he won’t just come out and say it!

“No, I don’t know. Because you’ve never told me straight out what you think of me.”

“What? What are you saying? I’ve told you over and over that I love you... Hmm?” Kazuya’s head reels back and he mutters, “Hold on a sec. Come to think of it, maybe I haven’t said it...”

I glare at him. “You haven’t said it!”

Kazuya’s eyes go wide. But soon, a sly smile spreads across his face. “What haven’t I said? You mean you’re frustrated because you don’t know how I feel?”

He leans forward until our foreheads are touching. I hate his happy smile, and it’s embarrassing seeing his face this close! But I’ll lose if I’m the first one to look away, so I keep my eyes fixed on his.





“You big dope, Sakurako.” Kazuya smiles kindly, then presses his lips to mine. It’s so sudden! But I’m so happy, I let him do what he wants.

When he pulls away, he’s beaming, genuinely happy. “Obviously, I like you. I love you. Otherwise, I’d never kiss you.”

His smile is tinged with a little embarrassment, and he looks cooler than anyone I’ve ever met. My heart pounds fast.

“That aside, you love me, don’t you?” he asks cheekily.

“Huh?! Wh-what?!” My voice raises an octave.

Seeing me like this, Kazuya smiles spitefully again. “I’m asking, what do you think of me?”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what do I think of you?! Gimme a break!” I stammer. I didn’t expect *him* to ask *me* like this!

“Tell me. It’s only fair,” he whispers in my ear, unusually lively, like he’s enjoying my reaction.

*Stop it! I’m blushing all the way to the tips of my ears!*

But..... Yes! He’s right, it’s only fair. I’ve heard how he feels, but I haven’t told him.

“K-Kazuya. I... I don’t know how to say this, because I only worked it out recently, but I... might, just maybe, like you more than I thought—”

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha! Lady Sakurako, I have finally caught up with you! You forgot about me and went on ahead, but your airheaded nature is yet another thing I find charming about you!”

—*I love you!* Just when I was about to shout out how I feel, an unnatural, high-pitched laugh bursts out overhead, interrupting me.

“D-Demon King?!” I look up to see the Demon King back in his usual demonic form.

*Oh, yeah! I forgot about the Demon King!* He got drunk on booze, and we abandoned him at the inn...

“You timed this for the worst possible moment!” Kazuya yells in annoyance,



glaring at the Demon King with total and utter loathing.

“I won’t let a lower lifeform get the jump on me! Ha ha ha ha!”

“Just when I thought I got lucky enough to ditch you for good...” Kazuya mutters, frustrated.

Oh, so he didn’t forget? He left the Demon King on purpose?

*Kazuya...*

Isn’t it too dangerous to leave him on his own in a built-up area? Well, I forgot him, too, so I don’t have the right to point that out.

I’m still reeling, but the Demon King and Kazuya launch into an argument like they always do. It’s a familiar sight to me now.

Just a minute ago, Kazuya was toying with me as well, so I can’t help but laugh.

But there’s no mistaking how I felt about Kazuya then. I love him. Not like family, but like a woman loves a man.

“Hey, Kazuya, Demon King, should we get going? We’re heading to the next town, aren’t we?”

The two of them turn to face me.

“As you wish, dear Lady!” The Demon King puffs out his chest with pride and walks the same way we were heading before.

“Sakurako, we can pick up where we left off... No, the mood’s all ruined.” Kazuya’s shoulders fall in a slouch.

I smile, sidling up next to him. “I like you, too. I love you,” I whisper quietly so that the Demon King doesn’t hear.

Kazuya’s eyes widen and he blushes bright red, right up to his ears. Seeing that, I get embarrassed, so I quicken my steps to catch up to the Demon King who’s leading us.

“What? Hey! Sakurako, say that again! One more time!” Kazuya yells.

I only shoot him a smile over my shoulder, my heart pounding, and let this unfamiliar joy I’m feeling sink in. If this is what they call love, then love is

wonderful!

Kazuya always makes me feel like a 'normal girl'. No... He always makes me happy. *Very* happy. I couldn't help but fall head over heels for him!

## Afterword

**HELLO**, Kazuki Karasawa here. For those of you who have read *The Weakest Manga Villainess Wants Her Freedom!*, it's been a while, huh?

Thanks for checking out *Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!* As with *The Weakest Manga Villainess*, it took a whole team of people to bring the story into English.

I actually wrote *Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!* before *The Weakest Manga Villainess*, which Cross Infinite World published in English first. I think of *Too Strong to Belong!* as an old piece of writing, so I was shocked when Cross Infinite World asked to publish it as well. It was a little hard reacquainting myself with a story I hadn't touched for years, as well as tapping into my mindset from back then in order to come up with a brand-new extra chapter, but the process was a lot of fun.

I've gotta say, the biggest draw of the story is how sweet the main character Sakurako is. (Oh, hey, I said the same thing about Elle, the main character in *The Weakest Manga Villainess*, haha). Sakurako has something different going for her than Elle, in that she's super strong. But despite her strength, she's still a normal girl who wants to fall in love. She's shy and blushes when she comes face to face with a hot guy. I find that an adorable quality.

I also love Kazuya's tenacity and how he has his heart set on being Sakurako's partner. I want him to get what he wants!

Oh, I should take the opportunity to mention that a Japanese manga adaptation of *The Weakest Manga Villainess* is in the works! I don't have further details at the moment, and I don't know if it'll get published in English, but stay tuned.

Finally, I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone involved in making this book and to my family and friends for all their support. And thank you to every reader who has picked up this story. I hope you find it entertaining all the way to the end, and I look forward to crossing paths with you again in the future!







**Rising from Ashes: My Dear Emperor, You're Putty in My Hands!**

By Makino Maebaru illust Yoko Maturika

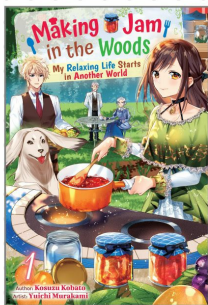
When Sai reincarnates into an otome game as an NPC destined to die, she's saved by the winged Orient Emperor who shares a similar fate! How'll they rewrite their story?



**I Guess This Dragon Who Lost Her Egg to Disaster Is My Mom Now**

By Suzume Kirisaki illust Cosmic

A gender bender fantasy series about a betrayed adventurer who ends up not only turning into a girl, but being raised by a powerful dragon too!



**Making Jam in the Woods: My Relaxing Life Starts in Another World**

By Kosuzu Kobato illust Yuichi Murakami

What Awaits Her In Another World Is Delicious Food And A Relaxing Life Surrounded By Spirits!

Margaret's life is cut short when she gets into a fatal accident at her workplace, except instead of the afterlife, she finds herself in another world!



Author: Iota AIUE Artist: Misa Sazanami



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