

Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of ENGEANCE a Second Time

7 The Righteous and the Wretched

NERO KIZUKA
Illustration by SINSORA



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The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of Vengeance a Second Time, Vol. 7

NERO KIZUKA

TRANSLATION BY JAKE HUMPHREY • COVER ART BY SINSORA

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1: What Lies Beyond Virtue

Chapter 2: Supplies and Preparation

Intermission: xxxxxxxx

Chapter 3: A Vengeance in Motion

Intermission: Partners in Crime Distraught

Chapter 4: A Deep, Deep Forest and the Scream of the Land

Chapter 5: The Dead-End Arena and the Downfall of Power

Epilogue: Thus He Came to the Other Side

Yen Newsletter

7 The Righteous and the Wretched

Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of ENGEANCE a Second Time

NERO KIZUKA

CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1: What Lies Beyond Virtue

Chapter 2: Supplies and Preparation

Intermission: xxxxxxxx

Chapter 3: A Vengeance in Motion

Intermission: Partners in Crime Distraught

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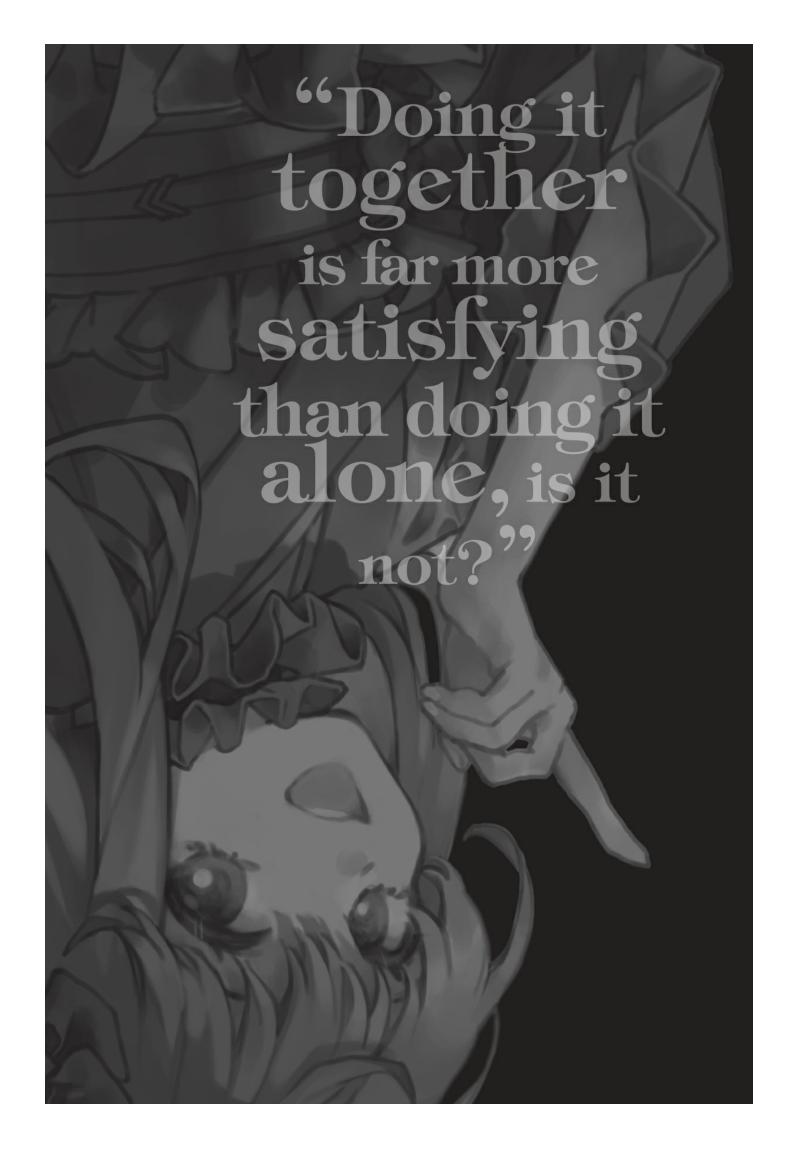
Chapter 4: A Deep, Deep Forest and the Scream of the Land

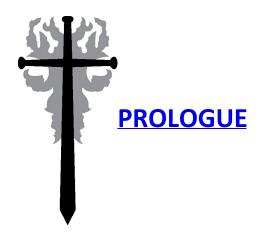
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Chapter 5: The Dead-End Arena and the Downfall of Power

Epilogue: Thus He Came to the Other Side

"Let's get started. Leon! This is the end of the line for you, I'm afraid. anightmarish hell from which there's no escape!!





I'm sure your mind was in the right place.

I'm sure your conscience was clean.

To the vast majority of humankind, your actions are the righteous ones, and ours are the evil ones.

We are the devious, the despicable, the deceptive and dishonorable.

But so what? So what? SO WHAT SO WHAT SO WHAT?!

You may say it's for the good of the people. You may say it's for the sake of the world! You may say it's the right thing to do, or what needs to be done!!

You may say that the needs of the many outweigh those of the few...

...but that is just tyranny. Blind righteousness in service to no one.

If that is your choice, then I'm sure you understand...

...that there is no telling what those subjected to that tyranny might do.

You said it was only natural to choose what's right.

You said you were only doing what needed to be done.

Well, this is only natural for us. This is what we have to do to get back at you.

You both understand that, don't you?

If we wish to drag you down with us, into the icy depths of purgatory your tyranny created...

...well, we can't exactly be blamed for that, can we?



I swore upon that scarlet sky that when I killed them, it would be with this knife, bequeathed to me by brother, the last demon lord.

"You sniveling child! I am ancient! Evil incarnate! I cannot be harmed by a wretched little worm like you!!"

"Heh. Let's see you fly without your wings, you oversize lizard! What's wrong? This pint-size pip-squeak giving you trouble?"

I was feeling on top of the world. The first time, I hadn't been able to lay so much as a scratch on his hard, impenetrable scales.

"What?! How can you—? You! It was you who stole my power!"

"I don't have to answer that. In fact, the less you know, the better. You're just a lizard who got some power by nibbling on a corpse. How glad I am to be able to deal the finishing blow instead of leaving it to Kaito! I might actually be grateful for the first time in my life!"

"Grh... Gaaaaagh!!"

Until today, my life had been nothing but suffering. But now, I was finally thankful to have been born.

The knife had lost its power, reduced to an empty husk. A burnt pommel on a wooden hilt stained red with my brother's blood. No matter how much it meant to me, it couldn't pierce a dragon's hide. Fortunately, with his power drained, the creature before me was a dragon no longer—just a demon pathetically clinging to life.

The scraps that had fallen from his mouth when he'd devoured my brother's heart were the only part of my family that remained.

But now I could carve out those regrets as easily as cutting into overripe fruit.

I had transcended time and was able to deliver death to those who deserved it. I had Kaito to thank for that. Because of him, I could finally taste that sweet fruit for myself.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Can you feel it? The sensation of being reduced to the lowest of the low?!"

"You sniveling worm! Ghah?!"

"Come up with something more original, moron! Let's see if we can't squeeze out some more creative insults!"

That fruit was red, so red. Tongue-meltingly sweet. Eye-blindingly sweet. Nose-tinglingly sweet. Earsplittingly sweet. An intoxicating seed. Red enough to stain the hand that touched it and the teeth that chiseled into it.

"This is for my brother. No matter how many times this world repeats, I shall always find you. But don't worry, we've got plenty of time left. Plenty of time to make you realize just how pathetic you truly are."

"Grh! Grhhh! No... Nooooo!!"

The first time, all I could do was kill. All I could do was squash that delicious fruit underfoot. I'd never known what it tasted like, so when I experienced it for the first time, it possessed me.

"Listen well, Leticia. This knife is very important; you must never part with it. Hold on to it, and unless something happens to me, never show it to anyone... even me. Don't worry. I'll think of something, just you wait."

I recalled the face of my brother as he'd stroked my head that day, and I remembered the knife he'd bequeathed to me.

Then a different memory arrived to take it all away. A recollection of a burning castle. Of my brother's corpse, his demon heart removed, and of this man standing over him and laughing.

I remember drawing that knife in an attempt to avenge my brother, along with the feeling of shock as it was plunged into my own breast.

I have longed to put that memory behind me for ages.

So.

"Cry, weep, howl, and wail! Let the fires of my soul consume you. Let the sorrows of the dead devour you! I will accept nothing else!"

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!!"

A resounding scream. I felt the power. The might of the demon lord. Each time his flesh, bones, and mind cracked, I knitted them back together.

"We're not through yet," I say. "I shall drive this knife into you as many times as it takes to shave your soul down to nothing. I shall impale your arms, slice your stomach, cut off your feet, and carve up your face."

"GAAAGGGH! AAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!"

Ah, how my blood boiled. How my blood raced. My knife moved faster and faster of its own accord, and my heart cried out for death and vengeance.

"I cannot help it. I know I must be patient, but I cannot..."

"Stop... Please... GGGGGGGGGG?!"

I needed to be calm. To not get ahead of myself and instead keep my mind focused on the present.

"This is precisely why I made mistakes the first time around, and Kaito paid the price."

There was only one thing I need to decide right now, and that was...yes. How should I kill *her*? The Burning Sword spell my brother taught me would do nicely.

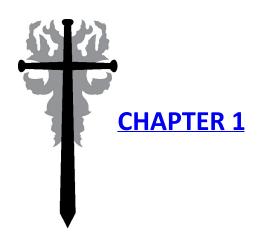
"No... Why...? Why did this happen...?"

"Ah, still able to speak, are we? Wonderful. That means we still have so much time together. How long will it last, I wonder?"

A dark pleasure spread across my lips. Before, I could only kill, but now, my heart yearned so badly...

SOBADLYSOBADLYSOBADLYSOBADLYSOBADLYSOBADLYSOBADLYSOBAI

...for vengeance.



What Lies Beyond Virtue

Zolkia—a desert oasis lush with greenery that lay along the border between the beast lands of Gilmus and the Lunarian See. It was a town enclosed on all sides by dunes of fine sand, along with sprawling forests filled with curious flora, and—if you believed the rumors—a magical kingdom of fairies.

Zolkia was considered the entryway to the See, and it was an important municipality to the nation of Gilmus.

Just like in the kingdom, there was prejudice against other races here, but this ideology was rarer farther from the capital. Ever since the establishment of the empire, the beast lands had been stripped of a border with the kingdom, allowing other nations' philosophies to take hold. These included the See's doctrine of *All equal except demonfolk*, and the empire's mantra of *Might makes right*. Of course, the nobility always needed a scapegoat, so beastfolk supremacy never went away entirely.

The town of Zolkia was a prominent one. Not only did it export a large volume of fantasy plants, it also possessed within its territory a high-level dungeon called the Gambler's Gauntlet. These days, it had become an important point to host troops and resources that were bound for the See to aid the war effort.

The air was heavier than I'd ever seen it when I arrived in Zolkia, and there was no shortage of those seeking mindless relief from the horrors of war. My partners and I had come here for one important reason: to brave the Gambler's

Gauntlet.

"Giryaaaah!!"

"Oh! Waah! Waah!"

The dungeon was laid out like a honeycomb, with numerous sections partitioned off by walls. Each section had its own unique environment, which ran the gamut from grasslands to ice fields to deserts to crags. Additionally, each area contained a large monitor depicting some kind of monster, and beneath that, an array of slot reels adorned with many levers.

Looking up always revealed the same clear blue sky. It didn't matter what the weather was like outside or how deep underground you were—the sunshine was brilliant at all times. It was what I like to call an "extraplanar dungeon," one whose layout didn't conform in the slightest to the outside world.

Yuuto was within one of those sections, a sandy plain filled with stone-barked trees, fending off a number of monsters.

"Krgh! Dammit!"

The monsters he was fighting were known as Woody Bears. They look like giant bear carvings with large exposed crystals in their chests. Their brutality alone earned them a B-rank classification.

Yuuto had managed to land his machete in the shoulder of one of the bears, only for it to get stuck there. His enraged foe swung a thick clawed paw in retaliation.

Thinking fast, Yuuto let go of his weapon and leaped back out of range. The maneuver left him defenseless, but he'd succeeded in avoiding the killing blow. A fair decision.

"Yuuto," I called out from atop the stone wall dividing the sections. "Put your whole weight into it when you swing that thing. It's not a light weapon, so you have to commit yourself: all or nothing. Wait for an opportunity to take back the initiative."

"Easier said than done! Grr! Take this!!"

"Gruh?!"

Aiming for when the enemy wound up to make a big swing, Yuuto launched a kick at his weapon, dislodging it and slicing off his foe's arm in one fell swoop. The machete landed with a *thunk*, point-down in the sand, while the bear, though undeterred by the pain, nevertheless reeled from the loss of balance caused by its missing limb.

"Hark, the sounds of a beastly feast. Monstrous Metamorphosis!"

In the opening thus caused, Yuuto transformed his arm into that of the Woody Bear itself, picking up the machete and swinging it hard into the exposed crystal in his foe's chest. The stone shattered, the bear froze like a marble statue, and the slots on the wall showing how many enemies remained went from five to four.

Meanwhile, Yuuto glowed with a magical light. This was the power of Monstrous Metamorphosis, the intrinsic ability he had gained upon making a contract with me. It allowed him to absorb the energy contained within the magic stones dropped by fallen foes and to call upon that power to transform in battle.

"Phew. Whoa?!"

"Don't let down your guard, Yuuto! Always be aware of your surroundings! Try to sense your opponents!"

"Sense them?! What does that even—? Aargh, forget it!"

I watched as Yuuto wheeled around to face the oncoming Woody Bears in the nick of time and engaged them in battle. There were no problems on his front, it seemed.

"It's Mai I'm more worried about," I said to myself, but when I turned to look in my sister's direction, what I saw shocked me. I suppose I should have expected her to be proficient in combat, but I never thought she'd be *this* good.

"Dear brother?" she asked, cool and calm. "I've run out of foes. What should I do?"

Behind her, I saw that the corpses of several slaughtered Lamias littered the marble floor. A thick layer of wind mana coated the blade of my sister's naginata. Some of the enemies were burned, others frozen or petrified, while

others looked like their flesh had swollen from the inside and burst out of them, or lay blackened as the result of some sinister curse.

The Lamia was a type of monster with a snakelike lower body and a humanoid torso. Lamias were C-rank monsters when alone, but their clever use of magic and group tactics forced them to A-rank when in a herd.

"...That's a good question," I replied.

"Anemol Arsenal." That was the name of the intrinsic ability my sister had gained from our contract. It allowed her to imbue her weapon with a shroud of wind that mimicked the other five elements—fire, water, earth, light, and darkness. Each element had a level associated with it, and defeating monsters using a certain element caused that level to rise.

Mai's skill with the *naginata* far outstripped her meager experience. Perhaps that was thanks to her having studied the weapon back on Earth. With just half a month of practice fighting various foes, she had gotten to a level where she could put up a decent fight against a high-class adventurer.

But a decent fight is all she'd manage. Ultimately, she'd still lose. What can I do about that, I wonder?

For all her genius, Mai couldn't hope to defeat a foe of equal strength. In fact, even one of lesser power could get a leg up on her if they were used to death and danger. It wasn't Mai's fault; she just needed more experience.

"Dear brother?"

"Ah, sorry, just thinking. Okay, next pull those levers in this order: red, blue, red, green."

As the name implied, this dungeon was all about luck. Pulling the levers scattered about the walls randomized the number of monsters, their type, and even the environment. It was a procedurally generated gauntlet of foes to tickle the fancy of battle-loving maniacs everywhere.

"This one, then this one, then this one..."

As Mai pulled the levers, images of monsters flashed across the monitor one after the other, while the three zeros embedded in the wall began to spin. The

slots finally came to rest, reading 0, 1, and 3, while the monitor depicted a B-rank monster called a Flame Leo, which was a lion with a fiery mane.

The next moment, the marble floor rumbled and changed into volcanic rock and lava, and the stone-barked trees were replaced by magma falls that came from above, and by enormous boulders the size of a person. The Lamia corpses disappeared, and at the same time the door to the next room closed again. Finally, the Flame Leos rose out of the lava, and Mai rushed into combat.

I'm not sure I like this, I thought. The two of them have grown so much in such a short time. I know it's mainly because of my power-leveling tactics, but still...it kinda bruises my ego.

The fastest way for me not to have to worry about their safety anymore was to get Yuuto and Mai up to as high a level as possible by grinding experience points. It was a controversial method of training, since while it raised one's stats, it would take a while for one's skills and senses to catch up accordingly. However, the demon war had already begun and we were short on time. We didn't have the luxury of choice.

Still, when I compared Yuuto's and Mai's growth to my own, I was gobsmacked. Did handsome men and pretty girls get some kind of buff or something? That wasn't fair.

Whatever, I thought, sensing the presence of more monsters. We'll see how far a full day of grinding gets us and then decide from there.

The object of this dungeon was to slay all the monsters within a room, thus unlocking the door to the next one. One day, a cunning spellcaster had thought of using flight-bestowing magic to simply fly over the partitions. But when they tried it, the end result was that they lost both their legs and had to retire.

"""Groooaaaaaagh!!"""

I heard the approaching sound of some lesser elemental dragons. They were the punishers of anyone who tried to unfairly cheat the dungeon, as I was currently doing. As long as I stayed above the walls, they would respawn almost immediately upon death.

These dragons were a far cry from Leticia's pet, Guren, the evil dragon. They

were basically unintelligent flying lizards. Still, dragons were dragons. The species was so powerful that all examples were at least A-rank, based only on their physical capabilities. Plus, dragons were only good for experience points. Their bodies disappeared immediately upon death, leaving behind no useful materials whatsoever.

Because of that, few people did what I was doing. However, experience points were all I cared about right now, and this was the best way I could think to farm them.

"Three hundred and eighteen this time," I noted. "I appreciate how more and more show up every time they respawn."

I conjured the Teardrop Blade of Lightning:

"The graceful Cloud Emperor weepeth. 'Hear my words and fall,' he cries. Even as he bewails a world of constant sorrow, he claims his place and screams. Even if no one hears his screams and answers. Even if all should vanish in the blink of an eye."

The blue sword, made up of seven crescent moon blades, crackled as I channeled my mana through it. I gave a longer chant to summon more of its power than usual.

"Whoa, he's going again?" "Seriously? Who the hell is he?" "I've never even heard of a top-rate adventurer with that hair and those eyes." "The aura he's giving off is crazy!" "How come no one knows who he is?"

Excellent. They're all starting to notice me.

Many adventurers had already departed for the front lines, but there were still a few left trawling the dungeon. Those who weren't fighting stared intently my way, looking back and forth between me and the approaching draconic horde, eager to know what would happen.

"Darkness claims proper grief. Evening claims unreachable tragedy."

Watch closely, I thought. Burn this sight into your eyes.

How many times had they watched me do this? While indifferent at first, their awe only grew the more times I pulled it off.

"Let this world hear your voice, Cloud Emperor. Imperial Cry: Black of Night!"

The next moment, the mana in my blade transformed into cruel, black lightning that shot out at all the approaching dragons at once.

CRKCRKCRKCRKCRK!!

```
"""Garrrrrgggh?!"""
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It was blatant overkill. The noise didn't let up for an instant, and when it finally died down, all the dragons had perished. Originally, their scales had been colored according to what element they used, but now every last one was charred black. The dragons fell out of the sky and dissolved into nothing before even hitting the ground.

"Just how versatile is he?!" "Last time it was fire, then water, then earth, and...I don't even remember what was before that!" "What is he using? It's like no magic I've ever seen! Is it some kind of intrinsic ability?" "You don't see many adventurers of this level outside the front lines."

The onlookers couldn't hold back their admiration. It was all so in line with my expectations that I cracked a smile. Yes, remember me. And go back and tell tales of what you saw.

I watched as, one by one, they left the dungeon, peering at me in wonder as I stayed behind.

Go along and spread my name for me, my little PR team.

""…""

"Damn, sucks to come back to weather like this, huh?"

It was cold, damp, and dark on the surface, a far cry from the clear blue skies we had been experiencing underground. It wasn't exactly what I wanted to see after shutting myself away for training. I'd been hoping to feel some freedom.

"Now then, should we go grab some food? ...Ah, I guess you're not in the mood for that."

After stretching and turning around, I saw the weary faces of my newest partners in crime.

"Dear brother?" asked Mai. "You're not so useless that you'd deny your beloved little sister a moment to dress herself up, are you?"

"Ha-ha-ha... I think I need a bit of a break, too. Sorry, Kaito," added Yuuto.

"Fair enough. Let's go find an inn, then. Don't worry, I've done my homework: On the west side of town there's a place with beds said to be as soft as an angel's cloud. The guy who runs it is a bit of a fanatic, see, and he custom orders the mattresses from all over the world. Of course, the food there's so bad we'll have to cook for ourselves, but that's a small price to pay, don't you think?"

The two either had no objections or were too tired to voice them, so we set off at once.

Along the way, we passed a good number of beastfolk roaming the streets. When we'd first arrived, Yuuto and Mai would crane their necks at every oddity, but they seemed to have gotten used to the sights and sounds of this world by now. Before long, we arrived at our destination without incident.

"Hey, got any rooms?" I asked the old man at the front desk, a Squamatonid beastfolk, judging by his slitted eyes and the set of lizard-like scales that ran around the edge of his face.

"For three? Upper floor, far back," he replied, and after I dropped a few silver coins in his palm, he smiled. We followed his directions and entered a room of simple make, which was nonetheless populated by three gorgeous-looking beds. Each came with a canopy that seemed far more extravagant than the rest of the room, yet nonetheless provided a feeling of elegance.

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"Wow, they're even fancier than I—hey, you two!!"
```

""…""

Before I could even say anything more, my two compatriots approached the beds to my left and right and collapsed face-first onto them, passing out instantly. They must have been even more exhausted than I thought.

"Whoops," I said to myself. "Maybe I was too hard on them..."

I realized now I'd pushed them a lot more than I had planned to. Oh, well. The

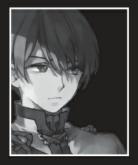
sun was still high. It wouldn't hurt to let them rest awhile.

"Now then," I said. "I'd love to try out these beds for myself, but first let's take a few notes."

I went and sat on the remaining bed, the one farthest from the door, by the window.

"Open status," I said.

STATUS



Yuuto Kanazaki Lv213

Age 18 • Male • Human

HP: 4,195/4,195 MP: 3,843/3,843 (4,024)

Strength: 3,285 Stamina: 2,795

Vitality: 2,565 Agility: 3,185

Magic: 2,137 Resistance: 1,985

Intrinsic Abilities: Monstrous Metamorphosis ▽, Auto-Translate

Skills: Machete Lv 15, Notice Lv 12, Beastfoot Lv 11, Demonfoot Lv 15, Overpower Lv 21, Control Body Lv 18, Control Mana Lv 5, Martial Arts Lv 14

Status: Asleep

Monstrous Metamorphosis: Goblins (3), Orcs (7), Ogres (4), Humanoids (12), Garm (7), Plants (2), Boars (3), Bears (2), Lions (2), etc.

STATUS



Mai Ukei

Lv222

Age 17 • Female • Human

HP: 3,451/3,451 MP: 4,261/4,261 (4,485)

Strength: 2,832 Stamina: 2,285

Vitality: 2,085 Agility: 3,380

Magic: 3,689 Resistance: 3,589

Intrinsic Abilities: Anemol Arsenal ▽, Auto-Translate

Skills: Naginata Lv 28, Jiujitsu Lv 22, Graceful Step Lv 33, Fleet-Foot Lv 12, Control Body Lv 19, Control Mana Lv 13, Notice Lv 21, Stealth Lv 31, Meditate Lv 12

Status: Asleep

Anemol Arsenal: Wind Lv 13, Fire Lv 4, Water Lv 6, Earth Lv 8, Light Lv 9, Dark Lv 6

The status boards of two exceptional warriors appeared before me. I had funneled my excess experience points into Mai and Yuuto using the Holy Sword of Retribution, and because they were otherworlders like me, their rate of growth was far higher than average.

However, their skills were still lacking, and that wasn't something I could fix with points. It would take real-world training and experience to build their proficiency, and until that time, they would be a step behind their full potential. I doubted it would present a serious issue, but still.

"Those two are like sponges," I said. "All that's left is to see how far they can go."

There wasn't anything to worry about, it seemed. I decided to open my own status board as a little reminder of what I could do.

"Let's see..."

STATUS



Kaito Ukei Lv112

Age 18 • Male • Human

HP: 15,345/15,345 MP: 12,226/12,226 (12,869)

Strength: 14,368 **Stamina: 13,398**

Vitality: 15,545 **Agility: 17,587**

Magic: 11,137 Resistance: 13,047

Intrinsic Abilities: Soul Blade ♥, Auto-Translate

Skills: Unarmed Lv 15, Track Lv 34, Stealth Lv 53, Enhanced Senses Lv 25, Divine Swordsmanship Lv 33, Air Step Lv 65, Godfoot Lv 31, React Lv 25, Control Body Lv 39, Control Mana Lv 58, Meditate Lv 42, Imperial Intimidation Lv 12, Natural Healing Speed Up Lv 33, Martial Arts Lv 22, Iai Strike Lv 45, Notice Lv 72, Carve Lv 31, Fishing Lv 5

Status: OK

Soul Blades: All unlocked

Unallocated Experience Points: 1,554



I had broken the unwritten rule I'd imposed on myself at the beginning of my do-over and raised my level above 1.

The reason I had decided against it before was because I wanted to prove a point to our fighter, Leon, who believed that levels and experience were everything. I figured my stats would be high enough without raising my level, and that everything would be okay. However, I hadn't expected to be returned to Earth with my memories stripped. Luckily, I managed to join up with Yuuto and Mai, and find my way back, but it was a close shave. I had been *this* close to dying out there.

"I'm not yet back at peak performance, but I'm getting there. Maybe eighty percent?"

The experience points I'd received from the dungeon allowed me to unlock all my remaining soul blades. I was still only a third of my previous level, but the stat buffs I received from them more than made up for it. Now the only scenario I could envision where I would be in danger was if I ran into an archdemon outside the barrier. Either that, or if I had to fight a certain someone who regained their full strength after the barrier fell.

The barrier weakened all demons within its bounds and made it difficult for new ones to enter. It was created by the Holy Crystal, borrowing the life energy of beings born in this land. That meant that after the barrier fell, that energy was returned to its original owners. Of course, few could put this returned energy to good use immediately, but there were some who could.

"Well, everything looks good on the stats front. Let's take a look at titles."

After returning here from Earth, I'd received a bunch of new titles: "Repatriate," "Returner," "Bound Breaker," and "Custodian of the Divine Key." Also, my "Avenger's Master" title changed to "Avenger's Overlord."

The first three were good. As far as I could tell, they raised my stats just like other titles. The problem was the other two. First, "Custodian of the Divine Key." Turning my "Appraise" skill upon it resulted in only a stream of incomprehensible garbage, leaving me unable to work out what it did. I didn't like having a title whose effects were unknown, and going by its name, I could only assume that I must have received it from that mysterious voice I'd met in

the space between dimensions. I didn't like that, either.

Then there was "Avenger's Overlord." It gave a small buff to all my stats, but on top of that, it also upgraded the effect of the Holy Sword of Retribution. Specifically, it altered the terms of the contract from a mutually beneficial agreement into one that favored me significantly. Now every one of my partners in crime would go down with me if I died, but if one of them kicked the bucket, I would be unaffected.

"Grr, another thing I didn't ask for..."

I didn't want there to be any difference between me and my accomplices. I wanted us all to share equally in revenge, our blood and our lives mixed together into a single, muddy mess.

But just as I was lamenting this "upgrade," there was a rattle at the window.

"Hmm? Ah, they're back."

I closed the status boards and walked over to the window. A dry wind blew in from outside as I slid it up.

"Welcome back, you two," I said.

"Kyupie!" "Squeak!"

Slimo and Sir Squeaks came into the room. They'd been scouting the area ever since we arrived. It was they who'd told me about this inn, in fact.

"Thanks, guys. Sorry for working you two to the bone—or, the goo, I guess. Get some food and you can have a nice rest."

I took out some food from the Squirrel's Blade of Holding and fed it to them. For Slimo, some magic stones I'd picked up in the dungeon, and for Sir Squeaks, a fancy cheese that he was rather fond of. As those two happily nibbled away, I turned my attention to the information they had brought me.

From what I could tell, it seemed time had passed as normal while I was away on Earth. However, war had broken out a little earlier than I'd expected. Additionally, the fighting had happened in the beast lands the last time, but now it was transpiring over in the See.

It doesn't seem like Leticia and Lilia are here in town, either. It's a little earlier

than before, but I guess they've already infiltrated the allied army.

My investigations turned up a demon on the front lines by the name of Ardelius, Baron of Flames. He was a long-standing enemy of the previous demon lord, and the one responsible for summoning the evil dragon that killed Leticia's big brother. Assuming history had not yet been totally rewritten, Leticia would still be after him, while Ardelius himself assaulted the mainland. Once the demon shattered the Holy Crystal, Leticia would ambush him and cut out his three hearts, slaying him. To do so, she would use the conflict between her supporters and Ardelius as a distraction. During that time, Lilia would be alone.

If all went according to plan, that would be when I made my move. So for the time being, I decided to focus my efforts on our noble-hearted fighter, Leon Gailed.

He was the one leading the troops on the front line, but if my information was correct, then he had come back to this town just yesterday in search of something.

"I hope he falls for my little bait. Well, if he doesn't, it's no biggie."

My biggest concern at the moment, however, was about Minnalis and Shuria. Ever since coming back to this world—actually, even before that—I had been able to sense a faint connection between us. The last moment I'd seen them painted a pretty dire picture, but based on this connection, it was safe to say they were still alive. But I had no idea where in the world they might be or what they might be up to.

Did Metelia take them prisoner? But then why keep them alive? There's no reason I can think of. So did they manage to escape?

There were too many possibilities and not enough facts. Any more postulating, and I'd basically just be making things up. I knew next to nothing about Metelia, too. My only option was to keep gathering information and hope that the other two managed to get away and find some way to contact me.

As for the offshoots, I still wasn't sure why they'd begun appearing already, and there wasn't much I could find out in this town on that front. But seeing as though I'd met Leticia, and she seemed to be doing fine, I guessed they must have come from someone else...

"Not much to go on there, either..."

That was as far as I could make it with the meager knowledge I possessed. If I wanted to know more, I'd have to go out and find it myself.

By now, Slimo and Sir Squeaks had finished their meals and were happily snoozing away on the edge of my bed. Looking at them made me feel sleepy, too. Or rather, it made me realize just how tired I already was.

"It's still early in the day...," I lamented to myself, but in the end, I crawled into bed, trying not to wake my two familiars.

There was a lot to think about, but first I needed rest. If nothing else, I had to quell the excitement rising in me over finding two of my sworn enemies in one place. I had to stay calm so I could execute my vengeance without mishap.

What I needed right now was a sleep so deep it extinguished all thought and soothed all weariness. And so, I gently closed my eyes...

...trying not to listen to the voice in my head telling me, "There's no way you're going to get a proper night's rest tonight."



I dreamed of the past.

In an ethereal state, I watched as if reliving an abridged version of events. Objective and subjective facts merged and distorted, massaging my rational mind into realization.

This world is filled with deceit.

I recalled what I'd come to know after finding out the truth of the demon lord's existence—or rather, their role.

All demons possessed a magic stone inside their bodies that served as their heart. In certain circumstances, it was powerful enough to regenerate organs and flesh, but if the core itself was destroyed, the demon perished. On top of this, those who became the demon lord received another, separate stone: the arcstone. This was in fact a seed of the World Tree imbued with evil. It gave the demon lord unfathomable power, but it slowly turned them into something called a Demonlight Tree. Once the transformation was complete, the tree's

malign influence would spread to the surrounding areas. For a hundred years until that tree's death, monster attacks would be more frequent, and the demons would grow in power.

This was why heroes were needed to slay the demon lords: to destroy the one and only arcstone and purify the demonic energy within. Only a hero could perform this feat, thus bringing peace to the realm until the time another arcstone made its appearance.

...But I couldn't do that.

The transformation brought on by the arcstone was not immediate. It took time for a demon lord to be consumed entirely. But things had been different with Leticia. She'd received her arcstone from the previous demon lord instead of through normal means.

That meant she only had a few years left to live.

Leticia had asked me to spend those final few years with her. She said there was no other way.

She wanted me to complete what she had set out to do. Combining her power with mine, we would create a barrier that split the world in two, separating mankind and demonkind, thus putting a stop to the fighting once and for all. Then we would live out the rest of her life in the space in between.

...But I couldn't accept that.

I decided to search for a way to remove the arcstone from Leticia's body. The sudden appearance of the evil dragon had devastated both sides of the war, and while Leticia and I had managed to put it down, the feat had weakened us, and neither the forces of mankind nor demonkind had enough strength to resume hostilities, either.

So I left Leticia in the care of Lilia, her sister, and Leon, a proud and upstanding wielder of martial arts. Meanwhile, I embarked upon a journey to find a cure for Leticia's condition.

And eventually, I found it. From the ancient vampires, I learned of a tome called the "Book of Wisdom," that bestowed the reader with any knowledge their heart desired.

Deep in the Ruins of Decay, I learned of a dungeon where the Book of Wisdom might be found.

And deep in the elven forest, I entered that sealed dungeon in search of the treasure within.

I fought my way through nearly five hundred floors, each swarming with boss-level monsters, until finally laying eyes upon the artifact I sought.

And there, I learned how to extract and destroy the arcstone without endangering Leticia's life.

I had found it. At last, I had found it. I hurried back. I hurried back to where Leticia was waiting.

Leticia...

I promised you. I gave up your hand so I could promise you.

So why...?

"No... It can't be... Not this quickly..."

"Gruuuuuuuuhhh!"

Why did I return to find your transformation complete?



After Leticia became a Demonlight Tree, I fought her.

I didn't have much time to consider the matter. Leticia's selfhood had fallen completely silent, and all the tree cared about was sending out Offshoot after Offshoot in search of life to feed on. Neither mankind nor the demons boasted enough power to stop it, and so that task fell to me. I had no choice unless I wanted innocent people to suffer.

We fought for three days and three nights. She was more powerful than any foe I'd ever faced, and through it all, I clung to the hope that there might still be some way to save her.

But I knew it was a vain hope. Because the book had also told me that once the tree sprouted, there was no way to separate Leticia's soul from it.

...Or rather, there was only one way.

If I could find the arcstone, wherever it was hidden, I possessed the knowledge and ability to draw out the evil power and release it into the world, leaving Leticia's soul intact.

But I couldn't find it. And even if I had, I wouldn't have been able to go through with this plan.

Because I was a hero. Because Leticia had taught me to love this world and everything in it.

If I released that energy into the world, it would create a blanket of evil so dense that all who breathed it in would perish, demons included. It would create a world inhabited only by death, and I knew for a fact that Leticia didn't want to live in a world like that.

Even so, I doubted and doubted. I fought desperately against the pitch-black monster that had drawn Leticia into its wooden heart, asking myself what the right thing to do was all the while.

I couldn't bring myself to end it. Not even as the Demonlight Tree glowed red and prepared to self-destruct. Ultimately, all my hesitation bought was my doom.

But just as I was about to pay the price for my fatal mistake, Leticia regained consciousness.

"I think I do want to destroy the world, actually. Let's settle this once and for all. Win or lose, no regrets, okay?"

Her lie was painfully obvious, but with it at my back, pushing me on, I skewered the arcstone that Leticia's heart had become, thus ending the battle and my hesitation for good.

"Leticia..."

"Heh. What a face to make when you've got such a cutie in your arms."

"Why...did it happen so soon? Couldn't you have...fought it off or something? I found it! I found a way to save you! Didn't we say we'd go back to my world together? Didn't we promise I'd show you off to my parents and tell them what a cute girlfriend you made?"

I could sense Leticia's soul fading. I could feel the body I held in my arms gradually growing emptier and emptier.

"Sorry, Kaito," she said. "It looks as if I shan't be returning to your world after all. But that's only fair, I suppose. I've always taken and taken, and never had the chance to give anything back. At least this way, I'll be able to do something for you for a change. I told you before, did I not? I never like to leave a debt unsettled."

She giggled, the same way she had always done.

"Promise me you'll go back to your world. Your family. Your home. Oh, but don't forget me too quickly. Be sure to mourn me. Construct a tomb worthy of my greatness, and weep as you remember my legacy. Kaito, all you ever think about is your own world. I want to have you to myself for a while! Hee-hee-hee! When I think about it that way, suddenly dying doesn't seem so bad!"

She chuckled mischievously, the same way she had always done.

"Oh, and one more thing. Make sure you get all you want out of life. I'm giving you my own, so you had better not waste it. I'll be watching over you, so watch out, mister! If I see you slacking off, I'll come back to life and beat you up! Or I'll haunt you!"

She boldly urged my spineless self on, the same way she had always done.

Only this time the pain was too much to bear.

"Leticia..."

"Come on, Kaito! Do you mean to use up all your tears before I'm even gone? I said 'no regrets,' didn't I?! Smile! S-M-I-L-E!"

Her powerless fists struck my cheeks one at a time.

"Ow... What's that for ...? This is domestic abuse, I'll have you know ... "

Leticia's body began dissolving into sand. The contamination of the Demonlight Tree had left her demon heart unable to contain the boundless power of the demon lord.

"Smile, Kaito. Come on. I want you to."

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"L...like...this?"
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"Pfft! What an unfortunate mug! Now, there's a head that's going to go bald!"

"Y-you idiot. Are you blind? Can't you see my luscious locks?"

"Heh-heh. Ignore my predictions at your own peril, Kaito!"

I forced a smile and tried to chat like we always did, but it felt like that smile would come apart at any moment. The schism between how I looked and how I felt was so wide, I thought it would tear me apart.

Her arms and legs were already gone. Our time was rapidly running out.

"I can't believe you...," I said. "Even at a time like this..."

"Heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh... Aah, I don't think I can do it, Kaito..."

Her voice strained and strained and strained.

"I...don't want to die after all..."

"Leticia..."

It was a whisper.

"I want to stay. Please let me stay. Why can't I stay?"

"Leticia... Leticia!!"

Her words, too, crumbled to dust.

"I don't want to go! I want to stay with you, Kaito! I... I...!"

As if finally looking down from the precipice on which she stood, as if finally turning to face her imminent extinction, her nonexistence, like a bubble vanishing forever...

"I love you! I love you, Kaito! I love you so much..."

...as if finally awakening from a dream, she cried. Her tearstained face burned itself forever into my memories.

"I...love you...too. I love you, too, Leticia. I love you, too. So, so much..."

I wept, clutching nothing but cold, lifeless sand.



It was cold. So cold. I never knew the world could be so cold. I never knew the world could lose its color.

I lay atop a piece of driftwood in the deserted ruins of a coastal town. The hot sand caressed my cheek.

The blood rolled down me, taking my body's warmth with it, while poisons and curses left me unable to teleport or even move.

"..."

It all felt so empty. Even the dazzling glare of the sun high above seemed hollow. It was as if I'd regressed to the way I was when I first came to this world.

I felt like the whole world was trying to squeeze me out of existence. My entire being. It felt like vague specters of the past were shackled to my legs as I trudged through a deep, boggy marsh. I was trapped, as if in a cage, and the more I tried to run, the more I was pulled down, choking, into those forbidden depths.

"...Ha-ha-ha. No, if anything, it's even worse than back then."



Because Leticia had broken that cage of loneliness and fear for me. I knew that there was nothing that bound me now.

"I suppose I should be impressed, Kaito," came a voice.

"We caught you at your weakest moment and outnumbered you two to one," came a second voice. "And yet you still live."

The pair who stood over me were like giants formed of ice. One, the Leonid beastfolk, Leon, a martial artist whose fists were his deadliest weapons, dressed in his training garb. The other, Lilia, of the race of demons, wearing a purple, dress-like spellcaster's robe.

I had trusted them both so much that I'd been willing to leave the weakened Leticia in their care. Now they looked like complete strangers.

"H-how?" I asked. "Where did you find a poison so strong it prevents even me from teleporting?"

Leon answered my question as though keeping secrets from me was no longer necessary. "That was the Cursed Toxin of the Fey Queen," he said.

I could piece together the rest. "I see," I said. "So you didn't kill her after all."

The Fey Queen ruled over the Fairy Kingdom. But her people weren't the kind and gentle fairies from kids' tales. They saw humankind as nothing more than toys, and the pranks they played were beyond the pale. They would lead travelers astray in the forest, causing them to die of starvation. They would summon hordes of monsters or sabotage adventurers' equipment without their knowledge.

And that wasn't even the worst of it. Sometimes, they stole newborn babies and toyed with them until they died. If they took a shine to a particular human, they'd erase the memory of them from people's minds. Sometimes, they'd even turn someone into a brain-dead zombie for no reason.

To get away with their mischief, they brainwashed people. Consequently, almost everyone would find a way to dismiss what had happened to the fairies' victims. They'd say it was an accident, or that the victim had it coming, or that it was only natural.

Only a very small fraction of people were able to resist this, and it was only these few who knew what a threat the fey truly posed.

"So that's why you were so insistent you be the one to kill her," I recalled. "Oh, it all makes sense now."

There once was a man who lost everything to the fey. One day, a capricious fairy took a liking to him. This fairy proceeded to erase the memory of him from his parents, his wife, and his children, then asked the man to be their playmate for the rest of his life.

Naturally, the man refused, but when he did this, the fairy grew so angry that they blinded the man in one eye, paralyzed him in one arm, and aged him to the brink of death.

This man had not seen even thirty summers, and yet when he appeared before me on the road, his skin was saggy and wrinkled, his white hair thin and balding, and with his final breath, he begged for my help.

All he left behind was his diary, which told of his awful fate in wretched, pitiable words.

After reading it, we all agreed to go to the fairy village and put a stop to the fairies' trickery once and for all. While I caused a distraction, Leon advanced on their leader, the Fey Queen, and dealt the final blow.

Or so I thought. I wanted to know why Leon had kept her alive, but there was something else I needed to ask.

"I was worried about you guys, you know. Now I know I didn't need to be. Tell me...what did you want?"

I wanted to know why. I wanted to know why warmth slipped from my hands. Why sharp knives dug into my arms and tore them apart from the inside. Why my breath turned to ice and froze everything in sight.

"Tell me, Leon. Could you not just have waited for Leticia to live out the rest of her life? Did you have no faith I'd return? Did you want the glory of killing the demon lord yourself? Did you think it was the best way to end the war?"

Leon remained stone-faced and unfriendly.

"Tell me, Lilia. You know how much Leticia looked up to you, so why? Why did you turn against her as well? Answer me! Answer me!!"

"…"

Lilia remained stoic and calm.

"I thought maybe she just didn't have as much time as we predicted. I thought maybe you two were in danger, or she'd hurt you, and that's why I didn't see you there when I got back..."

I clenched my teeth so tightly, I could hear them grating. The tightness pressed down on my heart, begging for an answer.

"So then tell me why! Why couldn't I find the arcstone after I killed her?! And why can I feel its very same mana emanating from the crystal in your staff, Lilia?!"

Something was ringing in my ears, growing louder and louder, suffering all the while. I could feel my mind screaming out as it rotted away to nothing.

"Tell me!!" I yelled, my words burning the walls of my throat. "Both of you! Why did you betray her?!"

"...You know nothing, Kaito," said Leon. "You don't belong in our world. Neither of you do."

I could barely hear his words.

"I feel sorry for you," he went on. "You and the young lady as well. But we must put a stop to this charade, or else the tragedy will never end. It will go on and on, repeating the cycle, until finally it tears this world apart. So long as evil exists in this world, it can be defeated, but a broken world can never be remade."

"What...are you talking about?"

"Our work began long before you ever set foot in this realm," explained Lilia. "We are more than prepared to commit any sin, if that is what it takes to return it to the hands of its people. We have resolved to walk this path, no matter what we lose along the way. In fact," she went on, "I have already sullied my

hands with my brother's blood. There is no going back now."

"Y-your...brother?" I stammered. "Hold on...you killed him? But that means..."

Leticia had already taken revenge for her brother's murder. But it was not against Lilia. I demanded to know more, but the woman refused to speak another word of it.

"That is all in the past," she said. "It was the only way to save the world. Once, I hoped there might be another way, but fighting against the roles of the hero and the demon lord proved impossible. The only way is by combining the power of the arcstone, the godstone, and the power of the void that you possess."

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about!!"

It didn't make any sense. It just didn't make any sense. Their incomprehensible justifications were like smoke in my eyes, sparking my anger.

"The hero and the demon lord are not meant to exist," said Lilia. "Leticia was going to destroy this world. To save it, the two of you needed to die."

To save the world? We weren't supposed to exist?

"Lies!" I cried. "Leticia wasn't going to destroy the world! She asked me to kill her so that she wouldn't hurt anybody!!"

"It doesn't matter," said Leon. "The role of the demon lord itself is the threat. It is a plague upon this realm, as is the hero."

"All we are," said Lilia, "is entertainment for a cruel and callous goddess, content to watch the same story play out again and again while we suffer. Once this world is reduced to a barren husk, she will throw us away."

Entertainment? A cruel goddess? A barren husk?

Dammit, I don't have a clue what's going on!

Their words sounded hollow to my ears. I understood what they were trying to say, but it didn't seem real. They weren't lying, either. Their eyes were not deceitful, but noble and pure, brimming with determination. Whether or not what they were saying was true, they believed it.

Once I realized that, I lost the will to argue, and all the strength left me.

"...Fine," I said. "Whatever. Just answer me one thing: Why did Leticia's transformation complete so quickly? Were you behind it?"

"...Yes," replied Leon. "It was I who removed the arcstone. Without it to suppress the rising evil inside her, she succumbed to her fate immediately."

At this confession, the part of me that was screaming out for closure died.

It had been a mistake, then, to leave Leticia with them. I had committed a fatal error in judgment. There would have been very little the weakened Leticia could do to defend herself against those two conspiring together. Especially since one of the perpetrators was her own beloved sister.

Leon channeled mana into his fists, which began to glow with a golden light. Lilia raised her staff, and its tip swelled with unfathomable darkness.

"...I do not mean to make excuses, Kaito. I must kill you and become stronger. To save this realm, the hero must perish."

"This world has no need of heroes, of demon lords, of priestesses or princesses. We will not be its pawns. And so you must die."

I didn't care anymore. I just didn't care. I was tired.

Because I no longer recognized the world I'd sworn to protect. The world whose people I had tried so hard to give a happy ending.

And in the end, the people I'd trusted had betrayed me.

Somewhere in my steadily decaying mind, a nerve disintegrated. One that had been trying to tell me something very important.

"I don't care anymore..."

"...You're my enemies now."

"Rgh! Lion's Golden Roar!"

"Shadow-Eclipsing Spine!"

Leon's mana took on the visible form of a roaring lion's head, while Lilia's became a pitch-black spear that obliterated all it touched.

If those two attacks hit me now, debuffed to hell as I was, it would be the end of me.

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"If" being the operative word.

"Devour them, Gluttony."

""Wha—?!""
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Something appeared that could only be described as a hole torn into the fabric of space. The attacks disappeared into this hole and vanished completely.

In my hands was a bloated, flesh-colored blade—the Sword of Sin: Bottomless Greed. Currently, it was in the form of a weapon, not in the humanoid shape it adopted when fully unleashed.

This was the first time either of these two had seen this form in action. I had created it to counteract the sword's penalties and to increase its ease of use. The downside was that I didn't have access to its reality-bending powers, and so the sword was only useful against entities of the same power level as me or weaker. I thus gained versatility while giving up the power to execute a complete reversal of fortune.

But versatility was exactly what I needed right now. Leon and Lilia knew about Gluttony's main power, but they weren't prepared for this.

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""Grh!!""
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The pair had poured a significant amount of mana into their attacks and were thus left off guard. I capitalized on that chance by summoning my next soul blade.

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"Time to play, Lust."

"Oh no!"

"Krh!!"
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The next blade I summoned shimmered in all the colors of the rainbow—its name, Sword of Sin: Lusty Little Girl. I swung it, and an enormous toybox enveloped the pair.

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"Now, get lost."
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The box made a gulping noise and vanished into thin air. Leon and Lilia weren't dead. In this form, my Swords of Sin weren't powerful enough to take

them out. But with those two out of the picture, I would finally be able to teleport away. I figured if they'd sealed my ability to leave, I just needed to get rid of them instead. Somewhere far, far away, as far as possible. Where exactly I'd sent them, even I didn't know.

"It's going to be a while before I can teleport," I said to myself. For now, I had to hide away somewhere and wait for this poison to run its course. Besides, I'd used the Swords of Sin, so now Metelia knew where I was.

"The hero must perish."

"And so you must die."

"...You think I care?"

I hung my head, hands clasped tightly around the bag that held Leticia's heart.

There were people who wanted me dead just because I was the hero.

"I have to go back...," I muttered. "I have to return to Earth."

I repeated the words I'd uttered so many times before. After that, the air fell silent once more. The only things in this world that answered me were the sun beating down on me and the sea spray on my skin. However...

...nothing in this realm could make me feel anything anymore.



Waking up left me with a bad taste in my mouth, like I'd swallowed a handful of worms, and they were all crawling about back there. The closer I got to my vengeance, the more insistent my dreams seemed on reopening old wounds.

Bright sunlight streamed in through the window, but Yuuto and Mai were still fast asleep in their beds.

"Eh-heh-heh...sleeping in the lap of my dear brother..."

"Ugh...no...stay back, giant tins of mackerel..."

Where did I even begin?

"I was hoping the training would temper your minds a little...," I muttered, brushing the hair off my darling little sister's sleeping face. "I knew you wouldn't let the pressure break you, but you're taking it even better than I

expected. Too well, in fact."

The two of them had tasted blood already. On Earth, where death was always so much farther than it was here. On top of that, they'd crossed the line, not out of necessity, but of their own accord.

But it was one thing to execute a captive foe and quite another to stand up to wild, ferocious beasts and heinous murderers. They needed to get used to things trying to kill them back.

At the start of my adventure, I had been thrown into battle without knowing the terror of either killing or of being killed. It took me a while to get used to it all, and until that time, I was shaking in my futon every night, unable to sleep a wink.

"Next to these guys, I look like a total wimp."

I didn't know whether they were strong-willed or just simpleminded.

"...But we can't sleep forever, can we?"

""Hrh!!""

I hit them with my intimidating aura, and the two of them instantly awoke, jumping out of bed and looking around for the danger.

"Wakey, wakey, you two. Sweet dreams?"

Upon seeing me, the pair of them relaxed.

"...Dear brother," said Mai. "If you're planning on entering my bed, you could at least wait until we're alone."

"Morning, Kaito," said Yuuto. "Think you could wake us up a little gentler next time? ... You did get me out of a fishy pickle, though, so I guess I can't complain."

The training yesterday seemed to have been a success. To think that if I'd gone through the same thing when I first arrived, I could have been snoozing the whole time. Still...

"Three out of ten. Too slow," I said. "You need to wake up at the moment the danger is produced, not only when it hits you. Also, you need to move as soon as you sense it. Don't stand around gawking like chickens, trying to find out

where the danger came from. If you know something's out to kill you, then what are you doing? Waiting for it to happen? Do you two have death wishes, or are you just plain stupid?"

I delivered my lecture with a smile.

"Sob. You're so mean, dear brother..."

"Ha-ha, yeah, your words have more bite to them than I remember..."

"Flattery will get you nowhere. Next time, if you're not up to snuff, let's see... We'll write something on your forehead, and you'll have to walk around like that until dusk."

The two of them scowled, and I heaved a deep sigh.

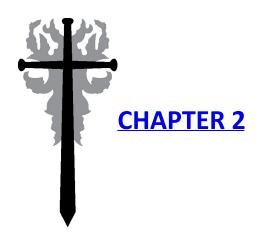
Well, they'll get the hang of it after a few battles, I thought. And that chance should be coming up on us pretty soon.

If my bait was taken up, we'd have our battles soon enough. Then these two would have no choice but to sharpen their senses. Instinct was nature's greatest teacher.

"We're heading out to sweeten the line, so go freshen yourselves up," I told them. "We still need to clean and gut our catch, so there's not much time. Chop, chop."

I clapped my hands, and the two slowly dragged themselves into action.

We needed to be extra careful and provide only the best of lures if we wanted to guarantee snagging our catch.



Supplies and Preparation

Papau's Snowmoon Wraps... Gugauga store... We really are in a fantasy world," said Mai. "The names don't tell me anything at all about what they serve."

"Yes," agreed Yuuto. "And it feels weird to understand it even though it's all written in a language I don't speak."

"Guys, you already said that the first time we were here," I reminded them as we all walked down the busy street.

"Oh, did I?" replied Yuuto. "I guess the shock of what came afterward caused me to forget..."

"I remember, dear brother. I believe I voiced my concern about some of these places back then as well; they can't be very hygienic. Are they aware they're serving paying customers, or are they just playing house?"

"Keep it down, o sister of mine. I don't want you to get us blacklisted."

Well, it wasn't like I couldn't understand her plight. There was no food standards authority in this world. Some places reheated and served soup made the previous day, spicing it up with a few fresh ingredients. If they dropped food on the ground, most stalls would just wash it off and place it back on the shelves, and stale and fresh items were mixed together, so you never knew what you were getting. Most vendors seemed to think there wasn't a problem as long as the food tasted fine, so they would just heat it up or add some herbs

and call it a day. You had to be careful if you wanted to avoid an upset stomach.

"Some establishments do run a tight ship," I remarked. "Plus, monster meat is usually replete with mana, so it doesn't go bad as quickly."

Perhaps that was the reason food standards were so sloppy in this world. Anyway, after spouting my unnecessarily expository explanation, I cast my eyes across the fare on offer.

Just as I expected, there are a lot of mercenaries around these days. It shouldn't be too difficult to find information.

Grinning on the inside, I guided us through the streets before finally arriving at the Adventurers Guild.

"Now that I'm looking at it again—boy, if this building isn't big compared to the others," said Yuuto, staring up at its imposing structure with awe.

The guildhall in this town was even more impressively built than usual. That was mainly due to the proximity of the dungeon, its difficulty, and the rarity of the materials found there. The guild here was very profitable and could afford to flaunt its wealth.

"...I'd rather not go in if we have to speak to that rude woman again," Mai said, sighing.

When we'd first arrived, we'd come here to register Mai and Yuuto as adventurers. The receptionist at the time had left quite an impression on my little sister, and not in a good way.

"Just bear with it," I told her. "We're only here to sell our materials. We won't be staying long."

That was, of course, because the guildhall was where you could expect to run into all manner of tedious and involuntary side quests. Merely setting foot inside was asking for trouble, and that was discounting how I had gone out of my way to draw attention to myself in the dungeon. Speaking of which, I hoped that wouldn't attract more trouble than I bargained for.

If the town were a little busier, I wouldn't have had to resort to such measures, but it was understandable, given that the demon war had already

started. I pushed open the doors, which creaked as I entered.

Yeah, it's almost empty inside...

The guildhall was mostly filled with the same dry, dusty air as outside, and there weren't many people populating the vast space. Lunchtime was when the quest boards got updated, so normally, the halls would be teeming with eager adventurers looking to take the best pickings right about now.

But all the big-name adventurers had left Zolkia to fight in the war, and the only ones who remained were, for want of a better phrase, a bit crap. That fact also contributed to the lazy atmosphere that infected not only the adventurers, but the guild staff as well.

"Let's see...ten goblins, here's your reward. Thank you, come again."

The weary receptionist practically tossed the coins onto the desk before a seedy-looking adventurer.

"Come on, Johanna, warm up a little, eh?" the man said. "The streets have been gettin' pretty dangerous lately—want me to walk you home tonight?"

"Spare me the jokes," the woman replied. "Your face is enough of one already. If you want my attention, then you'll have to make better use of your time than slaying goblins. How about you try talking to me once you're B-rank, okay? Assuming you can even make it that far. Door's over there. Next customer, please!"

"Damn, well, you're no fun. Guess I'll grab some cheap booze and hit the hay..."

The adventurer man reluctantly slunk over to the guild's bar.

"Guess we'd better stand in line," I said. Even on a quiet day like this, a small queue had formed within the building. But just as we started to make our way over to it...

"Hey, look over there!" "Huh? Is that the guy you were tellin' all them tall tales about?" "I swear, this guy's the real deal!" "Pfft, yeah right, nobody could ever..."

... I heard hushed whispers discussing us. As I predicted, I had become quite

the hot topic around town by now. We waited in line for a few moments, and soon we were called to the desk.

"Oh, I remember you," said the receptionist lady, upon seeing our faces. It was she who had processed Mai's and Yuuto's registrations. I figured she would have forgotten about us entirely, if I was being honest.

However, her interest went no further, and she quickly resumed going through the motions.

"Come to accept a quest, have you? I'm surprised you're still alive."

I heard Mai suck on her teeth behind me. Now, now, don't be like that. Learn from Yuuto, who let it flow over him like water off a duck's back.

Well, I understand how she feels...

I thought back to the woman's appalling attitude when we'd first approached the register.

"Registration? Let's see, party rank D, personal rank E, is that right? Very well. And these two are registering as new adventurers? I see. A dungeon entry form? Excuse me, but are your C-rank party members, Miss Minnalis and Miss Shuria, not with you? ...Oh, no, I can issue it because you're the registered leader, but just to confirm, you're only seeking permits for yourself and the lady and gentleman with you at present? You are aware the guild is not liable for harm suffered in the dungeon, up to and including death, correct?"

The woman had been unable to take "yes" for an answer for the longest time. It had taken much to convince her that I did, in fact, know what I was doing.

I bet she thought I was a useless freeloader who left everything to my party members. Well, it's partly my fault for not showing my face around here a little more, I guess.

We had gotten through to her eventually, although only by being so insistent that she seemed to give up, as though it were no skin off her nose if we died in the dungeon. She probably thought we'd deserved it. And given that we'd spent almost two weeks down there, maybe she assumed we had.

"So? Did you learn something about how dangerous it can really be out

there? You should count yourselves lucky you came back at all. You need to work your way up by picking challenges that are on your level."

I mean, she's not a bad person...

"Danger is an adventurer's bread and butter, but not if it leads to an early grave, remember that."

Her sermon went on with no end in sight. It was all good, sound advice, of course, but...

"She's getting a little too full of herself, isn't she...?"

Even I was feeling myself beginning to lose my cool at this point. My vengeance was so close that I could almost taste it. Plus, I was worried about Minnalis and Shuria. I was at my wits' end, with no patience for fools.

"There's no way the stories are true. I mean, did ya hear that? He's E-rank!" "Imagination get the better of you, did it?" "Th-that can't be! I saw..." "Yeah, yeah, that's the last time I listen to one of your tales."

By this point, even the other adventurers were starting to doubt the rumors they'd heard.

Now, that's a problem, I thought.

"Yes, yes, all right," I said to the receptionist. "That's enough chitchat, don't you think?"

"Haven't you been listening to me? I said—"

With a tired old cliché, I drew our argument to a close.

Ker-lunk. Dun-dun-dun-dun. Trundle...

I upturned my bag, emptying its contents—our spoils. Fangs of the Great Wyvern, cloaks from the Lesser Phantom, Flying Viper wings, the toxic spines of the Poison Bisher Rabbit, the eyes of the Persona Goblin, Woody Bear paws, Lamia scales, and Flame Leo manes.

The trophies formed a messy pile on the receptionist's desk. The cherry on top was the jewel from the Emperor Dragon, a boss that appeared after I'd killed a lot of the elemental dragons. Just like them, its body disappeared after death, but for whatever reason, it left this gem behind.

uuuu nnnn

The room was stunned, stupefied, dumbfounded.

"Now, how much will you give me for these?" I asked, my voice the only one audible amid the silence of the hall.



My name is Johanna, and I've been working as a guild receptionist for XX years now. It was meant to only be a temporary gig until I found a husband, but now the other girls are starting to refer to me as a veteran, and...no, no, no! There's still time! I'm still young! I'm still pretty! Deep breaths...

I was in a bad mood one day. In fact, I had been like that for a while. You see...

"Oh, man. Haven't been able to afford any girls lately. If I don't find some decent scraps, my prick'll fall off." "I get ya, man. Hope the big shots make it back soon." "All these military guys are startin' to cramp my style, too."

What a load of useless idiots!

I could hear their voices from my desk—indolent adventurers with no drive to improve. Day after day, the only thing they did was search the dungeon for scraps that other, better adventurers had deemed too heavy or unimportant and left behind.

Prince Leon had taken the good adventurers away to fight the demon threat, and now all that remained were these lowlifes.

Three out of ten. Three-and-a-half out of ten. Two out of ten. Oh, when is my life finally going to start?

None of the men around here even got a passing grade. Feigning politeness with them was too much trouble when they had nothing to offer in return.

"Let's see...ten goblins, here's your reward. Thank you, come again."

"Come on, Johanna, warm up a little, eh?" the man said. "The streets have been gettin' pretty dangerous lately, want me to walk you home tonight?"

The aging adventurer flashed me what he apparently considered a

prizewinning smile in an attempt to cover his mountain of failings. Not even on a bad day.

"Spare me the jokes," I replied. "Your face is enough of one already. If you want my attention, then you'll have to make better use of your time than slaying goblins. How about you try talking to me once you're B-rank, okay? Assuming you can even make it that far. Door's over there. Next customer, please!"

"Damn, well, you're no fun. Guess I'll grab some cheap booze and hit the hay..."

Why not go check on your equipment instead? This is why you're stuck in D-rank, you know.

I side-eyed the adventurer as he slunk off.

Sigh. Looks like I'm never going to find a handsome A-or B-rank at this rate. I might as well give up on that and look out for someone with promise instead.

I resumed handling the usual suspects and their uninspired tasks.

"Oh, I remember you," I said, as a familiar trio of fresh-faced adventurers appeared before me.

It was the leader of a D-rank party named "Scorn Road," accompanied by two people who had only registered as adventurers the other day. They were a memorable bunch—their dark hair and dark eyes were quite striking. I had filed their registrations and produced dungeon entry permits for the three of them, and they had left a rather poor impression on me.

Entry permits were available to anyone who had achieved D-rank or joined a D-rank party. That meant that technically, the three of them were eligible.

But given that the other two registered members of this party are C-rank, and he's only E-rank, it seems quite obvious that the leader was kicked out of his original party and teamed up with these newbies instead. I'm betting he wants to secure entry to the dungeon before his party disbandment paperwork goes through.

At the time, I had been reluctant to grant the leader his request. It wasn't

strange for beginner parties to contain some disparities in rank that only became more apparent as time went on. In those cases, the heel-draggers were often kicked out, but many found it difficult to adapt and refused to lower their standards to something more attainable. They lived above their means, losing money as quickly as they made it, dreaming of the day they'd get their big break, and ruining those around them in the process.

But it looks like this guy's not as stupid as I thought. None of them are hurt, so perhaps they only took a quick dip in the dungeon to see what it's like. I'm not sure why that took them half a month, but regardless, he's not a total lost cause.

Every so often, exile from a party would inspire an adventurer to turn over a new leaf and strive for greatness. Those people were few and far between, but perhaps this bunch had only been dropped due to poor circumstances, and their day in the sun was yet to come.

"Come to accept a quest, have you?" I said. "I'm surprised you're still alive."

I was impressed by the party leader's resilience, but I couldn't allow this small victory to go to his head. If he could recognize his shortcomings, then there was hope yet.

Then again, his partners still seem fresh, and I don't sense any urgency about him. Perhaps he's a lost cause after all.

I thought this after the girl in the back sucked her teeth at me and the leader barely reacted. The other boy seemed like he'd been dragged into all this against his will. They didn't exactly smell like team spirit.

"So? Did you learn something about how dangerous it can really be out there? You should count yourselves lucky you came back at all. You need to work your way up by picking challenges at your own level."

Oh, I hope the demon war ends soon. I'm taking heavy casualties on my own battlefront here!

As I went on, my thoughts turned to my dismal matchmaking prospects. I needed better pickings, and I needed them yesterday.

"Danger is an adventurer's bread and butter, but not if it leads to an early

grave, remember that."

Why is it always me? That girl was such a bother the other day, plus my friend quit and married a craftsman. Meanwhile, that bitch from upper management somehow wrangled an officer, leaving me the oldest one here!!

All my frustrations came back to haunt me, while my tongue carried on and on. I was so used to delivering sermons like this that I didn't even have to think about it anymore. I knew it hurt to hear, but some people needed the wake-up call. Besides, it made me feel a lot better.

However, that boy just sighed and interrupted me.

"Yes, yes, all right," he said. "That's enough chitchat, don't you think?"

I gave a sigh of my own in response. This was precisely why I hated dealing with newbies.

"Haven't you been listening to me? I said—"

Ker-lunk. Dun-dun-dun-dun. Trundle...

aaaa nnnn

The leader upturned his bag and emptied out the contents. The room went so quiet, I could almost hear myself blinking in surprise.

Huh? Wh-where did he find these?

Even just a cursory glance revealed materials I'd never seen before in this city. Others were so high rank, they hadn't crossed my desk in years. They were all from the dungeon.

"Now, how much will you give me for these?"

His question dragged me from my stupefied trance back into the chaos of reality.

"E-er, just a second, please."

I grabbed my material qualities checklist and began going down it.

Great Wyvern fang: rank A. Lesser Phantom cloak: rank S. Flying Viper wings: rank S. Poison Bisher Rabbit spine: rank A. Persona Goblin eye: rank A. Woody Bear paw: rank S. Lamia scale: rank SS. Flame Leo manes: rank A. What in the

world?

My desk was fairly large, but the mountain of materials filled it. I'd given up on seeing specimens this rare after all the decent adventurers went off to war, but here they were before my very eyes. Those blowhards drinking over at the bar could fight all day until their legs gave out, and they'd never see a single one of them.

And I've never seen so many at once! Even my best party before the war never brought back a haul like this!

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

Now that I think about it, there was that one rumor...

A few days prior, the whole town had been buzzing about an adventurer fighting off hordes of monsters in the Gambler's Gauntlet by himself. When I heard that, I thought my customers had been hitting the tavern a few times more than was healthy. Monsters in the dungeon always appeared in groups of at least three, usually numbering anywhere between five and twenty. The smaller the group, the more powerful each individual specimen was. It was simply impossible to fight by yourself for an extended period of time.

But...what if that rumor was true?

Some claimed the stranger was a man, others a woman, or a pretty girl, or a beastfolk. One person even claimed they were a demon. Of course, there wasn't a grain of truth to be found in any of the tall tales these fools concocted over their drinks. But one of the stories really took the cake.

"The Dragonslayer," they called him. An adventurer so powerful, he didn't even need a fancy nickname. According to the tales, he was a swordsman who'd climbed the walls of the Gambler's Gauntlet and used hitherto unheard-of magic to obliterate the dragons that appeared.

A swordsman who used magic and could fight off a swarm of dragons by himself? It sounded like something out of a children's book. A fairy-tale hero. In fact, I don't think anyone would even dare put a tale so absurd to paper.

However...

"Gulp..."

I came at last to the final material, a jewel cloaked in golden light. I had never seen one up close before, but I knew what it was. Its perfectly spherical shape and mysterious markings told me it was a treasure known as a Dragon's Eye.

I've only ever seen sketches...

It was a mark of power, seen only rarely in the foreheads of intelligent dragons and some of the more powerful unintelligent species.

And this is a large one, too! It looks about the same size as the one harvested from the Kaiser Dragon, defeated by the hero over 200 years ago. But if it is, it's far too valuable for us to handle by ourselves...

If the man before me had really obtained this himself, he would be one of only twenty people in the world to be valued at S-rank.

Of course, there's more that goes into adventurer rank than just combat ability, but still...

"Excuse me, but could I ask you to come this way for me?" I told him, after a moment's hesitation. "Wait in this room, and I'll go fetch the guildmaster."

I wasn't sure what else I could do. This was way above my pay grade.

"Sure," the man replied.

And then...

I felt my neurons firing. Yes, my marriage-seeking neurons!

"And...," I said. "I'm deeply sorry for any offense I may have caused, sir."

I bowed as low as I could. I hadn't figured out which of the two men to aim for, but for now I sought to clear the slate of my unfavorable first impression.

I screwed up big time! But it's not over yet! Not while I can still claw my way back into their good graces!

"I didn't realize I was dealing with an adventurer of your esteem," I went on. "Please accept my sincerest apologies."

"Oh, it's fine," the leader replied. "You just did what any well-meaning guildwoman would do. I know you didn't mean anything by it. I'll let it slide, this

time."

"Thank you, sir. Your words are most gracious."

Grr! I wish I'd just kept my advice to myself now!

I tried not to let the regret show on my face.

"Please step this way, sirs, madam," I said, guiding the three of them to our reception room. "Please wait here, if you wouldn't mind. I shan't be long."

First, I'll offer to make it up to him by inviting him out to dinner, and then—!

"Aieee!"

I squealed as a sharp pain ran through my foot.

"Whoops. Oh, I'm sorry about that. It was an accident."

The girl in his group, who had always been casting me unfriendly glances, now stared at me with such disdain that I thought my heart would freeze over. The blatant insincerity in her apology sent a shiver down my spine.

She leaned a little closer and whispered in my ear, "But that's not nearly as hard as I would tread on any worms who attempted to get close to my dear brother."

"Frk..."

I guess I'm fated to be alone forever...

I attempted to keep up a smile, but on the inside, I was weeping.



The room the woman led us to was a reception chamber for noblemen and other visiting dignitaries, so it was far tidier than the other rooms of this squalid place. The tables and chairs were all crafted from a fine fantasy plant and hummed with faint traces of mana, and into their blue wood were carved sculptures of the Goddess, imbued with a purification spell.

The ceiling was high, the room was large, and it all came together to leave a rather striking impression.

It was clearly built with consideration in mind for both the religious

sensibilities of the See, which worshipped the Goddess Lunaris and valued asceticism, and those of the beast lands, which worshipped the Great Spirit, Luna.

These tasteful trappings were far more in line with my preferences as a humble Japanese than were the gaudy gold and silver of the kingdom.

"That was very 'Main Character' of you, dear brother," said Mai.

"More like 'Major Pain in the Ass,'" added Yuuto. "I had to deal with customers like you on the night shift. Hated every second of it."

I turned to my two compatriots and cast a deathly glare at them.

"...Is this still because of that training?" I asked.

There was no gain to be had in acting polite for politeness's sake. I was fully prepared to fight fire with fire if the situation called for it. However, I couldn't deny that hearing that evaluation from my oldest friends and family hurt a little.

"Still, you guys are right. I'm nothing but a pain in the ass at this point."

It had taken losing my memories for me to realize just how much my journey had changed me. Whether I was dealing with my sworn enemies or just with someone I didn't like, no conscience could stay my hand or my tongue. If that wasn't the very definition of an asshole, then what was?

"No, I'm more than your garden-variety jerk now. I'm a monster."

That was more fitting for this world. A term that far better encapsulated the terrible power I wielded and had decided to bring to bear against those who crossed me.

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"Dear brother... I didn't..."
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"Kaito..."

"...Well, that's enough of that. It's almost time for our meeting."

It seemed like the two of them wanted to speak further, but as I had previously told them, they were to remain silent during the negotiations. After all, I wasn't going to get away with just bluff and bluster here. I needed to use this opportunity to get close to Leon. To do that, I would have to stay calm and

polite. Well, as I just finished saying, I could stand up for myself if I needed to, but there was no sense in casting the first stone when there were friends to be won.

Presently, the door creaked, and an aged Cetaceanid beastfolk walked in.

"Thank you for waiting," he said. "You must be Mr. Ukei. And these, I presume, are Miss Ukei and Mr. Kanazaki."

The top half of his face was deep blue, like a whale's, and he possessed a bushy white mustache alongside a pair of large, goggly eyes. He stood at almost three meters tall, and he had a surprising force of will, given his advanced age.

I could tell that Mai and Yuuto were shocked by his appearance. Whalefolk, as they were commonly known, were fairly rare, as were extreme deviations from the standard human build, like this gentleman's. Male beastfolk more readily presented animal-like traits than did their female counterparts, but even by their standards, he was an exception.

I still remember how surprised I was when I first saw him.

"...That's right, I was wondering if it was you..."

I couldn't help speaking my thoughts aloud.

In my previous life, Leon had spared the Fey Queen, and she had granted him her Cursed Toxin. This was no ordinary poison, of course. It was unreproducible by any means and lost its potency after two weeks. In return, it was so powerful that even my inhuman resistances could not prevent its effects.

One of the ingredients was fifty human hearts taken from those so steeped in anger and despair that they actively sought death. And though Leon had let her live, the Fey Queen was wounded in the battle, and there was no better place than this land for her to rest and recuperate.

As for me, I had departed immediately for distant lands once the battle was over, telling nobody about the fey, for fear it would only make matters worse. That meant there was nobody left here who posed a threat to them.

In other words, chances were, the poison used against me was created here.

And if the Fey Queen was hiding out in the area around Zolkia...

Fairies amplified their power by feeding on human emotions. The Fey Queen needed humans, both to heal her own wounds and to produce the toxin. But even in the midst of a war, that many humans going missing all at once would surely cause a stir.

Which meant someone must have helped to obtain all those "ingredients." Someone intimately familiar with people whom nobody would miss. Someone with plausible deniability as to why they had disappeared.

It was you, wasn't it, Valeria?

A pale flame burst to life in the depths of my heart.

"Hmm, is something the matter, sir?"

"No, not at all. I was just surprised to see a beastfolk of your impressive stature. Pardon my discourtesy."

I cast my palm over the flame of my vengeance, shielding it from view. It wasn't time. I couldn't lose myself yet. Not before I proved beyond all reasonable doubt that he was the one.

Starved of oxygen, the flame in my heart snuffed out. But if he was really associated with the Fey Queen in some way...

"Ho-ho-ho. Well, I'm afraid I must be shrinking a little in my old age. You should have seen me last year! My name is Valeria, and I am the guildmaster here. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

The old man fired off a superficial greeting and sat down across from us at the table.

"I do hope you won't mind if I get straight to the point," he said. "I would be exceedingly interested in finding out how you obtained that Dragon's Eye."

"I just stood on the walls of the dungeon killing dragons until the big one came out," I replied nonchalantly. "I took it down, and it dropped this. That's all I know, honest."

"A simple, and if I may add, quite unbelievable story," replied Valeria. "Still, your account lines up with what I heard, and I suppose if the item is here, that's all that matters. Now then, I presume you would like the guild to purchase this

Dragon's Eye from you, is that correct?"

"Obviously," I replied. "I didn't bring it here just to show it off."

"Quite. Well, I'd say we're looking at a figure in the region of—"

"Oh, I don't want money," I said, cutting him off. "I'd like you to increase my guild rank instead."

"Would you, now? Well, I suppose with an item of this quality, a jump to Brank wouldn't be out of the question..."

"That's not enough, I'm afraid."

"...You'd like to be made A-rank? I suppose I could pull a few strings..."

"Nope. Still not enough," I insisted. "I'm looking to snag a rank of S, if you don't mind. Anything lower than that, and we're just wasting each other's time."

"My boy, you must understand that that's simply not possible."

"Don't be silly. You're precisely the man who can get it done, aren't you?"

Valeria grunted. "I'm sorry, but what you ask for is beyond my power. An increase to A-rank requires only the consent of multiple guilds, but anything above that can only be granted via royal assent."

"Right, and you can sort that out for me, can't you? After all, you're all chummy with Prince Leon, right?"

"...Oh?"

""Hrh!!""

The moment I spoke Leon's name, Valeria's entire demeanor changed. I sensed Mai and Yuuto freeze in their seats behind me.

I, however, countered his intimidating aura with a menacing air of my own, like blackest night seeping from my pores.

"Ergh..."

"Don't think that pathetic excuse for intimidation is enough to get rid of me," I said. "If you're going to turn this into a face-off, then two can play at that

game."

"...My, my," said Valeria. "I feel like you just played a joker to my ace. My old bones can't take these games anymore."

"So?" I asked. "What'll it be?"

"I'll do what I can," he said, giving a deflated sigh. "But it will take some time."

I dismissed my aura of intimidation.

An S-rank adventurer was entitled to lead their own force on the battlefield and was treated—for all intents and purposes—like a military general. That alone would bring me leaps and bounds closer to Leon.

"That's good to hear," I said.

The flame in my heart rose anew between my gently parted fingers, and I felt its tips turning black.

Back at the inn, I checked my saved status board and saw something that confirmed Valeria's betrayal beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"Ah, that settles it, then."

STATUS

Valeria Lv98

Age 58 • Male • Whalefolk

HP: 6,882/3,882+3,000 MP: 4,569/2,569+2,000

Strength: 2,699+2,000 Stamina: 2,357+2,000

Vitality: 3,390+2,000 Agility: 1,418+2,000

Magic: 831+2,000 Resistance: 1,491+2,000

Intrinsic Abilities: Infallible Ear

Skills: Martial Arts Lv 15, Track Lv 10, Stealth Lv 5, Brawler Lv 21, Control Body Lv 31, Carve Lv 5, Strengthening Magic Lv 3, Water Magic Lv 8, Wildform Lv 10 (Granted)

Status: Healthy; Contract with Fey Queen (Hidden)



"We've got no plans for today, so you're free to do as you please."

That was what my dear brother told us over breakfast, the day after we visited the guild. After sitting in on such an intense negotiation, it was nice to get a little time to ourselves.

Living in a fantasy world was no cure for red tape; the guild had asked us to wait up to two whole weeks before any final decisions regarding Kaito's appeal were made. Kaito said it was unlikely to take that long in practice, but that it would be at least a few days before we heard anything back. He also said that things were only going to get more dangerous from here on out, so we should get all the rest we needed to be prepared to face the challenges when they came.

"I think I'll take a look around the bookstores," said Yuuto. "I've been meaning to keep an eye out for monster manuals and the like... Oh, and any fairy tales unique to this world would be interesting, too. I've got money burning a hole in my pocket, after all."

I heard him scraping his coins together.

Fairy tales... Come to think of it, his girlfriend was interested in those, wasn't she?

At that moment, I caught a whiff of something like weeping on the wind. It was an acrid smell, like burning asphalt mixed with a nighttime forest breeze.

One of the powers I obtained by traveling to this world was the ability to sniff out emotions on the wind.

"Sure thing," said Kaito. "Oh, and make sure you look over any books closely before you buy. They're sometimes infested with insects. If you're not careful, you'll buy one only to find the most important page has a hole in it. Good luck getting to sleep after that."

"Ha-ha-ha, that does sound like a pain..."

Yuuto cleared away his breakfast and headed out into the streets.

"Well then, dear brother," I said. "I assume you haven't made plans?"

It was my first day off since coming to this world. Now that I thought about it, I had been through some trying times. They had been necessary to survive here, of course, but all the same, I deserved a little reward to make up for it, didn't I?

"Hmm? Nah, not really. Probably going to spend the day dozing around. All that time in the dungeon has worn me out."

My dear brother gave a big yawn and put his bowl down on the table.

The new, violent side of Kaito took some getting used to. I didn't hate it, but I much preferred seeing the old, sloppy side of him, like this.

"Think I'm going to head back and catch a nap," he said. "Take care, Mai."

"Of course, dear brother."

I watched as he staggered, still half-asleep, back to our shared room. After that, I stayed put for a while, silently sipping some tea. I had to pick the right moment to act, or I would lose it all.

That said, I can't let this chance slip away, now that we're alone at last.

After precisely twenty minutes had passed, I headed to our room. This was when Kaito was at his doziest, and most prone to errors in judgment.

I stepped into the room and undid my top button.

"Mmph..."

With his memories returned, Kaito was a lot more aware than I was used to. He could even tell that I had entered the room while he was sleeping. However, he quickly realized it was only me, and his breathing returned to normal.

"I hope you don't mind sharing, Kaito."

With that, I slipped into his bed, so that I was the big spoon.

"Hmm? Mai."

"Yawn. Nighty-night, dear brother."

I ignored his weak protests and pretended to fall asleep. I made sure to wrap my arms around him first, of course.

Kaito would never kick me out of bed. He simply muttered, "Ugh, fine," and

went back to sleep.

Just as planned. Exactly as planned. I'd been worried the new Kaito might be more forceful than I was used to, and I'd prepared to turn on the waterworks, if necessary. However, it seemed my fears were unfounded. He was still the same old Kaito I knew and loved.

That's right, Kaito, you're my dear big brother.

Mine. He was all mine. No matter what. He was mine, and he would always be mine, today and forever after.

No longer would the thought of him leaving me haunt my dreams.

Kaito... Kaito... Kaito...

I would never leave him, and he would never leave me.

Never ever...

"We'll always be together, Kaito..."

I took in his scent, never loosening my arms as I drifted off to sleep.



"...Huh, so there are different kinds of vampires in this world."

I finished examining the old tome, flipping through rough, heavy sheets of parchment. The book was called "The Monsters Farthest from Death."

My newfound ability, Monstrous Metamorphosis, allowed me to absorb the powers of monsters, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to learn a little bit more about them. The title seemed promising, too, so I picked it up, and my instincts proved to be correct.

It was strange being able to read a language I had no knowledge of, but the ability was undeniably useful. If this worked back on Earth, too...

"No, on second thought, I don't need it to."

Shiori had always liked collecting fairy tales, and it got to the point where she was importing foreign books just to have more to read. The two of us had read books in English, Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian.

I still remembered how daunting it was, faced with pages upon pages of letters from alphabets I'd never even seen before. To think that one little skill could make up for weeks, months, even years of study. But when I thought about it like that, something occurred to me. I didn't need a magic ability to translate all those languages for me, because the days we'd spent muddling our way through those books with only a dictionary in hand were happiness enough.

"..."

I cast my gaze around the room. I could almost hear Shiori's voice.

"Wow, look at all these books, Yuuto! They're all from another world, how exciting is that?"

I could practically see her dancing between the shelves.

But she wasn't here.

I would never see her smile again.

Why? Why me? Why her? Why had this happened? Just why, why, why?!

"...Snork... Whuh? Whoa, that was close! If Gram-Gram catches me snoozin' again, she'll tear a hole in her slipper!"

At that moment, the voice of a mouse-faced beastfolk brought me to my senses. He had been sleeping at the front desk ever since I entered. It was hard to estimate his age, given his beastly features, but he didn't seem young by any means. He rubbed his eyes a few times and sniffed.

"Hmm, wossat?" he said, noticing me. "A customer? Don't just stand around readin' if you're not gonna buy somethin'!"

"R-right, sorry," I replied, flashing an awkward smile. "I'll take this one, and these two, please."

"Oh? Yer payin'? Well, that's okay, then..."

As soon as I showed him the cash, the mouse man turned friendly.

"This should be enough, right?"

"Yes, that's exactly...whoa!"

I dropped the coins into the shopkeeper's palm, and he immediately spilled them all over the floor.

"Right, I'll be off, then," I said, leaning over the counter as he scrambled to pick them up.

"Uh, yeah, thank you, come again."

I stepped out into the burning sun. The hot, desert air felt like rough sand against my skin.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Really?" "You there, lady! How about Garasha Frog meat for supper tonight? Real cheap, and your husband's sure to love it!" "Did you hear about the kingdom's hero? I heard he fought off a whole army of demons by himself!" "Barkeep! Let's get some beers over here!"

The voices, like those of monsters, rang in my ears. I felt like if I stopped walking for a second, the world would swallow me up.

"This place..."

This place took Shiori from me.

It could burn, for all I cared.

"I don't get it, Kaito. Why don't you just kill them all?"

The people around me looked like dark shadows, laughing and smiling, while my loved ones suffered at their hands.

"Why should these scumbags get to live when their world is the one that killed her?"

Unable to bear being in their presence a moment longer, I hurried down the street to get away from them. I preferred fighting in the dungeon, away from them all. At least then I didn't have to contend with the curses spilling unbidden from my lips.

I think that was the point at which my life forked.

"Oops."

"Whoopsie-daisy."

As I rounded the corner, I bumped into someone. Or rather, bounced off them.

"Sorry about that," I said, looking up at the figure. He was a pale man in a gray robe.

An elf, I thought, noticing his imposing height and pointed ears. I haven't seen one before.

His eyes were strangely colored. I couldn't tell if they were gold, or gray, or white, but they unnerved me.

"Hmm? Well, now, this is a coincidence," he said. "The Goddess truly smiles on me today."

His voice was uncannily young, and for some reason I couldn't quite grasp, it sounded sinister. The word "fishy" was made for men like him.

"My friend, would you mind if we had a little chat?" he asked.

"...Sorry, I'm busy," I replied. "If you're not hurt, then I'll be on my way."

I tried to walk past him, but he reached out and grabbed hold of me.

"Don't be like that," he said. "Let's talk."

Grr!

The moment he touched me, a shiver coursed down my spine. It felt like the bony hand of the reaper himself. Alarm bells started ringing in my head.

"Let go of me!!" I yelled.

"Listen, my friend. Isn't there someone you'd like to bring back?"

"Rgh!!"

When he said those words, I froze. Every part of my body screamed at me to run away, to not listen to another word...

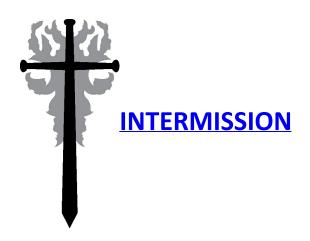
...but it was almost as if he heard those voices, too.

"Oh, very good. You are a good listener, aren't you?"

"So what if there's someone I want back...?" I asked.

"What if I told you I'm just the man who could get it done?"

le smiled, like a demon prince unveiling his latest dark contract.	



XXXXXXX

Error: xxx. Trace lost. Trace lost."

"No sign of Goddess in last known location. Possibilities: Returned to void or mortal possession."

"Accessing extradimensional intervention logs regarding the transfer of visitor #538 via mortal terminal #6963. Calculating target behavioral goal... Target behavioral goal unclear. Assumed goal: to protect visitor #538. Assumed goal inconsistent with facts; no subsequent intervention located."

"Evidence of divine interference confirmed at extradimensional coordinates (N89, B155, SJ778) during self-initiated transfer of visitor #538. No record of similar interference found in logs. Searching for instances of returned individuals subsequently retransferring from original to foreign world. Many instances found. Requesting data... Request denied."

Everything was white. White. White.

A female voice, beautiful beyond all description, rang out across the vast, empty landscape. And there, alone at the center of the void, sat a single woman.

Or perhaps "alone" wasn't quite the right word. She was surrounded by several floating fairies. She and these fairies spoke over each other in completely monotonous voices.

It was as though they were not talking but mindlessly repeating themselves, like a machine. What made the scene even more bizarre was the fact that their voices were all identical.

"Priority level currently at low. Reason: resource shortage following time coordinate reversal. Peculiarities surrounding visitor #538 marked for urgent response. Priority level and resource allocation rate increased."

"Calculating visitor #538 expected behavior. Irrational activity determined to be product of mental deficiency. Based on previous action log, target is predicted to seek elimination of two low-priority mortal life-forms."

"Reanalyzing sterilization script. Proposing use of mortal terminal #E57 to distance visitor #538 from battlefield and eliminate uncertainties in manifestation sequence... Proposal approved."

"Manifestation sequence progression in mortal terminal #6965 currently at fifty-eight percent."

"Progression rate low. Reason: low synchronization rate in backup unit. Deficiencies predicted."

"Accelerating schedule. Transferring blessing of crystal from mortal terminal #E57 to mortal terminal #6963. Goal: advance spread of World Tree seed."

The woman's long hair was fastened in buns on either side of her head, while the remainder spilled out across the floor. Her features were almost too perfect, like that of a finely crafted doll without a human heart. Her loose garb was austere, yet reverent.

But while there were many points about her worthy of note, one stood out above all the others.

"Probability of target traces spontaneously disappearing before manifestation: very low. Preparing emergency manifestation sequence to be used upon detection of direct interference event."

"Diverting energy to sensors. Divine mana readings and manifestation time correct to within one point. Luna arrest probability in future cases increased to seventy-three percent."

A pure white. An overwhelming white. Her hair, her clothes, her skin, even the fairies dancing around her head were white. Although the space itself was also white, her white was overpowering, enough to make the eye forget all other colors, so white that the room only seemed to inherit its tone from her. Not a single shadow nor speck of dirt polluted her pure, radiant form.

"Predicting interference from Goddess of Earth in acquiring world access rights. Divine pact forbids interference except via means of visitor #538. Further intervention opportunities negligible."

"To date, schedule has been delayed 897,561 times, due to actions of Earth Goddess."

"Elimination of local Goddess Luna required to further counteract influence of Earth Goddess."

"Continuing to monitor and assess the situation."

"For divinity. For divinity."

"Our righteous work be done."

Those words lingered in a pure white space amid nothing else.



In a castle near the border of the Orollea Kingdom and the Lunarian See.

"Heya. Been a while, Princess."

A curious, singsong voice heralded the sudden and unannounced arrival of the elf, Endimir, to the kingdom's war room. The soldiers all bristled their spears without a word, while the officers continued their conversations over tabletops full of maps and plans.

"How fares things?" "It will be a few more days before we finish readying the reinforcements." "Let's pull back the front lines and use the seeds on all our remaining men." "It won't work. They haven't been trained. If we use the seeds now, they'll turn into useless blocks of wood."

Everyone carried on like clockwork, as though they were little robots following their orders. Everyone, save for the elf and the princess.

"Endimir. As tactless as ever, I see."

Princess Alicia regarded the gray-robed elf with the same unconcealed reproach as always. Despite her proximity to the front lines, she still wore her usual dress, and she sat atop a felt-lined sofa alongside an unidentifiable figure in full plate mail and helm.

"Come now, Princess," replied Endimir. "We're all friends here, aren't we?"

Alicia sighed. "You are as oblivious as you are irritating. So? How long do you plan on bothering me this time? Is your 'urgent business' all dealt with?"

"Oh, Princess. Disappointingly curt, as usual," said Endimir. "But I suppose you're right; there's not much time for jokes. Our goddess has really been cracking the whip lately."

"Then let's get this over with so you can be on your way."

"Ha-ha! Patience, Princess, patience. My goddess has a gift for you. Here."

Endimir handed over what looked like a smooth, clear sphere of glass about the size of a softball. In its center was a softly glowing white wing.

"What is this?" the princess asked.

"The crystal blessing," answered Endimir. "I believe the Church calls it the Holy Crystal."

"The Holy Crystal? Then this crystal contains the mana of Lady Lunaris?"

"Precisely. It will allow you to manufacture World Tree seeds on a much grander scale. I was told to hurry things up, so here we are."

"Hmm. Somebody nipping at your heels, perhaps?"

"The anomaly has returned."

"The anomaly? Ah, you mean that failed hero," said Alicia with dispassion.

"Quite right, Your Highness. That little boy has us running hither and thither all over the place. I'm surprised you don't show a little more interest, given how obsessive you were about him in the past."

"I care not for hunting down monsters," said Alicia. "I have my dear sister Lamnecia to think about now."

The princess beamed a genuine smile—a rapturous, ecstatic smile—and spread her fingers across the armored figure beside her.

"Yes, well," said Endimir. "I think you'll find the crystal to be most useful in maintaining that doll of yours— Oops."

Just then, iron brambles shot at him from out of nowhere. The elf deflected the thorns with a swing of a sword crafted out of mana.

"Doll?" said Alicia, consumed by rage. "If you dare insult Lamnecia in that way again, I'll tear you limb from limb."

"No need to tell me twice, Princess. It was a slip of the tongue, nothing more. That's right, she's your beloved big sister Lamnecia, isn't she?"

"Quite right. Tee-hee-hee."

Alicia's fury dissipated in an instant, and she returned to her peaceful tittering.

"Really now," said Endimir. "You truly are only good for your exceptional mana control. When it comes to empathy, you're the polar opposite of your sister. In some ways, I suppose you complement each other nicely."

The elf laughed and dissipated his sword, which turned into mysterious motes of light and disappeared.

"Of course," said Alicia. "Lamnecia and I are wonderful sisters."

"Well, then, Princess, I suppose I'll see you around. Toodle-oo."

Endimir gave a vicious grin and vanished in a flash of light.

"...Ah-ha. Ah-ha-ha! AH-HA-HA-HA!!"

After the elf left, I could no longer contain my laughter.

"I was wondering how I'd get my hands on this, and then that horrid elf just comes along and drops it in my lap! Tee-hee-hee!"

I looked at the so-called crystal blessing that Endimir had left me.

"Now I have everything I need. Finally, I can do it. We can be..."

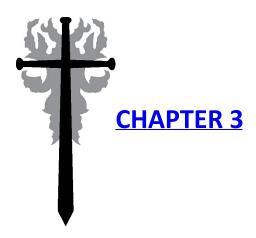
"Just you wait, my darling sister. Just you wait..."

...I will bring you back to life.

"Oh dear. The game's almost over, and in the end, nobody realized. Oh, well. It was a good way to kill some time, at least."

A deep sigh, filled with emotion.

"Let's see if you can keep it up until the credits roll, my final little Hero."



A Vengeance in Motion

had a dream.

In it, the world was saved. Humans, beastfolk, and demons fought no more, and all nations came together to support each other through thick and thin.

One day, I was summoned to this world as a result of a mishap in one of Leticia's experiments. To find a way to send me back, she and I went on a journey together.

In the beginning, of course, we fought, we swore, and we clashed, but over time we came to know each other better. We fell in love.

There were no heroes, no demon lords. Nobody needed to go through loss or to sacrifice themselves. It was a kind and gentle world.

When I woke up, that dream left a sickly taste in my mouth. It was idyllic and naive, too far-fetched for even the wildest fantasy.

But that was a good sign. That was the way I had to see it. Because until my vengeance was complete, I couldn't change. I couldn't let anything get in my way.

I had to keep pressing on, through that boiling pit of tar.

"Same old, same old, huh?"

Back at the inn, I went through the information Sir Squeaks had gathered for me and let out a huge sigh.

The war was still going strong, and Ardelius was still a major player in the battle.

"Leticia should have headed over as soon as she heard about that. Lilia, too, of course."

As soon as I had heard that Ardelius was on the front lines, I exited the dungeon with Yuuto and Mai. I had run into Leticia soon after arriving in this world, but I needed her out of the picture to go up against Lilia. So the instant I'd learned that Leon would be coming back to this town to resupply, I decided to go after him first. This meant we could train in the dungeon at least until word of Ardelius spread to this town.

Once that happened, Leticia would leave the city. I couldn't keep tabs on her because of her overpowered magical capabilities, but that was what I predicted.

Then I would have all the time in the world to take care of Leon.

Then again, perhaps not all the time. I need to start thinking about Lilia while Leticia is still distracted.

My preparations were proceeding apace. Slimo was making sure the stage was set. It wouldn't be long now before we were ready to raise the curtains.

"And for the finishing blow...we'll go with this."

One of my soul blades manifested in the air before me, and I grabbed the hilt. This was the Tempter's Blade of Polymorphism. It was a relatively short sword, with two thick, daggerlike blades sticking out of the hilt. However, these blades were not metallic but were instead made of a partially transparent material, like the claw of an animal. The blades were hollow, and inside one of them was a mysterious liquid with an indescribable color. The grip and blade trimmings on that side also kept changing color every few seconds. This contrasted starkly with the other blade, which was empty and colorless.

I once again confirmed that the sword was set up correctly, then dispelled it back within me, before leaping backward onto my bed.

"Fine. If you like fairies so much, then try this on for size."

The Tempter's Blade of Polymorphism was not designed for combat. It was

blunter than a wooden sword, but too small to be used as a club, and too bulky to be concealed. This soul blade had one use and one use only: It could alter a person's race. However, the process took two weeks to complete. Not something that could be done in the heat of battle.

Additionally, the blade was incapable of altering anything other than race. Its targets would still keep their intrinsic abilities even after their transformation.

"You can be one of them and get crushed alongside them."

Once Leon heard of my ascent to S-rank, he would come. He would come and ask to test my power. Then I would be able to use this. The Tempter's Blade required a sample of the target's mana in order to take effect.

"Become one of the very vermin you tried to protect."

I would turn Leon into a fairy. And then...

"Heh-heh. Ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Oh, I just couldn't wait. Couldn't wait to see his face twisted with grief when he realized what I was going to do to him. Couldn't wait to see what he would choose, when all paths ended in death.

"Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha...ha... Phew."

The day I would find out was fast approaching.



We were flying around in the sun-dappled forest, as usual, feeling the warm rays on our skin as we went about our daily stroll.

"Huh? Didn't we nap all day yesterday?"

"No! Yesterday was the eating competition! We packed in so much meat!"

"No, no! Yesterday we made the humans eat! They ate so much, their stomachs burst! The napping competition was the day before three days before yesterday's yesterday!"

"Yes, remember? We decided that wolf fur made for much better blankets than human skin! Human skin is all cold and smelly."

"""Yes, yes! Humans are cold and smelly!"""

Actually, that was a good point. This wasn't a *daily* stroll at all. Well, we could do a daily stroll tomorrow, then.

Just then, we heard a noise, a kind of terrible clanking. It wasn't the trees, and it wasn't the monsters. It was our toys.

Three of us, including me, raised our hands in excitement.

"The toys are here!" "The toys are here!" "The toys are here!"

"I want to nap." "I want to play tag." "I want to play hide-and-seek." "I want to eat."

The others had no interest in the humans and went away somewhere else. They were probably bored with humans already, after all the fun we'd had with them lately.

I'm not bored! I'll never be bored! The humans are so silly, and they're always fun! They're fun to surprise, fun to control, and they make such good emotions when they find out what we made them do!

"Let's go! Let's go!" "Is it just us?" "Let's go! Let's go!"

Here we go! Onward!

We flitted through the trees, bountiful and replete with mana. Flapping our wings, even though we didn't need them to float.

"There they are!" "There they are!" "There they are!"

Looking down from atop the canopy, we spotted a human trekking laboriously through the forest. His cloak was ragged, and he carried a large sack. Many humans like this got lost in our forest from time to time, seeking the powerful herbs that grew here.

Hmm? But something's strange. He doesn't seem like the others.

I suddenly recalled the words of our queen.

"My darling children. Spread your wings as you please. We are the guardians of this land. Wherever the Angellight Tree grows is our domain. Our garden. There we can play to our hearts' content."

The queen was rather fond of me, and I got to speak with her often. I once

impressed her with a musical performance using an instrument made out of a living human. The queen complimented my style, patted my head, and called me a good boy, and ever since then, a tiny part of her favor had gone with me.

After that, I loved playing with humans, so I tried to play with them every chance I got.

But why? Why? Why?

Something felt strange. I wanted to play with him, but I also didn't want to play with him. Why was that?

"Shall we pluck out his eyes?" "Tear off his nose?"

The other two didn't seem put off at all and were happily discussing what to do while I was thinking.

Humans are silly, so usually when we show ourselves, they smile and come closer. We talk and laugh, and when we stick our hands through them, they make these funny faces. The confusion, the surprise, and the pain are delicious to us. We slurp it all up.

Then the games begin. We make them play tag with the monsters in the forest, or strip them naked and make them walk into a cave of venomous insects, or make them fight each other. The emotions they release excite us and fuel our power, and it's great fun as well. But this time...

"Wait, you two!"

As if struck by divine inspiration, something occurred to me. I remembered what the queen told me! Sometimes, there are very special toys who share an affinity with us! If they want to, they can become fairies, too!

"Wait?" "Why wait?"

The two other fairies stopped. Happily, I flew over to the human myself. Wouldn't it be great if we had even more friends?

"Hey, human! Hey, human!" I called out merrily.

"..."

The human didn't respond. I could barely see his face beneath his thick hood.

"Talk to me! Talk to me! Let me see your face!"

But in spite of my words, the traveler pulled his hood down even farther. Wasn't he hot, with those long sleeves and gloves?

Maybe he couldn't hear me? Perhaps I wasn't shouting loud enough? He must have seen me flying in front of his face, right?

"Listen to us!!" "Don't ignore us!" "We don't like that!"

The three of us united to pull back his hood, when...

His face engulfed us.

```
"""Wha...?""
```

Where we expected to see a human face, we instead found only featureless slime. The slime extended several jellylike tentacles and grabbed each of us, leaving only our heads free. We screamed in pain as the acid melted our skin.

"Aieeeeeeeeee!" "Ow! Owowowowow!" "I'm melting! I'm meeeltiiiibbbbblllglglgl..." "Bbb...bb...blblb..."

Like blocks of ice left in the desert, the other two melted instantly into magical energy and were absorbed by the tentacles.

"What? Why? What's happening?!"

I was melting away, too, but at a much slower rate.

Why? The queen's blessing should be protecting me!

Her gift was the only reason I was still alive. I desperately summoned all my strength to free myself, until I heard a voice.

"Oh? Looks like this one's got a blessing. What a lucky catch."

The voice made me freeze. Alarm bells went off in my head. Look out, look out! He's trouble!

My blessing was telling me to get out of here in any way I could.

What do I do? What do I do? I need to escape!

I began to panic. I was running out of options.

O-of course! Our powers! No living thing can resist them!

I could eat his emotions, devour his mind. Just like I did to every foolish toy who wandered into this forest before him.

This ought to stop him, whether he's a human or a monster!

Eating emotions was not difficult. So long as there was a conscious entity nearby to connect to, the process was simple. And our wings were a reservoir of power. If I directed all my power into destroying my assailant's mind...

"Aaaaaaaghhh!!"

Just then, my head went black. The slime's mind was as dark as blackest night, darker than any mind I'd ever seen. It crushed me as if between two hard boulders, grinding me and everything else to dust, until nothing was left.

"...You flying little shits. That's what you get for touching someone's mind without asking."

"Agggghhgghhgghh!"

I was scared. So scared. It was like a monster was chewing on fairy bones right before my very eyes.

Why can't I escape? Why have I stopped trying? Stop! Let go! Let go! Let go!

I had severed the mind-link, but I still couldn't escape that inky black world. It was pulling me in.

First went my eyes, then my ears, then my nose, my arms, my legs. One by one, my parts unraveled from the outside in, disappearing, being absorbed into nothing. Nothing...

"Don't worry. I'm not going to kill you just yet," came the voice. "This time, we're going to be patient. Whatever happens. Even if the world is rewound once more."

My consciousness was clear until the very end. Just then, my head popped back into existence. Before my eyes now was the face of an ordinary human.

No, it wasn't an ordinary human at all.

His black hair and black eyes were as dark as the deepest of pits.

"We're going to drain your soul until there's nothing left."

That was when I realized what I was feeling—it was an emotion the humans called "despair."



Alone in the forest stood a single monster. Its face quivered, and from it issued the most ear-piercing screams, but strangely, the monster itself looked almost happy.

"I think I'm starting to get the hang of this. Not a bad skill, Slime Possession."

"Kyupie!"

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Slimo."

The monster stopped moving and sat down on the ground.

"All right, Slimo. Time to make the next one."

"Kyupie!"

At those words, the monster lost its humanoid form, returning to a normal slime shape. Its clothes, unfilled, fell to the ground.

Its body shifted through red, blue, yellow, green, white, black, all while roiling as if in pain. At last, a second monster was born, expelled from the first.

"""Gobyoh! Gobybygggbygaaaaaahhh!"""

The new monster looked utterly sinister. If you saw it at night from afar, you might mistake it for a giant of a man. It had two arms, two legs, a large and muscular torso, and an even bigger head. However, that was where the similarities between it and humans ended. Its black-green skin oozed mucus, and the upper bodies of several small figures appeared to be growing from its head: the fairies it had absorbed. Even more bodies hung around its neck like a scarf. Any human who saw it would have been frozen stiff by its evil.

"That makes thirty," said the voice. "Yep, everything looks good on the status board. Race: fairy, and there's that skill I want."

This voice came from the smaller slime, which had shrunk to half its original size after disgorging the second monster. It crawled back into the discarded clothes and readopted a humanoid form. The voice was much clearer now.

"Now then," it said. "I wonder how many more of these I can make."

"""Geggbybyeaaa..."""

The newborn monster left, shaking the earth with every step. The one that stayed behind may have looked human, but in every way that mattered, it was as monstrous as the first.



Just as I predicted, the day came sooner than the guildmaster had said.

"Excuse me, would there be an adventurer by the name of Mr. Ukei here? I had heard he was staying at this inn."

"There he is."

I was sitting on my bed as the sun streamed in, fiddling with some old junk I'd picked up in town, when I heard voices from downstairs. Someone was looking for me.

"I don't know from where you hail, but around these parts it's considered good manners to give your own name first."

"Oh, pray, pardon my rudeness, kind sir. I am a messenger on behalf of the Adventurers Guild. Could you tell Mr. Ukei that he is wanted at the guildhall for some important business?"

"That right? Well, if we do have anyone stayin' here by that name, I'll be sure to let him know."

I heard the messenger speaking with the innkeeper through the floorboards. The old man had earned my respect with his cautious response, and I really hoped he wouldn't get tangled up in what was to come.

However, I already knew the guild envoy was coming today, because I had learned as much from Slimo and Sir Squeaks. That was why the three of us, Yuuto and Mai included, had been hanging out at the inn all day, making ourselves busy.

"Still, a week. That's longer than I expected."

To be completely honest, I'd been imagining somewhere more in the region

of three days. Knowing that the guildmaster needed royal assent, there really wasn't anyone he could ask at a time like this besides Leon. And if I knew Leon, he would have dropped everything at once as soon as he heard of me. As you could tell from the fact that he traveled around by himself in search of powerful foes, he wasn't the stuffed-shirt kind of prince.

Still, we used the time to rest and prepare for our vengeance a bit more, so it wasn't all bad.

I had Slimo and Sir Squeaks to thank for the assistance on that front. As a result, we had used our extra time efficiently, and Yuuto and Mai got to stretch their wings as well. They hadn't rested much since coming to this world, so that was nice.

Yuuto made good use of the time, heading into town to peruse the bookstores, and even heading into the dungeon from time to time. Not too deep, of course. Mai, on the other hand, stayed at the inn and never left my side, so I was starting to worry about her a bit. I suspected she was a little homesick, and if that was the case, then I didn't see why I shouldn't let her do whatever helped her deal with it. It certainly seemed to cheer her up anyway.

Meanwhile, I was beginning to grow impatient.

"You know, if you wanted to," said Mai, "we could always just hang out here some more, and you could spend some time with your darling little sister."

"No, we've rested enough, I think. Too much, in fact."

I sighed. Wasn't it usually Mai who blamed me for being lazy?

In the end, it was Yuuto who intervened.

"Ah-ha-ha, well, I don't mind. After all, we won't be getting another break for a while."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door.

"Anyone in? A message came for you just now."

I tossed all the junk I was messing with into the Squirrel's Blade of Holding. Mai handed back the herbology book she had borrowed from Yuuto, while he closed the book he had been reading; it looked like a fairy tale of some sort.

"Let's go," I said. "It's time to get to work on the next stage."

Upon arriving at the guild, the three of us were shown to a private meeting room. The people I saw waiting there were exactly the faces I'd predicted. The first was the jolly guildmaster, who greeted us warmly.

"Oh, glad to see you could make it. Please, take seat."

And secondly, a man whose very being seemed to fill the room, even more so than the guildmaster himself.

"Hmm. I see."

A man with an iron body and a lion's face—Leon.

I wanted to kill him so bad.

"Let's get straight to the point, Valeria. We don't have time to waste on idle chitchat."

He stood from the sofa and presented himself before us.

I wanted to kill him so bad.

"My name is Leon," he said. "Second in line to the throne of this realm."

His imposing aura alone made him look even larger than the Cetaceanid gentleman standing beside him.

I wanted to kill him so bad.

"We face an unprecedented threat in the form of the demon invasion," he said. "All life in these realms is at risk."

His eyes were tinged with sorrow, with a burning will to make things right.

I wanted to kill him so bad.

"In times like these, you must understand the duty that falls to all powerful warriors of these realms. A duty you accept in seeking an S-rank certification. If you do, then it matters not whether it is money, fame, or the thrill of battle that propels you."

He spoke of duty. Of righteousness. Of saving the world.

I wanted to kill him so bad.

"If you really are as strong as I've heard, then your presence on the battlefield will be invaluable."

A mind that put the many above the few without even thinking about it.

I wanted to kill him so bad.

"However, an adventurer of rank S must be a beacon of hope for our people. They must be worthy."

If there was any hero in these lands, it was him, and only him.

I wanted to kill him so bad.

"Therefore, I expect you will be able to prove your worth to me."

This man would pay any price, endure any hardship, and suffer any pain.

I wanted to kill him so bad.

"If you can prove that, then I will grant you the rank you seek."

He would do anything to save this world. Uphold the grandest virtue...and commit the basest sin. That was why...

...I wanted to kill him so bad.

"I hereby extend my warmest welcome to this realm's newest hero."

Stop smiling. Stop smiling. STOP SMILING STOP SMILING.

He extended his hand for a shake. I wanted to rip his arm off and beat him to death with it. I wanted to tear out his throat, whittle down his arms and legs, and cave in his chest.

I had to keep it under control. I had to be patient.

Don't smile. Don't offer me your hand. Don't humbly ask my assistance.

"Thank you, Your Highness," I said. "It's an honor. We all share a dream, you see, and we need to be S-rank to achieve it. I'll gladly put my life on the line if that's what it takes."

Oh, I made myself sick. How had I become this duplicitous? Hiding my emotions, keeping all the burning anger bottled up inside my heart.

I know it was what I needed to do, but something within me was screaming to

forget it, to let it all out.

So I built it up. Bit by bit. Piece by piece. Bone by bone. So that the next thing you knew, it was already far too late. There's a tiny pile of corpses. A tiny, tiny pile of skulls. A tiny, tiny seed of hate.

Leon. Do you have any idea how much hatred I'm carrying around with me every second of every day?

I've had a lot of time to think since then. A lot has happened. I fled, I died, I got sent back, I killed, I took vengeance.

Now when I think back to what you last told me, something about it feels... wrong.

Perhaps you know something I don't about this world. Perhaps that was important enough for you to betray me.

But that's no excuse. That doesn't make it all right. No matter how airtight your argument, no matter how just your cause, I will kill you.

So wait for me. Just a little longer.

"See you on the battlefield, Your Highness."

I took his hand, and I shook it.



After a moment of silence, Valeria stepped in.

"Er, excuse me, Your Highness. I wonder if I might ask you to refrain from making any promises until the whole thing has been discussed? This is already a highly irregular case, as you well know."

"Hmm. Apologies," said Leon. He frowned, then sat back down on the sofa.

Yuuto and Mai had been silent this entire time, though their fists trembled with my anger. My precious little sister and my closest friend had both decided to join me in the deep, dark pit I'd fallen into. As much as I wished for them both to live happy, peaceful lives, I was humbled by their presence. However, even the boundless gratitude I harbored was only a helpless drop of water in the raging whirlpool of my hate.

I had to be careful. If Leon got a whiff of my true feelings for him, everything would be for naught. I took a small breath to steady myself and cut off my conscious mind.

"Now, then," said Valeria. "Though I fear the prince has given the game away somewhat, we summoned you here to discuss your guild rank. We have decided to confer upon you a rank of A, to be raised to S temporarily, in light of the current crisis. As I'm sure you know, with a higher rank comes..."

Valeria went over the benefits, including the ability to take on more dangerous requests for higher rewards, higher-level access to the guild's store of information, and a larger discount on all goods sold by the guild.

"Lastly, the guild may also make some requests of you as an adventurer. You can exercise your discretion in accepting, of course, but be aware that refusal may impose some restrictions on your guild privileges."

That appeared to be the end of his little spiel. Valeria crossed his arms and continued speaking.

"Of course, being that we are currently at war, you would be expected to leave for the front lines immediately. We find that S-rank adventurers work best by themselves without any red tape slowing them down, so you will be acting not as a platoon commander but on your own initiative."

"Of course," I replied. "Well, that's no problem for me. There's someone I want to kill out there."

"...Hmm. I see."

I wasn't lying.

"Now, moving on to the test. We will need to assess your strength."

"Prove myself, huh?" I said, standing from my seat. "All right, bring it. I haven't got all day. Who am I fighting?"

I stole a crafty glance at Valeria. Of course, I was familiar with Leon, and I knew that he'd want to test my skills personally, but I couldn't let *him* know that I was aware of that, so I waited for Valeria to say it.

Here we go. The first step.

The first sip of a deadly poison. The first loose brick of a crumbling castle. The first step of a path on which I would trample your virtues to mush and pour your life into a vessel of despair.

And for me, it was the final step of my preparation. After this, the only thing left was to watch you stumble along the road to destruction.

Say it. Say it. Say it, already. Say you'll be my opponent. Say it.

"Well, in fact, you'll be fighting..."

Edging closer and closer to the brink of despair.

I had to do this to obtain the mana I needed for the Tempter's Blade of Polymorphism. That way, Leon wouldn't realize what I was doing until it was already too late. The race transformation magic only worked if the target was prepared to feel pain. That was why we needed to fight, even if it was only a mock battle.

That will be where it all begins. My plan, and your doom.

So say it. Say it. Say that...

"Sorry I'm late! So, who's the nincompoop I'll be facing?"

"Grah!"

"Ta-daa! I'm here! Oh? Why, if it isn't Kai! What a coincidence, running into you again!"

I should have known. I should have always known.

"Ah, there you are."

Fate always dealt me the joker, a devious smile spread across her lips.

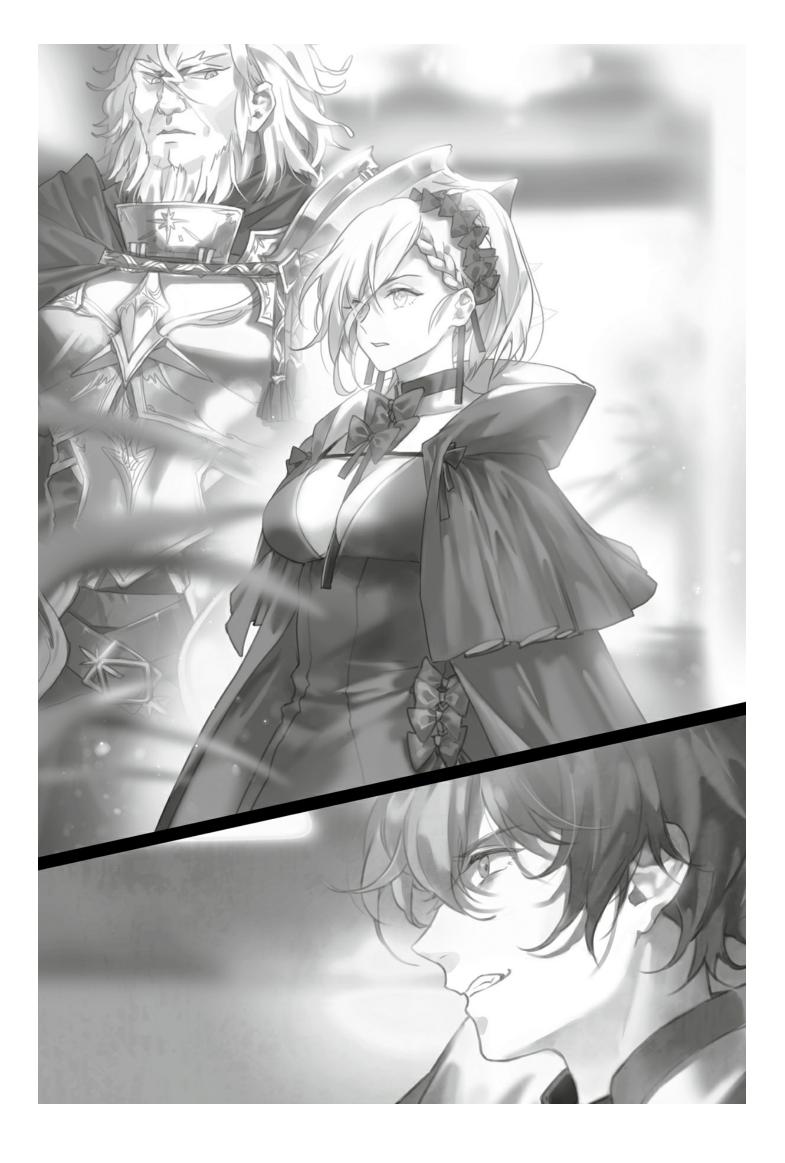
"Now then, you will be fighting these three."

Dammit. Goddammit. Just when I thought I had the upper hand for once.

The trio who had appeared and stunned me into silence were as follows: First was Leticia, her hair a flaming scarlet and her face a determined smile. Beside her was her pet dragon pup, Guren, belching a fireball. And alongside them both, with radiant golden hair and a sadistic grin, stood Nonorick.

Didn't I kill you once already, Nonorick? Give me a break.

My mind whirred but failed to spit out the optimal solution to this unexpected conundrum. There were just too many unknowns. Too many unsolved mysteries. Too many unanswered questions. And to top it all off, while I was still reeling, my second symbol of calamity walked into the room.



"You two. A lady does not behave in such an unbecoming manner."

Her blond hair was much more subdued than Nonorick's, more brownish in color. It was not overly long but tied up in a short, high ponytail. Her quiet voice lent her a mature air, especially when contrasted against the two total children she accompanied.

Yes, that's the face I remember.

I desperately tried to think over the deafening grating noise in my head. Lilia. Oh, Lilia. Lilia! Lilia, Lilia, Lilia!!

This was an ambush. It expelled all the myriad questions from my brain.

They were here, Leon and Lilia, at the same time, in the same place, before my very eyes!

A wave of anger came and washed my mind clean.

But one thing couldn't have been clearer: Whatever goddess ruled this world, she was a real manipulative piece of shit.



Time marched on while I reeled with confusion. It turned out that my opponents had also petitioned Leon to allow them to seek fame on the battlefield. I didn't even have time to dispute it. While I was goggle-eyed, my partners in crime and I were taken to the guild's arena to fight against Leticia, Nonorick, and Lilia.

"Oh? Whatever is that delectable scent? Sister, I've never seen food like that before!"

"We just took lunch, Leticia. Save filling your stomach for *after* our current order of business."

"Ooh, there's a lovely smell coming from over there. Look at all that soft, pink meat!"

"Grah!"

"Whoa! Watch it, lizard! You almost burned my beautiful hair!"

Leticia, Lilia, and Nonorick seemed in high spirits as we headed over to the

arena.

What's going on? Why are these three still here?

Leticia was supposed to have gone after Ardelius after news of his appearance reached town. Nonorick shouldn't even still be alive! I'd killed him!

...Whatever, I can't waste time thinking about that. I need to focus.

I needed to work out why Leticia and the others were fighting us in the first place. What did they stand to gain? There was no way they just wanted to seek fame on the battlefield, like they claimed. It had to be related to getting vengeance on her brother's killer.

The first time, Leticia disguised herself as a member of the army and got into the war that way. Nobody, not even me, ever noticed her then. So why didn't she do that again?

The only thing different about the situation this time was Nonorick. Did he have something to do with it? I supposed there was also the fact that I wasn't the hero this time around, and instead, the kingdom's new hero was apparently fighting on the front lines in my place. I had no interest in chasing down figureheads, but from what I'd heard, they seemed to be doing a decent job. In any case, the hero piece was on the board—it just wasn't me. Could that difference have been enough to provoke this change?

I just can't work it out. Nothing fits. What do I do now?

I couldn't even begin to formulate a hypothesis with the intel I currently possessed. The only thing worth thinking about, then, was ourselves.

Think simple, I told myself. I need to get a sample of Leon's mana, and I need to make it look like an accident. That's the only thing that matters right now.

At that moment, I felt a series of small tugs at my sleeve.

"Dear brother," came Mai's voice. "I know you told us not to speak, but what are we doing now?"

"We've veered quite far off script, don't you think?" added Yuuto.

"We just have to go with the flow for now," I told them. "Once the fight starts, you two buy me some time. Make it flashy. Just don't push yourselves."

Just ahead, I saw a building marked with the guild crest. Our thinking time was up.

The guild's training grounds were plain and of cheap make. It was little more than a circular arena surrounded by pitiful seating. It wouldn't fit too many people at once, but considering we were only in a town and not a city, it was actually fairly extravagant.

The place seemed to have been reserved for our bout, since there was nobody else there when we arrived.

"As soon as the battle begins, fan out," I told Yuuto and Mai. "Mai, you take Lilia, and Yuuto, take Nonorick. I'll handle Leticia. Remember what I said. We'll figure out the rest as we go."

Leticia stood fifty meters opposite me, doing some warm-up stretches. She was wearing the same frilly *kimono* that she'd had on when we'd first met.

She carried no weapons, but her sister, Lilia, was armed with a flail—an iron pole with a spiked metal ball chained to one end. Her clothes were almost like a servant's, with no superfluous decorations of any kind. Regardless, it didn't look like she was going to be using magic here.

Lastly, Nonorick. He hadn't changed in the slightest since last I'd seen him. He was still dressed in military garb, banging his twin swords together in glee.

"Dear brother," said Mai. "I'm afraid that's not much of a plan, is it?"

"Plus, my opponent looks kinda tough," added Yuuto.

Splitting up wasn't exactly an orthodox team strategy, but we hadn't practiced fighting together all that much. I'd primarily been focused on raising Mai's and Yuuto's levels as quickly as humanly possible.

"There's no point in putting together a plan," I said. "It wouldn't hold up three seconds against these three."

"We will now begin the Rank Up trial," came Valeria's voice from the stands. "Keep in mind that the purpose of this match is to showcase your abilities. It is possible for both sides to pass, and for both to fail. It is not necessary to draw blood or beat your opponents into submission. We have healers standing by to

treat any injuries that may arise, but please do not test them. Very well. Then begin!"

The whalefolk gentleman let out a low, deafening cry to signal the start of the match. Mai, Yuuto, and I scattered in three different directions. I rushed straight forward to close the distance between me and Leticia as quickly as possible, while Yuuto and Mai ran around the outer circumference of the arena. In theory, Leticia would be forced to deal with me, while Lilia and Nonorick would meet the other two, but I hadn't counted on one thing...

"Hi there, Kai! Ah-ha-ha! To think we'd meet again in a place like this!!"

"Grr!"

Nonorick had no respect for combat theory. Instead, he rushed straight at me. We swung our swords at each other; I, the Soul Blade of Beginnings and the Teardrop Blade of Lightning, Nonorick with his two white swords. A clash of sparks ensued, and we each pushed against the other, vying for control.

Dammit, why can't anything go my way for once?

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Leticia engage Mai, and Lilia, Yuuto. None of us was facing who we were supposed to. I could only count my blessings that our foes hadn't managed to combine their strength.

"Hey! Don't let your eyes wander!"

I barely moved quickly enough to dodge Nonorick's graceful lunge. He was like bending rubber, and the force from his blade left a cut on my cheek.

"Grrh!"

He's much stronger than before!!

I tried to knock his sword aside to put some distance between us, but he trapped my blade in place with his.

"I'm not letting you get away that easily!" he chirped.

"Dammit, let go of me!!"

My stats were way higher than the last time we'd fought, but it felt like Nonorick would turn things in his favor if I let my guard down for even a second. Stats weren't the only factor determining the outcome of this battle. There was also raw fencing ability, and in that respect, Nonorick held the upper hand.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! This is so fun! I've been waiting for this rematch, you know?"

"And I hoped never to see your face again. How are you still alive?!"

"No obstacle is too great for a girl in love, Kai! Surely you know that!"

"Urgh, you make me want to stab out my ears! Teardrop Lightning!"

"Whoa! That's—not—ve—ry—nice!"

Nonorick's blades were keen, and his eyes keener still. The three blue lightning bolts I fired didn't so much as faze him. He ducked, weaved, and twisted between them without even giving me an opportunity to get away.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha!! That's the Kai I remember! My thighs are tingling again... "

"What the hell was that?! How is that possible?"

But Nonorick didn't answer. Instead, he slid his tongue coquettishly between his lips.

This guy's a real pain!

I couldn't kill him, I couldn't cause collateral damage, and I couldn't devote too much of my focus to any flashy moves. The only thing on my side was my skill with the blade, against an opponent who *literally* didn't die when he was killed.

"Give me a break... You're going to make me cry!!"

My aim here wasn't to win, but still, I could see no path to my true goal. Nonorick had closed off every door.



Your plans have been thrown in the trash already, dear brother!

No sooner had the battle begun and Kaito had lunged for Leticia, like he said, than that girl called Nonorick moved to intercept him. I know he'd said his plans wouldn't last three seconds against the enemy, but I don't think he even managed that long.

Kaito seemed locked in battle with Nonorick, unable to disengage.

Which means it looks like I'm going to be fighting...her.

Leticia, the demon lord.

My brother's sweetheart, and the girl who'd stayed by his side all through his life in this world.

I could see her charm, I suppose. Some might even call her cute. And there didn't seem to be any red flags in her personality, either.

However, that was all beside the point. I would get no better chance than this.

"Heh-heh. Come to challenge me, have you? Let me see what you're made of, then!"

All of a sudden, dozens of rock spears rained down on me. Thinking fast, I cloaked my *naginata* in wind mana and swept it to destroy the projectiles. Her control of magic was meticulous, and her casting so fast, I couldn't even see it coming. I could see why some called her the evil sorceress.

But it's not so fast that I can't keep up. Kaito instructed me to fight flashy, so I suppose I shall have to adapt to long range— What?!

"You're too slow!"

"She's so fast!"

My thoughts slipped from the battle for only a moment, but that was all it took for her to seize the initiative. Leticia flew toward me, closing the distance in an instant by utilizing "Wind Magic" to propel herself forward. I immediately swung my glaive in response. However...

"Oh, no you don't! Take this!"

"Krh?!"

The redhead veered wildly to one side, as though she could teleport in midair, and my attack missed. In return, she shot her flame-wreathed fist toward me. I raised my *naginata* to block in the nick of time, but I heard an awful creaking coming from its staff.





It won't hold. I can't keep this up!

"Hide me, Dark Storm Winds!"

Before my weapon splintered under the strain, I called upon the power of the wind to catapult myself high into the air, out of the reach of Leticia's technique, while also leaving dark winds and lightning in my wake that obscured her sight and stifled her movements.

"Interesting response," she said. "However..."

"Wh-what?!"

Leticia suddenly appeared behind me like something out of a manga, swinging a foot that crackled with electricity.

"...you're still a little weak to be facing me."

I can't respond in time! Rgh!

The only thing I could do was raise my weapon in the vain hope it would protect me. But as if to mock my feeble attempts, Leticia's foot sparked, sending lightning coursing down my weapon's handle.

"Aagh!"

The powerful blow sent me crashing into the ground.

"What...on earth? That's just...not...fair."

"But worry not," said the girl. "I'll teach you a thing or three!"

Leticia puffed out her modest chest with pride, looking for all the world like a triumphant child.

I don't have the luxury of thinking about anything else, I realized. If I let my guard down for a moment, she'll wipe the floor with me!



We had exchanged over two hundred slashes at this point. I was using "Control Mana" and "Control Body" skills to strengthen my limbs with magic, "Air Step" and "Godfoot" to boost my mobility, "React" and "Enhanced Senses" to push my reflexes to the limit, and "Stealth," along with the abilities of my

soul blades, to cut down on my opponent's reaction time.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-l! This is fun! This is so much fun! Tra-la-la! "

"Well, I sure ain't enjoying it!"

I couldn't push through. Our blades clashed endlessly.

I was still holding back, of course, but Nonorick had forced me to display more of my combat skills than I'd bargained for. Mai and Yuuto were fighting their opponents bravely and, more importantly, impressively. On the other hand, I was struggling to bypass Nonorick and get close to Leon, like I'd planned.

What now? Do I go all out on the basis that Nonorick will be ready for it? Then in the chaos, I get close to Leon and...no, it's too suspicious, especially while Lilia's watching. If they both suspect me, it's all over.

I tried to piece together a plan in the small windows of time I got while keeping up the offensive. However, no brilliant ideas came to mind, and I was running out of tricks to keep Nonorick occupied.

Dammit, if only Nonorick hadn't shown his creepy face—oh, crap!

Amid the clanging blades, I heard the telltale sound of an imperfect strike. I had swung too fast, or perhaps too slow, and ended up missing the mark.

"See? If you keep looking over my shoulder, you're going to make mistakes!" cried Nonorick with glee. The balance of the fight shifted dramatically. I was now only seconds from meeting my end at his blade.

I can't hold anything back! I have to move the fight over to where Leon is, no matter the cost!

Nonorick had already won this battle, but there was one fight I was never going to lose—the fight for my vengeance. But just as I steeled my nerves and prepared to do what was necessary, a voice reached my ears.

"Nyah-ha-ha! Still having trouble, are we, Nonorick? Here, allow me to give you a hand!!"

The next instant, I was being bombarded by dozens upon dozens of supercharged fireballs, each about the size of a ping-pong ball.

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"Whoa?" "Mmrgh!"
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Both Nonorick and I had to leap away from each other to dodge the blasts.

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Is Mai out already? ... Wait, the fireballs!
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Having missed us, the projectiles continued on their trajectory...directly toward Prince Leon.

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"Hrm."
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"Whuh-oh!"

Realizing her mistake, Leticia bent the fireballs' trajectory upward. Consequently, they missed Leon...but crashed into the roof above the seating area instead. The explosion dislodged huge chunks of the building, which came plummeting down toward Leon's head.

"Watch out!"

Seizing my chance, I ran toward Leon, as though in an attempt to save his life. The prince, of course, wasn't the kind of man to be fazed by a little structural collapse.

"Hmph! Lion's Cannon!!"

His fists glowed with a mystical light, and then Leon punched the sky. A ball of magical energy flew from his outstretched arm and took on the appearance of a lion's face before colliding with the falling rubble.

The whole building shook, and I felt the vibration in the pit of my stomach. When the dust cleared, not only was there no more rubble, but Leon's move had blasted a hole clean through the ceiling, and we could see the sky outside.

"Are you all right, Your Imperial Highness?!" cried Valeria.

"That was nothing," Leon replied. "Apologies, Mr. Ukei. I appear to have interrupted your match."

"No worries," I reassured him. "As long as you're okay."

I had used Air Step to reach the raised seating area.

"Then again," I remarked. "This has kind of messed with my flow. Maybe this is a good place to stop?"

"Indeed," said Valeria. "If nothing else, we can risk no further damage to the building. I believe we've seen enough to make our assessments."

Once again, the whalefolk's booming voice echoed throughout the arena.

"The test is over," he said, with markedly less pomp than before the battle began. "Let us move to safe environs before the whole place collapses around our ears."

It looked like Leticia had knocked Mai out cold. Yuuto was still in the middle of his fight with Lilia, and both sides seemed to have taken their fair share of punishment. The two of them tidied their outfits. Leticia and Nonorick, on the other hand, were brimming with energy and ready to go again at the drop of a hat. In fact, they kept on play-fighting in the background, even though the test was over.

"Now, I'm afraid my business takes me elsewhere," said Leon to me. "Valeria will let you know of the results in due course...though that is merely a formality at this point. I look forward to seeing you on the battlefield, Mr. Ukei."

"Likewise. And thank you."

My response elicited a chuckle, for whatever reason, and Leon departed. I also gave a friendly smile, but only a superficial one.

Internally, I was grinning to myself. I'd been flying by the seat of my pants for a while there, but everything had come together at the very end.

With that, I have a sample of Leon's mana, and nobody suspects a thing. Now I have everything I need.

Just a little more time. Just a little more...

...and I would drag you down into the depths of the darkest chasm to be with me.



"...Mmh...Where am I...?"

"Ah, you're awake."

My mind came to life like a light switch had been flicked, and the very first

thing I saw was my dear brother's face.

"Kaito? Where are we? What happened?"

I sat up. The bed was of a simple make, and the room was one I didn't recognize.

"We're at the guild," said Kaito, sitting in a chair by my bed and flipping through the pages of some tome. "You were knocked out during the battle. We were all killing time, waiting for you to come around."

"Knocked out... I see. I'm sorry, dear brother, I really am..."

I thought back to the last thing I remembered.

I just couldn't get through...

That Leticia girl slapped me silly without letting me land so much as a single blow. I couldn't even look my brother in the eye after that shameful display.

"It's all too easy to guess what's going on in that head of yours, dear sister. You don't need to apologize for losing to her."

"Ow!"

Kaito pulled me by the hair, forcing me to look him in the eye.

"You did a great job. Don't ever be ashamed of that."

It was the first time Kaito had ever handled me roughly. My chest tightened. What if I'd disappointed him? What if he was going to leave me? I couldn't shake the fear; tears formed in my eyes. However...

"I know what you're feeling," he said, "and I know you're not going to listen to excuses. Things like *Oh, we weren't fighting as I planned,* or *It wasn't a real battle, so who cares?* You're embarrassed. Ashamed that Leticia made a fool of you in front of everybody."

I was wrong. My dear brother would never leave me. His voice, deep yet soft, filled my ears, and his eyes pierced my very soul.

Meanwhile, I recalled the things Leticia had told me during our battle.

"Worry not. I'll teach you a thing or three!"

"Look, you're swinging your weapon all over the place! That's because you aren't thinking!"

"Broaden your mind. Watch everything. You need to train your observation skills until they become unconscious."

"Keep your eyes on your opponent. If you're only thinking about yourself, then you can only beat yourself!"

"It's time to finish this. Give some thought to what I said, okay?"

It was like she could see. She could see the presumptuous little girl I was.

"Keep your head up," said Kaito. "You can hang it when you're weary. You can hang it when you need a break."

I could never disappoint him. He would never leave me. But neither could his words heal the damage to my heart.

"But never hang your head in shame! Look up. Look forward. And keep looking at yourself. Because if you don't, this world's going to eat you for breakfast, just like it did to me. The path we walk is not an easy one. It doesn't leave us time to sit around and lick one another's wounds."

"Mhh..."

I needed to keep moving onward, with such force that nothing could stand in my way.

"I'm not going to say, Well done. I'm not going to say, It'll be okay next time. If you're the one who's disappointed in your performance, then it's not me you need to say sorry to, is it? It's you."

"...You're a bully, Kaito. You're making your little sister cry."

I tightened my lips, as if to seal off what was trying to escape them.

"I thought you were kind. I thought you were always nice to me."

"Sorry," he said. "We sold out of kind brothers a long time ago."

"...That's not true, Kaito. I know it isn't."

"Do you, now?"

A gentle smile crossed his face.

"So, what did you think? Leticia's not just a pretty face, eh?"

"...I'll beat her next time, Kaito, I swear."

"That's the spirit... I really didn't want you fighting her this early, though."

"Hang on," I said. "Why are you suddenly going heart-eyed for your ex when your injured sister is right here? I never knew you could be so cruel."

"Oh, well, um, there's a good reason for that," Kaito replied. "And that reason is...I don't know."

"Nice try, dear brother... Silly Kaito."

I hugged him so that he couldn't see my tears. Using the hand he'd tugged my hair with, he gently stroked my head.

My dear, loving brother stroked my head until I was feeling better. It felt even more calming than usual, perhaps because he had been so rough only a few seconds before.

Actually, you know what? It wasn't so bad being treated roughly from time to time.

"All right, I guess it's time to go," he said.

I looked around. "Come to think of it, where's Yuuto?"

"He's headed back to the inn already," replied Kaito. "Fighting Lilia alone took a lot out of him."

The guild had plenty of spare beds, but it wasn't like they let anyone use them. They were supposed to be for people too injured to move, like me.

"Oh, and by the way, we passed. This proves you're an S-rank adventurer. Don't lose it."

Kaito hung something around my neck. It was a red plate with a green metal border.

"These are our tickets onto the battlefield," he explained. "Now we just have to wait for our efforts to bear fruit."

I rose from the bed, and we both left the room. Descending the creaky wooden staircase, we arrived back in the guild's main hall with the reception desks and the bar. There, a pair of familiar voices reached my ears.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha! Another plate of this delicious meat if you please, barkeep!"

"Hey there, big boy, come to show Nono a good time?"

One belonged to Leticia, waving a mug of ale around in one hand. The moment I heard it, I jumped, as the trauma of the fight flooded back to me. But I had to be strong. Kaito was behind me all the way.

"Ah, there you two are!" she said upon our arrival.

"Are you guys having lunch?" Kaito asked.

"Of course! It is vital we replenish our strength after such a taxing match! Come join us, my new friends! The food here is quite scrumptious!"

Leticia laughed and tore a strip of meat off the bone in her other hand. I could smell spices, along with a slightly burned sauce.

"I think we're fine for—," began Kaito, when a loud rumble echoed throughout the hall. "...On second thought, let's eat."

Th-that wasn't my stomach, I swear! I-in fact, I didn't even hear anything. What sound? That said, my goodness, just look at the time! It's the perfect opportunity for lunch!

We both ordered something from the kitchen and took our seats. We didn't have to wait long before our food arrived.

"I apologize for earlier," said Leticia to me. "I may have overdone it a slight bit at the end there. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I replied. "Just a few cuts and bruises. It's nothing to worry about."

"I see. Well, excuse me for a second..."

Suddenly, an emerald light enveloped me, and in a few moments, the aches and pains went away. I could have sworn it made my skin sparkling smooth as well.

"That should do it," said Leticia.

"Hey, that's not fair!" cried Nonorick. "Cast that on me, too! I want my skin to be all sparkly smooth!"

"Get your hands off me! If you want it, then you're going to have to sit still!"

"Mmm! Ooh, that's the good stuff!"

"Good grief..."

I watched as the same emerald light engulfed Nonorick.

"So, what does the future hold for you three?" Leticia asked. "We are planning to head to the front lines as soon as we are done collecting enough materials."

"We'll probably stay in town a little longer," answered Kaito. "Your battle showed us just how much we still have to improve."

"Aww. I thought we might be able to travel together with our new friends. Oh well, no matter. *Burp.*"

Leticia threw down her spoon onto her empty plate.

"If you'll excuse us, we must be off," she said. "Hopefully, we shall meet again on the battlefield. Come on, Nonorick."

"Aww...I don't wanna move yet. Can't we just chill here a bit more?"

"No. Lilia just messaged me with Soulspeak. She's done with the shopping. Come on, now."

Leticia threw some coins onto the bar countertop and dragged Nonorick from the stool.

"Stay well, friends," she said.

"Bye-bye!" chirped Nonorick.

Kaito waved good-bye, and I quickly followed suit. The bell on the door rang, and then the two of them were gone.

Kaito let out a sigh. "...Phew. I knew they were both still here, but I didn't expect them to call out to us like that."

"So you know this Nonorick as well, dear brother?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure I killed him, actually. Not sure why he's still alive. He didn't seem to hold a grudge, either, which is strange."

"What are we going to do, dear brother? About Nonorick, Lilia, and Leticia?"

"We don't need to do anything about them. We don't have the power to take on Leon and those three at the same time. Leticia said they plan on leaving town soon, so let's just wait for that to happen first."

"..."

"We'll set the trap tonight. By the time Leon notices it, Leticia and the others should already be way out of town. We can think how to deal with them later; right now, we have more important things on our plate."

Kaito placed a spoon in front of me. We ate our meals, and by the time we were full, our plates were both empty.

"Let's go back to the inn," said Kaito. "A good opportunity has just come around."

"A good opportunity?" I asked.

"I'll explain when we get back."

We both stood and headed for the door. However, as we were about to leave, we passed an unassuming old man, and Kaito froze.

"Hmm? Dear brother?"

The man ignored us and headed over to the counter with the other questgivers.

"Back again, old man?" said one of them.

"...My request...," replied the man. "My request... Has anyone accepted it?"

"Nope, still on the wall. See for yourself."

"Oh..."

Then the old man slunk over to the bar and took a seat on one of the stools there.

"Is there something strange about that gentleman's actions, dear brother?" I asked.

"No," replied Kaito. "No, there isn't."

And with that, he turned, and the two of us left the guild.



"Phew. That's dealt with."

On the upper floor of the Adventurers Guild, in the guildmaster's office, Valeria let out a deep sigh. He had just finished organizing the paperwork for six new S-rank adventurers.

"That should do it for now," he said. "I can finally enjoy a brief respite."

Valeria was already plenty overworked, owing to the war, when this new problem had fallen into his lap. It was a huge weight off his mind now that it was done and dusted.

"I suppose I shall pop downstairs and get myself a bite to eat."

However, just as Valeria stood from his chair, a bird ornament on his desk fell from its pedestal.

"...Oh, dear. Just my luck..."

Valeria gave another sigh, even deeper than before. Then he reached into his desk drawer and opened a mana-shielding box containing a crystal sphere. It glowed with a faint light.

"Valeria. Valeria. Answer me, Valeria."

"Yes, yes. I'm right here, Your Sylvan Highness."

The voice of the Fey Queen herself came through the mystical device.

"You must prepare for me a sacrifice. Bring me souls bountiful in mana, the purest you can find."

"As you wish," said Valeria, sighing, knowing very well there was only one purpose for which the queen would use the magic item she'd provided him. "How many? Five, like before?"

"You must bring me thirty," the queen replied.

"Th-thirty?!" Valeria squealed. He had not been prepared to hear such an outrageous number.

"Yes."

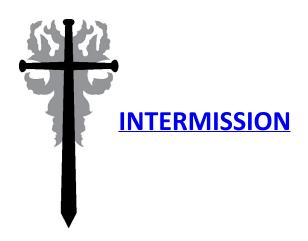
"Wh-whatever could require the use of so many? You must know these will not be easy to procure."

"They are necessary. For what, you need not know. You must simply bring them to me before the next full moon. Farewell."

With that, the light from the crystal ball faded. Valeria let out his deepest sigh yet.

"Oh, back to busywork again, I suppose. The full moon fast approaches, and the prince is busy petitioning the nobles for troops. It very much looks like I will be enjoying a few more sleepless nights yet."

Valeria put the crystal ball back where it belonged and left the room, ignorant of the little mouse that had been listening in on his every word.



Partners in Crime Distraught

In a space cut off from the rest of the world lay Minnalis and Shuria, their powers exhausted.

"Haah...haah...haah..."

"Hoo...hoo...hoo..."

They lay sprawled on the floor of a cubic room, its six surfaces all the same shade of gray.

"Is that all you've got?" came the displeased voice of the man standing over them. "I deign to offer my services, and this is all you can muster? I ought to finish you off right here and now."

The man was tall, and his coat was lined with fur. He ran his hand through his slicked-back gray hair.

"Wow, Garratt, you're a monster!"

"Silence, you useless Goddess. It was only because you asked that I offered them my guidance."

The man named Garratt gave a disgruntled snort at Luna's playful remark.

"With a true vampire such as myself teaching them, they ought to have advanced in leaps and bounds, yet here they are, sleeping on the ground like children. Pathetic."

"Of course they are! You've been training and training for ages! I'm bored! Give me something to do!"

"I'm not here to entertain you, Goddess. It's your fault we're all in this mess to begin with. You have no right to make demands of me."

"Waah, Garratt's bullying me!"

"Tch, useless Goddess. Fine. I suppose a little break is in—"

""Wha-?! Aaaaaaaaahhh!!""

Before Garratt could finish his sentence, Minnalis and Shuria sat up and screamed.

"I...I can feel him," said Minnalis, wrapping her arms around someone invisible. "Master... Master's back!"

"He's here! Oh, goody, he's here!" sang Shuria, shedding tears of joy.

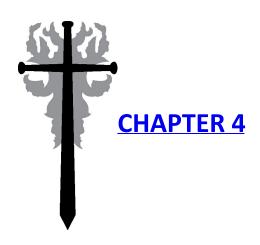
Garratt furrowed his brow. "Well, well, what's gotten into those two?" he muttered. Meanwhile, Luna nodded along. The pair on the floor just lay there, unable to wipe their tears, until they passed out from weariness.

"Oh, that won't do. They'll catch a cold, sleeping there like that."

Luna approached, a blanket mysteriously in her hands, and tossed it over the sleeping duo. Despite the dirt, the bruises, and their tattered clothes, they looked happy.

"Hopefully, they can protect him this time," she said, while the man called Garratt stared at them, saying nothing.





A Deep, Deep Forest and the Scream of the Land

A few days after we all became S-rank adventurers, I was in our room at the inn discussing the next steps of our plan with Yuuto. Leticia's party had left town soon after our bout, heading straight for the battlefield with Leon's imperial permit in hand. The prince, meanwhile, was slowly and unknowingly transforming from a beastfolk into a fairy.

Our plans were already in motion, but there was always more to be done. We needed to keep a steady hand on the rudder and fine-tune our vengeance into the sweetest dish imaginable.

"Kaito, I still think if we're going to make Leon run berserk, then perhaps he should do it right here in town. If he's really as noble-minded as you say, then that will be much more painful for him, don't you think?"

"Perhaps, but it's too risky. The more people involved, the higher the chance something will go wrong. Since my knowledge of the future is already getting spotty, we need to start being more careful."

The only one we wanted to kill was Leon. Getting bystanders involved was a step too far.

"We wouldn't have to worry so much if Leon wasn't so strong, but as it stands, I couldn't place bets on who'd win if it came to an all-out fight. Besides, attacking a prince is a serious crime. I don't want us to become fugitives so soon after getting into the guild's good graces."

Not that we had any further use for the guild. Initially, my thinking was that we could use that authority to help find out where Leticia had infiltrated the army, but since she'd found us this time, that was no longer an issue. In fact, Leticia seemed perfectly happy to stand out. Was it because I wasn't the hero this time around?

"But you're talking about the Leon from your future memories, right?" said Yuuto. "Maybe he's not that strong yet."

"No, if anything, he might be even stronger now," I replied. "Now that he wasn't dragged over to the kingdom to babysit me, that is."

Ironically, journeying with me had most likely stunted Leon's growth. Without the need to waste time on my heroics, he was free to train and obtain the power he sought at his own rate.

"Still, you have a point," I conceded. "Our plan still has room for improvement. How can we make him suffer even more?"

As I was pondering it, a devilish suggestion crossed my mind. If we could get Leticia to help us, it would make our vengeance all the sweeter. Leon and Lilia seemed to go way back somehow. Just imagine how much it would hurt for them to both watch each other die...

No, that'll never work, I thought. We'd need to somehow persuade Leticia to murder her own sister.

Just then, I heard a creak, and the door swung open.

"Dear brother, Yuuto, dinner is ready."

Mai walked in carrying a tray of food she had just finished cooking.

This was an unfair generalization, but by and large, beastfolk tended to value quantity over quality when it came to cuisine. Thus, the food carts around here were lacking in flavor, and we quickly got tired of junk food. Instead, we each took turns cooking for the three of us, and tonight it was Mai's turn. She had prepared a dish that was as close to mapo tofu as we could get in this world, complete with various kinds of spices.

"So, what did you two discuss while I was away?" she asked. I quickly summed

up what Mai had missed.

"I see," she said, when I was done. "And are your Swords of Sin no use here? They're your secret weapons, aren't they?"

"They probably won't be much help this time," I replied. "Leonid beastfolk have a strong sense of smell, so it'll be hard to trick the prince into drinking my blood for Envy. Sloth requires a cursed item to activate, and we don't have any. Lust could work, but someone like Leon could easily dodge the box before it swallowed him up. As for Pride, there's no telling what he'll demand in exchange for his services—that could jeopardize our future plans. And Greed only works against groups of people, not individuals."

None of the Swords of Sin I'd used so far would help us this time around. As for Avarice or Wrath, I didn't have access to them yet, so even if they happened to have some magnificently convenient abilities that were perfectly suited to taking down Leon, that wasn't much help to me now.

If only Minnalis and Shuria were here, I thought. Minnalis could use her poisons and her illusions, and Shuria's puppets would come in handy, too. Kitty can interrupt the flow of mana, while Teddy can alter people's dreams. I'd feel a lot less anxious about everything if they were around.

The two women weren't dead. They couldn't be. But even with all the information available to me as an S-rank adventurer, I could turn up nothing regarding their whereabouts. Still, ever since I'd returned to this world, I could feel my connection to them growing stronger by the day. If I waited a little longer, or if they came closer, I would be able to get in touch with them using the Soulspeak granted to us by our contract.

But first, let's focus on Leon. If I'm not mistaken, killing one of my sworn enemies should restore power to our contract.

"It doesn't seem like there's much choice but to fight Leon outright," I stated. "It won't be easy to capture a man like him and hold him at our mercy, but we have to do it. Now, then—" I tossed my spoon atop my empty plate. "—I'm going to go take a little nap before night falls. It's the full moon tonight; that's when Valeria will make his move."

I hadn't been able to sense hide nor hair of the connection between Valeria

and the Fey Queen, so I had doubted my suspicions for a while, but what I saw through Sir Squeaks confirmed it.

"We have to give him precisely the fate he deserves."



I exited the brightmoss-lined tunnel and stepped into a clearing. The trees here were rich in mana and reacted to the light of the full moon by emitting a pale and ethereal glow, which shifted colors slowly, like an aurora.

"A truly magical sight," I said to myself. "I never tire of it."

This would be a wonderful place to come and enjoy a quiet drink, were it not for the fairies' constant pranks and the unreasonable requests of their queen.

"Sis...where have you gone...?" "I'm tired..." "Whaah!" "..." "My feet hurt..." "Just a little farther, he said..."

Oh, yes, and if I didn't have to drag these children around, too, of course.

With me were thirty small children, all under the age of ten, some of them babies. They were of different races and were dressed in tattered rags.

Good grief. Doesn't that queen know what a bother it is to ferry all these brats around?

The constant yet irregular demands of Queen Berrybell had led me to build this passage with "Earth Magic," connecting Zolkia directly to the fairy forest. After smartly disposing of everyone who'd aided in its construction, I was the only one who knew of its existence.

The tunnel was perfectly straight, but it covered a fair bit of distance. Perhaps it was a little too long, and the air too cold for these old bones, especially with these whippersnappers in tow.

"Let us keep up the pace," I said. "Come along, now."

"M-mister? Where are we?"

"Hmm? I believe I stipulated you were to come quietly and not ask any questions."

The war had left many children orphaned. That made it exceedingly simple to

gather the "pure souls" Her Majesty had requested from the gutters of the town. All I'd needed to do was offer them a little food or money, and they'd followed. Children tended to be the easiest to spirit away, partially because it didn't take much to fill their stomachs, and partially because...

"You never mentioned a forest. Where are you taking us...?"

"Goodness, you're a handful. Can you not shut your trap?"

...so long as nobody was watching, it was simple to make them obey.

"Huh? Eep!"

I swept my arm, knocking the boy down and removing his grubby fingers from my clothes at once. Then I unleashed the spell I had prepared. Magical chains appeared out of nowhere, clamping around the necks of the children, which connected to a single chain in my hand.

"A guildmaster cannot tie himself down with too many obligations," I said. "I must exercise extreme caution at all times, even against children."

Still, the post came with its fair share of privileges, so I couldn't well complain.

"We've lost precious time. We must make haste."

Thanks to these children slowing me down, it had taken longer than I expected to pass through the tunnel. Fairies didn't experience time like humans did, but it was still best not to keep them waiting, lest I be subjected to their whims. You never knew what might set them off.

"Wait! Slow down...!" "Mister?!" "You're hurting me!" "Let me go! Let me go!" "Waaaaaaaahhh!!"

I advanced deeper into the forest, dragging the children behind me. Queen Berrybell had seemed uncharacteristically stressed this time, so I thought it best to get a move on.

"Oh, I must be getting old. The cries of children are like a rasp in my ears..."

"Why?! Why are you doing this to us?!"

"Because I made a deal with the Fey Queen," I replied. "In exchange for her granting me success in life, I agreed to do whatever she asked of me."

I hauled the unruly children along until I arrived at our usual meeting spot. It was tough work, bringing a haul of five or six times more people than usual.

"Finally here," I said aloud. It was a clearing containing a circle of fallen stone pillars.

"I'm here!" I called out. "Your Majesty? Where are—? Hmm?"

Just as I began tugging the children over to the circle, I suddenly felt the chain snag.

"What's that? Did it get caught on a tree or something?"

I turned around and looked at the children.

Hmm? Something's not quite right...

They were all standing in a line, perfectly silent. Even the ones who had been crying just a few seconds ago.

Then I heard voices. Not from the children, as their lips were all shut, but from the ground beneath my feet.

"Why?" they asked. Some sounded young, others as deep and husky as old men.

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"Why?" "Why?" "Why?"
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In perfect sync, the children all cocked their heads in puzzlement. I didn't know when it had happened, but someone had replaced the kids with something else.

"Oh dear. This must be the fairies' work."

I thought I had grown wise to their schemes by now. How did I fall this far without realizing it?

I spotted death, standing in the darkness. I had learned to feel it on the battlefields of my youth.

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"Why?" "Why?" "Why?"
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The sweat clung to my skin. The children's necks bent at impossible angles.

"Hmm... I don't know what you're after, but it'll take a lot to pull one over on

old Valeria here..... Hmm?!"

Suddenly, a skeletal hand burst from the soil. Just as I thought to use the chain to defend myself, countless tiny hands, like those of children, grabbed on to my feet.

"The undead?! Release me now—! Hwuh?!"

They were weak, and I easily shook them off. But then they suddenly grew stronger. Not only that, but the earth broke apart like the surface of boiling water, as many more hands came to join them.

"Wh...? What is this?!"

"Why, it's everyone who hates your guts."

"What?!"

At that moment, I heard a voice. It rooted me to the spot in fear, as if I were impaled on a thick black stake of death.

"The Fey Queen asked you to bring sacrifices," the voice went on. "To be toys for the fairies' despicable games. An offering from which they might grow in power and multiply."

"Th-that voice! Ggrgh!!"

I recognized it. It was one I'd heard only recently. But before I even had time to be surprised, hundreds upon hundreds of skeletal parts erupted out of the ground, clutching at me, pulling me, tearing and biting at my skin.

"Let me go!" I yelled. "You think a few undead is enough to...? Wha—?!"

I swung a fist at the summoned skeletons in an attempt to shatter them into pieces, but my hand passed straight through, as though there were nothing there.

"Wh-what are they? They're not just skeletons? Gggaggh!!"

"They hate. Hate this cruel world. Hate the cruel fairies and their cruel games. Hate you. And hate never dies. They've been here all this time, hiding amid the mana of the trees, determined to make you pay."

It hurt. It hurt. It hurt.

A fleshy sound reached my ears as my body tore apart.

Wh-what's happening? My skin shouldn't break so easily...!

A burning cold sensation, like frostbite, spread from the wounds across my whole body.

I knew, then, that I was being devoured.

Three figures appeared before me. The S-rank adventurers from before. "You!" I yelled at them. "What have you done to me?!"

The leader of the trio took a step forward and answered in a voice as cold as ice.

"Us? We haven't done anything in the slightest. We're not the ones who truly deserve you this time—they are. So we only lent them a hand."

""…""

His two companions remained as silent as the night.

"I asked them what they thought of you, and they said even death could not end their hate. So I gave them shape. A temporary form to embody their undying rage."

Then the man smiled. A cold, lifeless grin. His eyes were filled with disgust, like I was nothing more than a cockroach lying dead in the gutter.

"The power to strip the life and everything away from the man who wronged them, even though nothing remains of their former selves. These aren't undead. They're just bundles of raw hate that only possess a form so long as I say so."

"S-so they're wraiths? In that case, if I just channel mana into my fists, then...!"

Wraiths possessed a magic form, which meant they could only be harmed by magical attacks.

...Or so I thought. But no matter how many water-infused punches I threw, the only thing I felt was my hands passing through thin air, and a freezing pain that turned my blood to ice.

"Ggggh!! Wh-why isn't it working?!"

"I never said they were wraiths, either. These souls don't yearn for life—only death. Yours."

"Rrrrghh!! Enough games!!"

At this point, I began fearing for my life. The sensations of the battlefield, forgotten after my prolonged absence, came rushing back, along with the instincts that had helped me slip the grasp of death on so many an occasion. They caused me to see red, a red so deep, it eclipsed my pain.

Mana suffused my body, stimulating every one of my cells. This was the secret art of the beastfolk, devised to circumvent our kind's weak affinity for magic.

"Wildfoooorm!!"

It granted a beastfolk tremendous physical strength and unparalleled combat ability. It was a simple power, but it had saved my life many times, and there was no peril I could not weather with it at my side.

The Fey Queen's blessing shall see me through this!!

Berrybell had given me much in our deal. The guildmaster's seat, a close relationship with nobility, and this, the crowning achievement of the beastfolk race.

However...

"Oh, now you've done it."

The adventurer's mocking voice reached my ears, like that of a monster toying with its helpless prey.

And then, another one of my escape routes vanished without a trace.

"""GGGGGGGGGGG!!"""

"Gggghhh!! Wh-what is the meaning of this?!"

It was as if something had sucked out every last drop of the power building up inside me. The skeletal fiends emitted a cry of joy, of anger, of grief, all rolled into one.

"These guys are powered by hatred," the man explained. "The deeper their

vengeance, the stronger they become. What do you think is going to happen if you call upon an ability you traded their lives away to obtain?"

A wide grin accompanied his gleeful words.

"""Kee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!!"""

The skulls rattled as they laughed. They devoured me, their snow-white bones turning a dull liver-red, as though they were absorbing my very blood and flesh.

"Wh-what nonsense! T-tell me the truth! What did you do to me?! Wildform! Wildform! Wildfoorm!! Why isn't it working?!"

Power. I sacrificed so many lives for power. Yet in my hour of need, I could summon not a drop of it. It was as if those bones were sucking it out of me. I couldn't shake them off, no matter how hard I tried, and soon the skulls covered every centimeter of me, leaving only my head free. They nibbled and tore at my flesh, in some kind of deprayed torture.

"Let me go! Let me—! Gggrrhh!! F-fairies! What are you doing?! Save me! This is a violation of our contract!! I've always come to your aid in the past, haven't I?!"

The specter of death grew closer, despite my futile efforts to dispel it. As it approached, despair filled my mind, along with pain, fear, and confusion. But soon, even that would end.

A great gurgling filled the air as a giant skull, larger than my own body, rose from the earth. Its bone was stained dark and red, even murkier than the others, and insalubrious purple veins pulsated across its surface.

"N-no," I cried. "Stop! Wh-why are you doing this to me?"

That skull, that embodiment of death, opened its bony jaws wide.

"No, no, no, nooo!! Save me, somebody, save meee!!"

I had no alternative but to try bargaining with those who appeared to have orchestrated this foul trap.

"I gave you the rank you desired! What else do you want?! Is it the fairies' power?! I can help you make a deal, too! I'll do whatever I can, I promise! Just don't kill me!!"

"Welp, that's what he's offering," spoke the man. "What do you guys think?" He addressed his two companions.

"I think we have no cause to show mercy here," replied the girl.

"I agree. Everyone in this world can die, for all I care," replied the boy.

The man turned to me once more. "Sorry," he said. "Looks like it's just not in the cards." A callous smirk spread across his lips. "Besides," he went on. "It's not us you should be begging to, is it?"

"R-ridiculous. Y-you think this...this monster will hear my demands?!"

"Oh, so you do understand."

The skull emitted a low groan as it closed its jaws around me. The man's smile deepened.

"You understand what you've created. A monster that no apology can placate. In that case...let it be your end."

"Th-this isn't the end! It can't be! I am the guildmaster! Somebody, HELP MEEEEE—! *Gplff!!*"

The very last thing I heard was my own bones grinding to dust, my own flesh tearing apart, and laughter. Scores and scores of cackling voices, though their owners were nowhere to be seen.



After watching Valeria die, I turned and addressed the presence that had been watching us for some time now.

"Now that's dealt with," I said, "it's time to exterminate some pests."

"...Foolish mortal."

A fairy materialized in front of us. But it was by far the largest of its kind I'd ever seen. Were it not for her long white hair, sparkling in the moonlight, and the pair of long wings extending from her back, she would have appeared to anyone like a young girl of five or so. Beneath each of her eyes was a dark mole, and in her hands she held a crystal ball of swirling black and white.

"Hey there, Berrybell. Long time no see," I said.

"That's..." "...the Fey Queen?"

It was obvious, even to the untrained eye, that she was not human. She was from a different world—a cruel and barbaric one with different laws and morals.

When I'd fought her in my first life, I managed to tear off one of her wings, but she'd escaped in the confusion.

"I guess you don't remember me, though."

"No. I remember you, turncoat."

"Huh?" I said, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"There is no meaning," the Fey Queen replied. "Because you cannot stop it now. The time has come at last. At last, at last, at last, at last, at last..."

Berrybell spoke as if entranced, stroking the crystal ball in her hands.

"...What's up with you?" I asked.

"Hee-hee-hee. My task is finally coming to an end. That is a wonderful, wonderful thing."

"...Whatever. It doesn't change what I'm going to do to you. I guess I'll hear whatever it is you've got to say."

"I am no longer required," said Berrybell. "I can finally disappear from this world."

She raised the crystal, a royal treasure of some kind, as if offering it to the heavens above.

"Hey, wait, what are you—?"

But before I could react, the crystal shattered. Berrybell began disintegrating into motes of light that vanished on the air.

"What the ...? What are you doing?!"

"Oh, poor, foolish Hero. You know nothing. Fare thee well. Give my regards to the Lion Prince and the Handmaiden of Darkness."

A pure, genuine smile crossed Berrybell's lips. It was the very last part of her

to disappear.

"D-dear brother? What on earth was that?"

I just stared at the spot where the fairy had been.

"... Tch. Whatever. First things first, we have to focus on Leon."

There was much I didn't know about the Fey Queen. Like the reason Leon had saved her.

But that doesn't matter. It doesn't change what I have to do.

"You're next, Leon. Don't think you can wriggle your way out of this one."

The time had come at last.



Leon Gailed.

How old was I when I first questioned the meaning of that name?

I remember being told that it was customary to grant the name "Leon" to Golden Leonid beastfolk of the imperial family. Wanting to know more about this ancient tradition, I descended into the basement of the castle, trawling the libraries for ancient tomes in an attempt to shed light on the mystery. It became something of a hobby of mine.

The old tales spoke of many things. Of course, the stories rarely agreed on the details, but I enjoyed comparing them and piecing together the truth. It was nothing but fanciful thinking, dreaming of "what if." However, everything changed when I came across that book.

It had come from the library of a disgraced noble whose assets we had seized, and at first, its contents were encrypted. I took it upon myself to decipher the tome, and soon I learned it spoke of "the place where holy power rests."

Encouraged by early success, I decoded the rest of the book and learned that this location was in fact very close by.

I went there and claimed a part of that power for myself.

After that, I began taking what had only been a hobby far more seriously. I told my family I had learned of a traditional soul-searching pilgrimage

undertaken by princes of old and used it as a pretext to travel the world, searching for power.

I visited all the places spoken of in my books and investigated the ruins I found there. As I learned more and more about the history of our realm, I began catching glimpses of the horrifying truth that underpinned it all. In denial, I tried to disprove my theory, but everything I learned only lent it more credence. Along the way, I met Lilia, who taught me that this was not the first time it was happening, but that history had been repeating itself for eons.

This world was being drained of life. And all people across the land were being manipulated into killing one another, like pieces in a game.

Where there was a demon lord, there was always a hero. Time and time again these battles played out, bringing our world closer and closer to destruction.

People were dying. Offering themselves up to a goddess who only saw them as toys. It was wrong. This wasn't the way the world was supposed to be.

Lilia thought so, too, so we joined forces and set out to slay a god. For if not us, then who? Who but those who knew the threat could save our world from destruction?

After completing my negotiations with the aristocrats, I decided to make one last stop at the guild before departing for the battlefield, reinforcements in tow. Thanks to the efforts of those new S-rank adventurers, the tide of battle had shifted heavily in our favor, but for some reason, the guild was in an uproar when I arrived. I stopped the vice-guildmaster as he ran by, and I asked him what was the matter, and his answer shocked me.

"Valeria, missing, you say?"

"Y-yes, your Highness. He hasn't been seen for five days now."

I frowned and scratched my chin. The vice-guildmaster was sweating profusely, his nerves perhaps exacerbated by the presence of a royal figure.

"We've checked everywhere he might be, but our investigations have turned up nothing. I beg your pardon, Your Highness."

"And he hasn't left us a note or sent a message?"

"No, sir. He was last seen heading to the slums, Your Highness."

"And has there been any disturbance there?"

"We looked into that, sir, but we didn't learn of anything out of the ordinary. However, 'ordinary' can mean many things around those parts. Anything could happen, and it wouldn't so much as make gossip."

"But at the very least, you would have heard if a building was destroyed or the like."

Valeria wouldn't go down without a fight. I think this rules out a kidnapping or murder plot. Then who could make him disappear without a trace? The fey?

Or perhaps Valeria had simply gone missing of his own accord. Either way, it was likely the fairies were involved. Perhaps one of their demands had come through once more.

The slums are where Lilia built that tunnel to the fairy forest. Everything adds up...

"Has there been any unusual activity in the forest lately?"

"The forest? You mean the fairy forest?"

"Yes."

The vice-guildmaster was confused by my sudden and seemingly unprompted query, but he nonetheless answered me.

"Only stories told at the bar of drunken lumberjacks heading too deep into the forest and encountering strange monsters," he replied.

"I see."

Chances were high that something strange had happened in the forest. Stranger than usual, that was.

Did Valeria incur the queen's wrath somehow?

I thought back on my memories of Queen Berrybell, a creature who took the form of a human girl, despite her brazen contempt for mankind. On a bad day, she could snuff out a life as uncaringly as picking fruit. Even if Valeria did have some kind of deal with her, that was no reason to think she wouldn't turn on

him, too.

Fairies, like true vampires, were creatures that the Goddess had implanted in this world. They could not be trusted.

" "

Things look bad. But I still can't believe Berrybell would turn on her supplier so easily. I must go there and make sense of the situation myself.

In all honesty, it wasn't Valeria's welfare that concerned me. The only thing that man cared about was himself. Even if he was obligated to supply the fey with tributes, he lacked any qualms in handing over innocent children, and he greedily enjoyed the power and status he received in return.

I wasn't worried about my own safety, either. Rather, if some terrible fate had befallen the fey folk, it needed to be investigated as soon as possible.

We still lack a means to combat the ley-line energy, as well as to deprive the fey of their divine power.

Fairies were servants of the Goddess who'd taken over this world. They were tasked with managing the ley-line energy in an effort to increase the Goddess's control. Since they were formed of the mana of the Goddess herself, they were the only beings capable of interacting with ley-line energy.

Were the fey to disappear, there would be no one left to control it, and the ley-line energy would run rampant across the land. This would cause monsters to become more numerous and more powerful and produce strange weather anomalies.

If that were to happen, chaos would inevitably follow. Thus, we could not eliminate the fey, despite how they threatened the people of this land, and we had little choice but to acquiesce to their demands.

Plus, the fairies were one of the few leads we had to the Goddess. They could communicate with her, and they always knew where she was.

War has broken out once more, precisely as the ancient texts described. A conflict between the demon lord and her dark armies, and the forces of mankind, led by the kingdom's hero.

There was precious little time remaining in which to act.

The kingdom claims to have chosen a divine champion through a tournament, but that is most likely a ruse. If the ancient texts are to be believed, the hero must be summoned from another world in order to receive the holy power.

And yet I knew next to nothing about this supposed hero. They had no history, and they wore silver plate armor that completely concealed their identity; people weren't even sure if they were a man or a woman. The hero also stayed in the princess's care at all times, so it was difficult for either me or my spies to get anywhere near them.

As such, the fey were my only connection to the Goddess. I could not let anything happen to them. Someday, I would take up arms against them, but not today.

"Thank you for your time, vice-guildmaster. Excuse me."

I left the guild and ordered a subordinate to take the reinforcements to the front lines, while I departed for the fairy forest alone.



"There's no doubt..."

As I pressed on through the trees, I got the distinct impression that something was different.

"...something happened here."

I had been here before. There was a spring nearby where it was possible to meet Queen Berrybell directly, and at first glance, the forest seemed as I remembered it. The sandy soil had long since given way to proper earth, though the soil was rich in mana and caused the trees to grow in bizarre and miraculous ways. That aside, the forest appeared normal, but my beastfolk instincts were sensitive to changes the senses could not readily detect.

I haven't run into a single fairy since I came here. What's going on?

Ordinary people could not detect a fairy who did not wish to be detected. To sense them required either holy power or a special skill.

I had acquired a fragment of holy power when I was young, and if I used that,

I would be able to see the fey, but even if I did not, I could still locate them using my ability, Infallible Nose.

But right now, I could detect no trace of fairies on the air, and the risk of calling upon my holy power was too great.

"I can smell something...but it's not a fairy. It's similar...yet different."

It had the same sweet scent of flowers that fairies possessed. But if the smell of the fey was a poisonous flower, then this scent was that of a perfume made of those flowers.

Whatever it portended, it could not be good.

It is unfortunate that Lilia, with her boundless knowledge of magic, has departed alongside the demon lord. The timing could not be worse.

It was clear something about the forest had changed, but my nose alone would not be enough to ascertain the cause. On the other hand, if I were to unleash my holy power, I would not be able to maintain that state for very long.

I lamented the absence of my lover. She possessed not only knowledge of magical theory far superior to mine but an intrinsic ability called "Magic Eye," that would be invaluable in this endeavor.

Plus, I have been feeling rather unwell these past few days. Perhaps I should return to town?

Without letting down my guard, I carefully pondered my options.

Recently, I had been struggling with a rather bizarre affliction. Some days I felt normal, while on others a great weakness overcame me. Luckily, this disorder never seemed to strike when I was in dangerous situations, such as in battle or within a dungeon. On the contrary, I had felt at my worst in the safety and security of the aristocrats' private mansions, surrounded by their wealth and treasures.

I had never experienced anything like this before, and while there were times the affliction itself did not bother me, its unknown nature was a constant source of torment.

"...No, I cannot give up now. I have come so far, and it would be a shame to

return empty-handed."

Whatever ailed me was troubling me less now that I was far from town. Perhaps I was being overly cautious. I shook my head and pressed on, ever vigilant.

Just as the evening sky began to turn a deep midnight blue, I reached the spring at the center of the forest, where water rich in mana bubbled up from the earth.

At the spring's center was a tree known as a Fairy Tree, whose leaves were all different colors, including red, blue, green, yellow, white, and black.

This was the Fairy Village. I had first come here six years ago, after inferring its existence from ancient texts, to see if the fey really were real, and if they truly held the power of the divine.

That was when I had first met Queen Berrybell. She'd sat on a throne woven of magical flowers, floating before the Fairy Tree, a dreamlike smile upon her lips. Back then, I'd caught on to the fairies' malicious nature at once.

Just as now, I finally realized the evil of the person sitting here in her place.

"Hey there, Leon. Lovely night for a stroll, isn't it?"

"...I see. It appears I have been outwitted."

A man sat on the Fey Queen's throne—the very same adventurer who had brought the guild a Dragon Eye and earned himself the title of S-rank adventurer.

His two party members stood next to him, one on either side, and behind him were a row of despicable creatures, like an army of dark knights awaiting the word of their king. The air crackled with tension, and it was clear that what happened next was not going to be pleasant conversation.

I brandished my trusty weapons, a pair of knuckledusters crafted from an adamantite-mythril alloy. The man, whose name I recalled as Kaito, stood up and threw his arms wide, grinning a mad, intoxicated grin.

"Let's get started, Leon! This is the end of the line for you, I'm afraid. A nightmarish hell from which there's no escape!!"

With that, the evil king let out a mocking laugh, filled with nothing but contempt for the world and everything in it.

"I presume these monsters answer to you?" I asked. "Tell me, who are you, really? What did you do to the fairies of this forest?"

"What do you think?"

As I feared, the man had no intention of answering any of my questions. Using some kind of skill to tread across thin air, he moved over the surface of the spring toward me.



"If you will not give me the answers I seek," I said, "then I'll have to beat them out of you."

"Heh. Try me. First comes step one: showing you just how worthless your precious power really is."

All of a sudden, the man came screaming toward me, kicking up dirt and rubble in his wake.

"Are your two compatriots not going to assist you?" I asked.

"That's right. It's just you and me for now, Leon. They'll get their turn!!"

Just like at the training ground, a pair of swords materialized in the man's hands, presumably the result of some intrinsic ability. Metal and metal clashed.

"Grrr. You're faster than you were at the arena."

"Ah-ha-ha! Of course I am! Do you know how much effort I had to put into holding back, waiting and waiting and waiting for this moment?!"

The speed of the man's blades matched that of my fists. It was clear he had been concealing his strength at the trial, but something else worried me even more. I could sense divine power coming from within him.

Divine power was the only thing that could harm or affect the Goddess. If this man had access to it, then I wanted him to join our cause or, at the very least, lend us his aid.

But just look at that gaze of his... He has the eyes of someone who has endured a life of being despised.

"Where did you get that power?!" I demanded. "And what do you hope to gain by attacking me?"

"I don't have to tell you a goddamn thing! All you need to know is that I hate your guts! I hate you so much, I can't function anymore!"

To put some distance between us, I leveled a fist at Kaito. The man blocked my blow with his swords and went skidding a few paces back.

"So...is there no way for us to reach common ground?" I asked.

"Hah. Damn right there isn't."

"I see. Then it must be vengeance that drives you. I don't recall what I did to earn your ire, but I'm afraid I cannot die while my task remains undone. I'll beat the truth out of you: the source of your divine power, the fate of the fey folk, and the nature of that beast standing behind you that smells like the fairies do."

Mana surged within me, and my soul cried out for battle. I had activated the divine power I'd discovered in my youth—the power to go beyond the pinnacle of beastfolk evolution.

"You're looking good, Leon," the man said. "Guess a bit of greenery and fresh air really does do wonders, huh?"

The mana swirled like a vortex around me.

"I can't take any chances against a guy with the power of the divine like you," he went on. "Sorry to get rough, but I'm going to have to smash your arms and legs into dust!"

The look in his eyes was unwavering—it told me that this was a man who believed in his cause as much as I did in mine.

"Divine Wildfoooooooorm!!"

The mana filled me in an instant, stimulating, revitalizing, and rebirthing each and every cell in my body. My teeth grew long, my claws sharp, my mane wild and bristling with magic. Vast quantities of mana spilled out of me, crackling like lightning in the air around me. My five senses grew keener, and my intuition sharpened into a sixth.

This transformation drew out far greater potential than what a simple Wildform was capable of. According to Lilia, it worked by replacing part of the body with a magical substitute, allowing the user to absorb mana from the air and convert it into power. This granted a nigh-limitless supply of magical energy upon which to draw.

Going by intuition alone, I surmised that Divine Wildform granted a fivefold increase in power over the conventional Wildform. Unfortunately, while in this state, I was unable to check my status board to confirm it, perhaps because the divine powers conflicted with one another.

"Hmm. Nobody's ever reacted like that before."

Many creatures had fled immediately in primal fear and awe upon seeing me take this form, but the man before me still had a twisted smile on his face. In fact, his grin seemed even broader than before. It was a molten smile, like concentrated sugar.

"I can't help it," Kaito said. "I'm just so happy to see you go all out."

"You had better put up a decent fight," I replied. "Otherwise, my power will go to waste."

Kaito's eyes were steeped in blackest night. I had hoped this display would cause him to realize the difference in our strength and stand down, but evidently, he wasn't going to be intimidated.

However, it was all the same in the end. If there was any way Kaito could have won this battle, it was by getting to me before I activated this technique. Now that I had, the fight was as good as over. The mana-rich air of this forest made me feel more powerful than ever before.

"Let us begin!!" I yelled.

"Over Limit: Full Over."

Just then, the man was enveloped in a green glow, and he vanished. The very next sound was that of his blades against my knuckledusters. Had I not already activated my ultimate technique, I would not have been able to react to his unprecedented speed. The force of his strike, too, was unimaginable—it was as though he was putting every bit of strength in his body behind it. But that didn't mean that Kaito's onslaught ended there.

"Flash Change."

The next thing I knew, he was subjecting me to a flurry of blows from seemingly everywhere at once. Up, down, left, right, in front of me, behind me. A rising slash, a falling cut. A sweeping graze, a twisting lunge. The blades closed in from every angle, devouring me.

But that wasn't all.

"Y-you! What sorcery is this?!"

Each time Kaito landed a blow, the weapon in his hands changed. First, it was

a single-edged longsword, then a broad-bladed greatsword, then a knife of blackened steel, then a thick, curved blade, and then a sword made of crystal. Then a sword with many blades, then one as long as a spear, and then one worn on the fists, like my own weapon...

Every sword was of a different form, length, and weight. Different blades and different techniques.

If I readied myself to block a forward grip, he suddenly switched to a reverse one. If I planned to avoid a long blade, it was instantly replaced with a short one. Each and every slash was made with perfect precision and perfect knowledge of the blade's specific strengths and weaknesses. How many bodies had the man left in his wake to achieve such a comprehensive understanding of all these disparate weapons? I couldn't even begin to imagine.

But that was far from the most astonishing thing about him. For there was one sound beneath the unending cacophony of blades that disturbed me even more.

It was the sound of Kaito's tearing flesh. The sound of his crumbling bones.

"You're insane."

I could readily imagine what manner of technique he was using. The impact behind each strike was enough to shatter Kaito's body, but each new attack felt just as strong as the last. Somehow, he was able to surpass the limitations of his own body—which had been put in place to prevent this kind of damage—to draw upon his full potential. Thus, each strike damaged him, but by constantly healing those wounds with magic, he was able to keep fighting.

I understand the logic, but is any human truly capable of such a feat?!

"Oh no!"

The initial clash had caught me off guard, and due to the incredible speed and force of Kaito's follow-up attacks, I was unable to recover. It was only a matter of time before I would make a misstep and offer him a fatal opening.

The punishment for my mistake was Kaito striking me hard in the abdomen with a spiked metal rod. My body made a noise I did not know it could make, and I was flung backward nearly twenty meters, before I collided with a tree

and snapped the trunk in two.

"Told you the fresh air does wonders," he said. "To me, as well as to you!"

I gave Kaito no response. His mocking voice deserved none. I spat out the blood accumulating in my mouth and rose to my feet.

"No matter," I said. "These wounds will quickly heal."

That was no bluff. Divine Wildform dramatically boosted not only my physical strength but also the speed of my recovery. Cuts and scrapes that I sustained in this state disappeared in mere seconds.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "I'm not expecting you to go down that easily."

All the wounds that Kaito had sacrificed his body to inflict amounted to nothing more than a momentary discomfort for me. But even this piece of information wasn't enough to wipe the smug smirk from his face.

"This isn't the end," he said. "We've only just begun! I want you to show me what you're capable of! Squeeze out every last drop of strength! Present your greatest self! Otherwise, there's no point to any of this!"

None of my abilities seemed to faze him.

"Oh, Leon! Show me the power you've been seeking all your life! Watch me tread it into the dirt before you die a miserable death!"

Kaito's voice came as though bubbling up through thick lava. The green aura of healing magic that cloaked his form looked like a cloud of toxic mist. Pain meant nothing to him; his body was just another tool in his arsenal. The thing standing before me may have looked human, but the similarities ended there.

He was a monster in human skin.

But that meant nothing to me.

"Silence, upstart. I have a duty to uphold. A mission I must complete at any cost."

He was a monster, born to wreak calamity. But I was long since prepared to fight monsters.

"We fight to protect the world. The future! If you would stand in our way,

then you must fall, too."

Our mission was to slay the one who sat upon the throne of the world. No mortal threat could shake me from that path.

"I know not what gave birth to your hate, but your mission cannot possibly weigh heavier upon your back than mine! Thousands of lives rest on my actions! Can you say the same of your misguided crusade?!"

We had sworn to slay God. If we failed, our world would perish. There were no higher stakes than these. However...

"Ah, there they are."

I should have known. There was no reasoning with monsters.

"There they are—the eyes that killed me," Kaito said. "The world? The future? Don't make me laugh. First, you've got to pay for what you did."

This man was so steeped in hatred that it suffused his very being, yet still he reached out for more, shrouding himself in darkness. It formed a shell around him, a barrier of black steel forged in the fires of emotion, hot enough to melt anything it touched.

"Anyway, that's enough talk for now, I think," he said. "You've got a long night ahead of you, but I don't. Let's get on with it."

The last orange light had left the sky, and the cold glow of the moon replaced the setting sun. That, along with the faint glow of the magical water, bathed the two of us in light...

...making his darkness all the more striking.

In his right hand, a sword with a wave-edged blade burst into black flame.

In his left, a sword constructed of dozens of crescent-moon blades crackled with lightning.

"Very well. You shall not take me by surprise a second time," I said. "I will call upon the full extent of my power to utterly obliterate you."

I prepared to make another assault, accelerating the flow of mana around my body. Then I struck my fists together, and purple spirals formed around them.

"Heavy Impact: Lion Strike!!"

Usually, Wildform made it impossible to cast magic, but Divine Wildform possessed no such limitation. It allowed the user to make use of mana present in the air, avoiding the steep attenuation associated with beastfolk mana.

I swung a weighty fist, and a lion's head of mana appeared around it as it flew. However, Kaito unleashed a technique of his own at precisely the same time.

"Unison Slice: Black and Blue; Fire and Spark!!"

Dark flames wrapped in blue lightning tore through the air toward me. Our techniques collided at the midpoint between us, producing a momentary silence followed by a mighty roar that shook us both to our cores and coated the battlefield in dust.

The next sound to reach my ears was the clang of our weapons, as my full-power haymaker collided with the equal and opposite force of Kaito's blade.

"Haaaaaaaaagh!!"

"Graaaaaaaagh!!"

At the base of a newly formed crater, a battle of life and death began.



Oh, he was strong.

"Raaaaaagh!!"

"Hmph!"

I switched swords twice during a single swing, altering the trajectory, but Leon still barely managed to catch it on his fist.

"G...grh..."

His hands were cloaked in gravity magic, so they felt several times more solid than usual. My healed bones shattered upon impact once more. It hurt, but I was used to the pain by now, and the more I focused on the battle, the more it faded into the background.

"Wind Spikes! Ice Claws!!"

With the Briar's Blade of Wind in one hand and the Leopard's Dagger of Snow in the other, I caught Leon between multiple thorns of wind approaching from the rear and a formation of ice erupting from the ground. However...

"Out of my way!"

Leon scattered the spikes by blasting a gravitational wave from his back, while cloaking his legs in the same magic as his fists to shatter the ice.

We fought on and on, exchanging a number of similar techniques. The force of our struggle laid waste to the forest, uprooting and splintering any trees in the vicinity. Our power was almost equal, and Leon soon began taking damage, as evidenced by the blood that stained his tattered equipment.

Naturally, I was not doing much better myself. I had obtained the Peach's Blade of Revival, which specialized in healing and was much more potent than the Nephrite Blade of Verdure, but it drained a lot of mana, and my clothes and equipment were both heavily damaged. Plus, even healing my wounds did nothing to restore my stamina.

Leon and I had both taken substantial hits, but since we were constantly healing ourselves, there were no wounds to be seen on either of us. Nonetheless, the battle was nearing its conclusion.

"Heavy Impact: Flurry of Fangs!"

"Krk! Ghh! Grhhh!!"

My arsenal of tricks had managed to throw Prince Leon for a loop at first, but it wasn't long before his hardened battle senses kicked in and he gradually grew wise to my attacks. He was learning the flow of the battle, and some of my strikes started to falter. That left Leon free to throw faster and more devastating counters, tipping the scales steadily in his favor.

But I can't lose. Not yet. Not when there's so much more to do!

I had to be stronger, if this was to be my greatest battle so far. I needed Leon to go all out—to draw upon more of his power than he had ever needed in his life. That was precisely why I had brought him to the fairy forest. Seeing as he was turning into a fey himself, this was where his power would be greatest. Plus, this spring was brimming with mana, perfect for fueling his Divine

Wildform ability.

"Diiiiiiiie!!"

Just for this moment, I left my vengeance and everything else behind. Just for this moment, I abandoned my despair, my anger, my hate, and my pain. I thought only of how I was going to deliver the killing blow, despite the knowledge that doing so would cut my vengeance short.

One cut, two cuts, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

Fire, wind, water, ice, thunder.

Stronger, faster, again and again and again.

My swords were my body, and the entirety of my soul was housed within their blades.

"Grh... Nrgh... Not yet...!!"

A spray of blood flew as I redoubled my assault. Leon no doubt knew as well as I that the battle was steadily shifting in his favor. Hence, he remained calm, bearing the weight of my strikes, waiting for his chance.

"Haagh!"

Taking careful aim, Leon launched a single powerful blow that knocked my sword back, throwing me off-balance.

"C-crap!"

"You're wide open!"

Seizing upon the opening, Leon sent his fist toward me. A mighty punch that could end the battle in an instant. I stepped forward without even thinking about it. Why? Because this was the moment I had been waiting for. Leon had eagerly capitalized on the gap in my defenses to try to end the battle, but once he saw my reaction, he realized that it had been my plan all along.

Would his fist reach me first, or would my sword reach him?

I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you. Come on!!

One second slowed down to an eternity as our weapons crossed. And then...

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"Diiiiiiieee!!"
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"Guh...!"

...a spray of blood burst forth...from Leon's arm.

He'd managed to bring his left arm out of the path of my blade just in time, but my sword severed his right arm completely.

But that alone wasn't enough to win me the match.

"This isn't over!"

Baring his teeth and grimacing, Leon summoned his divine power, regenerating the muscle and sinew I had cut clean through. His arm reknit itself together before the detached limb even had time to fall to the ground. And because my attack had left me off-balance, Leon delivered a deadly punch straight at my rib cage. It was all I could do but to interpose my arms to protect my vitals. As the blow landed, I heard the same sickening crack I had heard so many times already.

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"G...gaagh!!"
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My face paled with shock. For about two and a half seconds, I completely lost consciousness.

"Dear brother!" "Kaito!!"

My two compatriots screamed my name from the sidelines, where I had instructed them to stand.

You don't need to sound so worried... I know!

Their voices drew me back awake, just in time to see Leon standing tall before me.

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"...Tch."
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I had taken as direct a hit as I could without it killing me, and Leon's divine power had infiltrated my body, interfering with my recovery magic. It would take another few minutes before I was up and moving around again.

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"I win," said Leon.
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[&]quot;Hah. I knew this was coming, but it still hurts like a bitch..."

I had regained almost all the lost power of my previous life. But if that was enough to beat Leon, one-on-one, steered and cultivated to the absolute height of his power, and provided with the most favorable conditions possible...

...then there would have been no point in any of this.

"Well done, Leon. You won this one, fair and square."

"... What are you planning, miscreant?"

Leon immediately realized there was a quality to my voice not in keeping with my predicament. He raised a single eyebrow.

But it was already too late.

"Ha-ha-ha! Oh, can't you savor the moment a little longer?! You've won! Your training paid off! You summoned a power even greater than mine! Even greater than the hero at the height of his strength!"

"The hero? ... What do you mean?"

He was too slow on the uptake.

"Come, now, Leon. You've proved your might and won the battle. Now, it's time to pay the price! Mai! Yuuto!!"

"Grr! Still intent on fighting me, are you?"

Without taking his eyes off me, Leon shifted his attention to my two allies.

"... Enemies of my brother must die." "Finally, we get to do something."

Before Leon could process what they were doing, Mai unleashed a poison slash, and Yuuto unleashed a monstrous claw...right at the Fairy Tree.

The very tree from which Leon drew the mana to fuel his Divine Wildform, now that he had been almost entirely transmorphed into a fairy himself.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaagh?!"

He emitted a scream unlike any I'd ever heard him make.

"Ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!! It's over, Leon. You gave everything you had to win this battle, and now it's time to settle the debt! You became the strongest being on this earth, and yet Mai and Yuuto are going to put you in the

ground without laying a finger on you!!"

"Curse you... What have you done...?"

Leon fell to his knees, clutching his breast as though he couldn't breathe. He tried to launch a gravity wave at Yuuto and Mai, but it rapidly dispersed after traveling only a few centimeters.

"Tell me! What did you do to me?!"

"I used the Tempter's Blade of Polymorphism," I replied.

"The what?! Argggggh!!"

I slowly rose to my feet. My whole body was crying out in pain, but it no longer mattered.

"You don't know what I mean, do you? But don't worry. In a few seconds, you'll remember it all."

I approached the kneeling prince and took out the Eight-Eyed Sword of Clarity. Then I stabbed the blade into his shoulder.

"Argh! Ggrh! Graaahhh!!"

Leon's pain doubled, and he clutched his head in agony.

"The...the hero? Where am I? Who am I? Grrh! What's going on?!"

"That's right, Leon. It's me, the hero you killed. I've brought you here, to this world, so we can have a little fun."

His lips twisted as new memories filled his head. Memories he didn't remember but that he nonetheless recognized as his own.

"Kaito... Oh, Kaito, Kaito, Kaito. You'll pay for this!!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Welcome back, Leon!! Oh, I never knew us meeting again could feel so damn good!!"

"What is the meaning of this, Kaito?! How are you alive? I watched you die! We all—! Gaaaaaaaghhh!!"

Mai and Yuuto attacked the Fairy Tree once more. As they did, the monsters surrounding us in the clearing let out howls and roars of excitement.

"...I see... The Tempter's Blade. That explains why I felt weak in places bereft of mana... It was— Gggrhhh!!"

Mai's poisoned *naginata* caused the Fairy Tree to rot and splinter. Meanwhile, Yuuto took the form of a many-headed monster and chewed its multicolored leaves and branches into dust.

"That's right," I said. "And this tree is the source of the fairies' power. If it's damaged, then it restores that energy by taking it from any fey nearby. If you'd known about it in advance, maybe you could have done something to disguise your race, but thanks to your Divine Wildform, you look just like a fairy now, cloaked in their mana that you sucked up!"

It would be like having a thick syringe plunged into your skin and all the blood in your body drained out. I couldn't imagine how painful that would be.

"How does it feel, Leon? You could have snapped both of their necks, but the only thing you can do is crawl on the ground like a maggot."

I roused my aching body to gaze upon Leon's suffering.

"It hurts, doesn't it? To be weak and powerless."

My mouth tasted of blood, but there had to be crystals of pure joy mixed in, given the high I was feeling.

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"Suffer."

"Gaaaaagh!!"

"Suffer."

"Grkh... Grrrhhh!!"

"Suffer."

"Ggh... Ggrh!! Rhh!!"
```

Yuuto and Mai chipped away at the Fairy Tree, and with their every strike, Leon let out another agonized scream. A howl I'd waited so long to hear. Oh, how good it felt.

"Yes, writhe in pain, like a pixie with torn-off wings."

By the time the tree was little more than a single twig, I'd recovered enough

to stand and walk. And although I could not fight, I was more than capable of delivering the coup de grâce.

"Stop...," Leon pleaded. "If you destroy the tree, the fey will lose their power. Many human lives will be at risk..."

"So what? You're saying I should die instead?"

"No, I'm not. But even you must see this just isn't right!"

"Hah! That's even less convincing! Since when have you cared about right and wrong?! You turned your back on it! You made an innocent man suffer so you could achieve your aims!"

I leaned in closer, as if to tighten the noose around his neck.

"I'm just doing the same thing you did."

With one final crack, the Fairy Tree snapped in half.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAGHHHH!!"

Leon emitted a noise as piercing and loud as a backfiring speaker.

"Ghh... Gah... Rgh..."

He lay in a pool of his own sweat, centimeters away from death.

What a beautiful sight it was.

But I wasn't ready to end it yet. Not by a long shot.

I wasn't nearly done defiling the power he'd lusted after.

"All right, Leon. It's time for scene two. This time, you'll—"

But just as I turned to walk over to him, a familiar voice reached my ear.

"I'm afraid I cannot let you harm him. That man is one of my few allies."

Mai and Yuuto both reeled with shock, too.

"What?! Why is she here?!"

"Wasn't she supposed to have left town?!"

"Liliaaa!" I cried. "What are you doing here?!"

Standing there, dressed shoulder to toe in a deep blue robe, with midnight

hair that seemed to blend into the night itself, was someone who by all accounts should have been nowhere nearby.

Lilia Lu Harleston had returned.



I am Lilia Lu Harleston, born illegitimately to the lord of the land of the demons via one of his harem. From a very young age, I have been able to see what others cannot.

It appeared to me as a sort of particle, gathering and diffusing in all different shapes and colors. This particle was found in the air, in plants, in insects, in animals, and also in people.

Whenever I saw it, it reminded me of the view outside the window of my childhood home. Of the memento left by successive generations of demon lords, which continued to watch over our race today.

The Demonlight Tree.

Its bark was so dark as to absorb all light, and it was covered in a glowing red that pulsed, as if alive. The tree was tall enough to pierce the skies themselves and was completely barren, without a single leaf on any of its branches. Despite its deathly appearance, however, it brimmed with monstrous life. That much was obvious to anyone who laid eyes upon it.

From the air and the earth, the Demonlight Tree sucked up those multicolored particles only I could see, converting them into white dust that it sprayed up into the sky.

At the time, I didn't know what I was seeing, but I knew it was wrong. Whatever the Demonlight Tree was doing, it couldn't be good for this world. The white spray it dispersed seemed to me like it was screaming.

I could see many such trees via my window in the demon lord's castle. Because of that, I came to dislike the realm in which I was born.

I was told countless times that what I could see was mana, and that it was due to my intrinsic ability, Magic Eye. But even back then, I knew that wasn't right.

No... That's not it.

But I couldn't argue the point. Because I could see mana. And if what I was seeing wasn't mana, then what else could it be?

My illegitimacy was only discovered after I had already been named. By then, it was too late to strip me of my royal surname. As such, I was sent to be the errand girl of an old wizard in the castle and given a magic item that concealed my status board. From then on, I was known as just plain old Lilia.

My magical aptitudes were average for a girl of my race, but the ability to see mana gave me an edge, and people considered me a promising mage.

Around the time I completed my education, the demon lord and his wife suddenly passed away.

Just prior to their deaths, the lord had summoned me to discuss the possibility of adopting me into the royal family and restoring my surname, so that I would no longer have to lie about my origins.

By that time, I had already begun to suspect my true lineage by listening to what people said about me when they thought my back was turned. At one point, I'd grown so suspicious that I removed the magic item and observed my own status board, thus learning my true name.

So I knew what the lord was offering, but nonetheless, I opted to stay as Lilia. I wished for nothing more than to stay away from the politics of rule and live a normal life.

But during that meeting, I noticed something strange. This substance only I could see that was present in every living thing—especially in those of power and greatness—right up until the moment of death, was completely absent in the dying lord.

Our lord was said to rank among the most powerful in all of history. I had expected to see his body replete with the particles.

Just like the Demonlight Tree.

Later that day, I spoke to my foster parent, the old wizard, about the choice I had made. He gave a troubled frown, then smiled and said to me, "Thank you." When I told him what I had seen, the old wizard looked sad, and muttered, "He's never been good with words, you see."

Soon after that, the old lord passed, and his wife quickly followed. The next in line to the throne was his eldest son, a man hailed as a worthy successor. When I saw him at the coronation, I wasn't sure he was the same man I knew. Such was the density of the mysterious particles I could see within him. I thought back to what the old wizard had said. Perhaps the old lord had bequeathed this power to his son?

"Lilia?"

Afterward, I began waiting on Leticia, now a young girl. Those years spent watching over her growth and aiding the old wizard in his experiments were among the calmest of my life.

But at a certain point, the old wizard began acting strange. He would lock himself in his laboratory, slaving away at his experiments for days on end. Eventually, he even left the city and went to live at the base of the Demonlight Tree. His eyes became sunken pits, his cheekbones grew gaunt, and his wrinkles became more numerous than ever before. I worried for his health, but there was nothing I could do. He wouldn't even accept my offers to assist in his research anymore. All I could do was watch as the old wizard aged rapidly beyond his years, before he was eventually killed by a magical accident during one of his experiments.

I had just gone to check up on him when I heard the explosion, but by the time I arrived, he was beyond salvation. His mouth hung half-open in death, his final words forever unspoken.

I took some time away from work and began going through the old mage's research. It was there I learned what my ability was really showing me.



The old wizard had been researching the structure of mana and of the arcstone, the special demon heart that only the demon lord possessed. His studies touched on the mechanism by which mana could be converted into fire, water, earth, and wind through the use of spells. Why dense concentrations of mana caused monsters to spontaneously spring into being. By what means mana affected the body in the case of support spells and hexes.

The old wizard described mana as a high-energy particle whose properties

could be changed at will. Spells were operations capable of breaking that particle down into pure energy and reconstructing it into a new form. This conclusion was based not only on his experiments but on interrogating me about the things my ability allowed me to see. The old wizard believed mana particles underpinned all creation and named the resulting energy "worldforce."

This energy was what powered change. Those with greater concentrations of worldforce had higher levels or more abilities than others. The theory went that those who absorbed more worldforce in their travels used it to fuel greater levels of strength, and that was what we referred to as "experience points."

This theory was consistent with how I had seen the world since birth. I was quickly convinced of its veracity.

"That all makes sense, but..."

I closed the old wizard's tome of magical research, which had been disguised as a vegetation field guide, and placed it back on the shelf. Then I picked up another book, similarly obfuscated, that detailed his investigations into the arcstone.

Among successive generations of demon lords were those who possessed an arcstone, whom history remembered as the most powerful of our kind. Whenever such a demon lord appeared, the humans would invariably receive a vision from their goddess, leading them to summon a hero from another world, replete with divine power.

The hero and demon lord would then battle. If the hero was defeated, the demon lord would transform into a Demonlight Tree. This transformation took a few years and always occurred after the hero died, whether the demon lord was directly involved in their death or not.

In that time, the demon lord would return here, to the home of demonkind, to plant their roots and take their final breath. The resulting Demonlight Tree would continue to produce black leaves and crimson fruit, absorbing mana from the depths of the earth and providing strength to demonkind.

That, on the surface, was the purpose of the Demonlight Tree. However, these experiments revealed that most of the energy absorbed this way was

converted into worldforce and sent somewhere else. Even after the tree grew barren and ceased producing leaves and fruits, this second function never ceased.

This seemed to imply that the Demonlight Tree was sending power to some enemy of mankind's Goddess, perhaps even some hypothetical God of demonkind. And if that was the case, then the roles of hero and demon lord—and even the very animosity between demonkind and humanity in the first place—were nothing but fabrications in a proxy war on a divine scale.

But that wasn't even the most startling revelation.

If the demon lord won, then the Demonlight Tree would send the Earth's power to this supposed God of demonkind.

On the other hand, if the hero won, then they would return to their world, replete with the worldforce they'd accumulated over the course of their adventure. In other words, the amount of energy in this world decreased either way. Eventually, if this went on, the world would be completely drained of worldforce, transforming into a barren land home to no life whatsoever.

Such was the chilling end my foster father's research notes foretold. He sought some way to reach the gods, to take that power back, but his experiments grew in scale until they killed him. And so I decided to search for such a means myself.

If our gods were not going to protect us, then I would have to assume that duty in their place.

So I inherited my father's work. I encouraged Ardelius in his crusade against mankind. I provoked the evil dragon and even killed Leticia's brother to obtain the arcstone for myself.

But thanks to Ardelius's schemes, Leticia ended up with the arcstone instead. The arcstone and the hero's power are both divine in nature. Consequently, they should both be capable of harming the Goddess.

I had come across a staunch ally in the form of Leon Gailed, but even together, we had not perfected a means of reaching the gods. I'd even gone so far as to inform Leticia herself of the crisis this world faced. However, I did not

tell her that the true object of her vengeance was none other than me.

Nor did she know that I had taken her brother's demon heart for myself.

And now...

The Holy Crystal of the Lunarian See. It was very likely that this artifact also possessed the power of the divine.

I may have further use for you yet, Ardelius.

I replaced the second tome on the bookshelf of my inn room. As I sat down at the desk, my lips twisted into a smile.

Lilia was after Ardelius, believing him to be the one who killed her brother. I would make use of the chaos to steal the Holy Crystal.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door.

"Oh? Those two are back earlier than I expected."

Leticia and Nonorick were both quite insistent that eating at every restaurant in town was the done thing upon arriving in a new city, so I hadn't expected them to return for some time.

"Hmm?" I said, upon opening the door. "There's no one here. And what's this, a note?"

I picked it up, and when I read it, I gasped.

"The fairies are about to be wiped out. If you wish to save them, then come to the forest."

This was no empty threat, for a fairy's disembodied wing was included with the note.

I must inform Leticia...but I cannot establish Soulspeak contact. Nonorick must have taken her to one of those suspicious curio stores with too much magical interference. I'll leave a note instead.

I quickly came to a decision. This threat could not go unanswered. I penned a message explaining where I was going and left the inn.

All without noticing the singular presence watching me from the shadows.



I hurried into the depths of the forest as quickly as I could. Even with the Magic Eye, I failed to spot a single fairy along the way. At last, I came across an unbelievable sight.

"Leon? What happened? You're at death's door..."

I ran to his side, at a loss to explain the situation I was witnessing. Leon had lost even after using Divine Wildform.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I'll explain later," I replied. "Right now, I have to deal with these three."

Lying opposite Leon was a man, not even attempting to hide the glare he was leveling at me. I believed his name was Kaito.

"... I have a feeling they will not allow us to run so easily."

I glanced around and saw that his accomplices—humans by the names of Yuuto and Mai—had immediately moved to surround us and cut off our escape.

"Watch out... They're strong...," Leon said, groaning.

"Yes, that much is clear. I shall not let down my guard."

It looked as though Kaito wouldn't be rejoining the fight, but his two companions appeared completely unharmed.

"They are...dangerous... Be careful."

With that, Leon passed out. I laid him under a tree and turned to face the other two.

"Earth Dragon's Roar! White Flame Wave!"

This time, I held nothing back. This staff was not a mere striking weapon like the one I'd used during the examination but a tool for quickening my casting speed to unprecedented levels. With it, the ground beneath my feet took the form of a dragon and attacked, while white flames sped toward my foes.

However...

"Gigantes Arm!!"

"Waterflow Wind!"

...Yuuto shattered the dragon with his arm—which had grown to gigantic proportions—while Mai quenched the flames with water.

Thus, our battle began.



"It appears you possess a modicum of strength. However, even combined, you can never defeat me."

"Krh...!"

"I knew you were going easy on us before, but this is crazy!!"

It didn't take long for Lilia to take the lead in the battle. The pair weren't giving her an easy time of it, but they had sustained many wounds in the process.

Mai and Yuuto are giving it all they've got...but it might not be enough...

They had taken more damage than I expected, and so far, their prospects were not looking good. The best thing to do would be to grab the two of them and get out of here, but I wasn't sure whether I could do that.

I had originally planned on leaving this place using my powers of teleportation as the final step in my vengeance against Leon. That power currently resided in a magic orb I had prepared with one of my soul blades.

Theoretically, I could use it to escape this predicament. Of course, our plans would be ruined, but...

"So long as we survive, there's always a next time..."

I readied myself to cast everything I'd worked for aside. But at that moment...

"Not yet, dear brother!!"

...Mai called out to stop me.

"I didn't come with you to this world just to hold you back!"

She rose defiantly to her feet.

"Yuuto," she said. "Thirty seconds. Please keep Lilia busy for thirty seconds. That's all I ask."

"Thirty seconds?! Hmm, that's a lot to ask..."

Yuuto curved his lips in a bold smile.

"But okay; I'm not going to be a burden, either!"

Yuuto likewise struggled to his feet and took out a glowing green orb from his pocket. He placed it into his mouth and bit down, shattering it and swallowing the fragments.

"Amalia Plant: Full Body!!"

Yuuto's whole body swelled like a balloon as he called upon the power of a high-level monster we had encountered in the Gambler's Gauntlet.

As he did so, Mai began chanting.

"Come, like malevolence spoken, your forefathers shrouded in gloom."

"Grrrrrooooooohhhhhh!!"

A howl rent the air as Yuuto took the form of a many-armed monster. Its body was formed of hardened moss and earth, and thick vines extended from its core. They whipped like vipers and sped toward Lilia.

"Come, like curses unbroken, your ancestors facing their doom."

"Krh! Out of my way!!"

Lilia was as adept in magic as any member of her race and began weaving together swift spells to protect herself against the vines. She wasn't quite as proficient as Leticia, for whom magic was as effortless as breathing, but she was a capable sorceress all the same. Her Magic Eye ability let her intuit a great deal about her foes' spells, so she was more than a match for Yuuto.

"They just keep coming!"

"Grrgh!! Giiieee! Gaaaa!!"

Lilia sliced away at the vines, to the resounding score of Yuuto's inhuman screams.

"Come, like the maiden expelled, as your house is eclipsed by the mists."

Although she couldn't cast as smoothly as Leticia could, Lilia's ability allowed her to see an opponent's attack coming far in advance, which meant she could approximate her sister's frightening response speed. But that didn't guarantee she could get through Yuuto's vines.

"Grhh! You think this will be enough to stop me?!"

Yuuto kept up the assault, regrowing his vines each time one was destroyed. Though he was unable to deliver a decisive blow, he succeeded in keeping her occupied.

"Come, like the darkness beheld, as your eyes slowly fester with cysts."

After the promised time was up, Yuuto's vines were depleted, and he returned to normal.

"Thirty seconds, on the dot," he said. "Don't say I never do anything for you..."

"Come, the gods tumble like flies. Come, let me pluck out your eyes."

Yuuto dragged his bloodied body over to the nearest tree and collapsed beneath it. He was exhausted, but he had upheld his task to the letter.

"Thank you," said Mai. "That's all I needed."

"What the ...?"

I could hear Lilia gulp. Wisps of dark wind whirled around the spot where Mai stood. She had channeled so much energy into them that they crackled with electricity, as if alive.

"Come to me now! Sigh of the Rotting Princess!"

"Krh!"

Lilia could see mana. That meant she knew Mai's spell would be fatal. And so, as Mai lowered her *naginata* in a sweeping arc, Lilia hopped back to put some distance between her and this mysterious power.

But Mai then spoke. "There's no use running. You cannot escape the wind."

There was a sound like crumbling sand, and more of the black wind

descended from the night, as if guided by Mai's spell. That wind came down on Lilia like a gavel from the heavens.

"Grhhh!!"

Lilia deployed a magical barrier, standing firm against the incredible weight bearing down on her from above. Outside the protection of her shield, the grass and the trees around her withered to dust at the black wind's touch.

Lilia was an excellent sorceress. However, her spells themselves were not where her strengths lay. She was more adept at solving strategic puzzles with the help of her intrinsic ability, and in terms of raw power, her spellcraft was somewhat lacking.

Thus, Mai's ultimate technique could very well seal her doom.

"There is no escape," Mai declared. "Prepare to be cursed, to run rotten, to descend into stagnation."

From out of the black winds emerged the darkened, slender arm of a woman.

"Die, die, diiiieeee!!"

As soon as that bony arm touched the barrier, Lilia's spell disintegrated into black sand. But Lilia wasn't ready to die yet. She threw up a succession of shields, one after the other. She seemed to be using observations from her Magic Eye to adjust the formula on the fly, as each was more effective than the last at holding the black wind at bay.

"You shall not defeat me!!"

"Give up and diiiiie!!"

Lilia and Mai screamed as their spells contended with each other's. Then the finger of Mai's cursed arm shattered the final barrier, and a release of energy gave rise to a blinding black light. The shock wave threw up a cloud of dust, and when it cleared...

"Haah... Haah... Haah..."

...Lilia was still standing, panting with ragged breaths. The cursed wind had turned everything around her to ash, and her arm had been caught and was beginning to turn black. Given that the spell was supposed to deprive Lilia of all

four of her limbs, however, this outcome was less than favorable.

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"I couldn't...do it... Guff..."
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Mai spat out those last few words, then fell flat from magic exhaustion.

"You did well," said Lilia, "But I'm afraid this—"

"Yeah, she did do well."

"Huh?!"

There was a *swoosh*, and Lilia's healthy arm fell to the ground, severed at the shoulder. Thanks to Mai's and Yuuto's efforts, my approach had gone completely undetected.

"Don't bother fighting back. I may be wounded, but there's no way I'm going to lose to a woman with no arms."

"Grh... How could it end...here?!"

Lilia leered at me, and I hit her back with a wave of intimidation. I had severed her limb with a high-temperature blade, so the wound had sealed over without bleeding.

But while I might have recovered the reins, I wasn't sure where to go from here. Despite all my scheming, this was one wrinkle I hadn't planned for. Why was Lilia back so soon after leaving town? I know they say when it rains, it pours, but this was ridiculous. I'd even made sure to double-check with the guild that Leticia's party had actually left for the battlefield like they said they did!

However, at that moment, my lament was cut short by an explosion that took place directly between me and Lilia.

Who is it now?!

I should have been able to guess. I had Lilia at the tip of my blade and was watching her closely for any sudden movements. The only person who could have cast that spell, then, was...

"Nyah-ha-ha! That's quite enough, I think!"

This world must have been created to torment me.

The breeze ran through her scarlet hair.

Her defiant grin challenged the world.

Leticia was standing there, in her gothic dress, exactly the same as I remembered her.

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"…"
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"Leticia...!"

She dropped into the clearing from out of nowhere. Lilia sounded relieved at her sister's arrival.

Crap. This is really bad. I might not be capable of taking on Leticia in this condition...

And if she was here, chances were Nonorick wasn't far behind.

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"...Grh."
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"This...doesn't look good."

Mai and Yuuto voiced their displeasure. They could each go no further.

There was no time to waste. I needed to get the three of us away from here by any means necessary.

Dammit, I was so close...! Okay, calm down... Dammit! Dammit!

I found it difficult to steady my thoughts. The frustration of my vengeance being so close at hand and yet tantalizingly far clouded my mind.

Without even casting me a glance, Leticia walked over to Lilia's side.

"My, you look even worse than usual, dear sister."

I knew that Leticia had no memory of our relationship, but even so, the reminder hit me hard.

"You have done well. Now rest."

"Thank you, Leticia... But I fear there is no time for conversation. First, we must work together to take these three into custody."

"I know. But your healing comes first."

I couldn't help but feel there was a strange quality to Leticia's voice. But before I could figure it out, Leticia took up position behind her sister and laid a hand on her back.

"Godly Bless."

Two pairs of faintly glowing golden wings descended from the heavens. One touched Lilia's severed shoulder, the other her cursed and blackened arm. Two bright lights flashed, and all of a sudden, Lilia's limbs began regenerating.

"Phew. Thank you, Leticia."

"Anything for you, Lilia. I shall spare no effort."

Again, I felt it. There was something strange about the way she'd said that. A nagging feeling at the back of my mind that I just couldn't shake.

"This fight required I expend much of my mana," said Lilia. "But now that you're here—"

Suddenly, Leticia hugged her from behind.

"Oh, Sister?" she said. "There's something I've always wanted to tell you, so, so much. But I had to wait until the time was just right. You don't know how hard it's been; at times, I thought I would fall apart. But I waited and waited."

"Leticia...? What are you—?"

"I've wanted to pay you back for Brother for a long, long time."

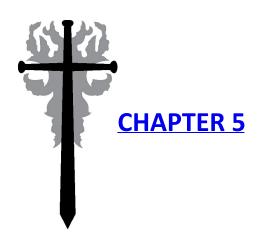
Though I was far from Leticia and Lilia, for some reason, I heard the stabbing sound loud and clear.

"I'm taking back the heart you stole from him, Lilia."

A small amount of blood spurted forth from Lilia's chest. Leticia's charming smile appeared over her shoulder. And finally, I realized what it was about Leticia that had given me pause.

It was a feeling of recognition. Recognition of a feeling. A dark and merry emotion that had been my steadfast companion for so long.





The Dead-End Arena and the Downfall of Power

Lilia collapsed to the ground with a thud. Nobody could find it in themselves to speak a word. In Leticia's blood-soaked hand, she held a violet crystal of a type I had seen before, although the color was different.

"Ah-ha-ha!!" she laughed. "I've been waiting ever so long for this! I pretended to be clueless, calling you 'dear sister' like I used to, all so you wouldn't suspect a thing!"

The crystal she was holding was a demon heart. Sudden death awaited a demon without it, and yet for whatever reason, Lilia still drew breath. Nevertheless, the heart was the source of a demon's control over mana, and so without it, her magic faltered, and a pair of black wings and a tail—her mother must have been a succubus, I guessed—came into view.

That's the heart of Leticia's brother? The heart of the previous demon lord?

"How...?" Lilia choked. Leticia refused to answer her and kept talking.

"I knew. I knew all this time. You see, when this second world began, Guren provided me with all my memories from the first! Ever since then, I've been watching you, Lilia." She spat the name with unbridled venom. "You did well to hide Brother's heart, but as soon as I stopped to think about it, it was obvious it was you!"

Leticia stood over her fallen sister and magically patched Lilia's wounds.

"I was conflicted at first, but in the end, I just couldn't deny this hate. It's not the result of some strange curse—it's mine, all mine! You ruined my and Kaito's happiness! You, Leon, and everyone else who interfered! My heart, my soul, and every nerve in my body cries out for revenge!!"

Anger! Anger! A fury impelled her words, and there was nothing Lilia could do to stop it.

"So I waited! I bided my time! I wanted you to trust me, so I could betray you right in front of your beloved Leon!"

"Gaaaaaaaaghhh!!"

Leticia conjured spears of ice and used them to pin Lilia to the ground.

"Does it hurt?" she jeered. "That's because I took out Brother's heart. When your body loses that much mana, your senses grow sharper to compensate! How about this?"

"Grhhhh! Gggghh!!"

Leticia brought her foot down hard on one of Lilia's wings, making her scream in agony.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! What an ugly cry! Come on, go 'Eek!' and 'Eep!' like a proper lady!"

Leticia looked on with glee at Lilia's suffering. The rest of us were all too shocked to move a muscle. Suddenly, who but Nonorick appeared beside the ecstatic girl.

"Oh, look at Kai and his friends!" he said, his merry voice a stark contrast to the military garb he wore. "They're petrified!"

"Hmm? Oh, you're right. I suppose they deserve an explanation, at least."

At last, Leticia scraped her sister's wing against the ground, as though removing something unmentionable from her shoe, and glanced over at us. In a flash, her wrath became a playful smile.

"Look at you," she said. "Never have I seen you so utterly bewildered."

"L-Leticia? Y-you remember me...?" I asked.

"What are you prattling about, you fool? Did I not mention as much just a few moments ago? I could recount some of our more *private* encounters, if that would serve to convince you."

"...Ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha... I don't believe it..."

I was so shocked that I couldn't even think straight, but the realization forced its way down my throat, regardless.

"I suppose you're wondering how I regained my memories," said Leticia. "Well, do you remember how I gave you my demon heart? Well, I decided to transfer my soul into it before I died, just in case. That just goes to show, does it not? Even I do not know where my genius will take me sometimes!"

"Your soul was in that stone? B-but didn't Alicia destroy it?!"

I felt sick as I remembered the princess's betrayal and the moment her blade almost skewered me.

"By then, my soul had all but transferred into you," Leticia explained. "I wanted to be with you, at least in your dreams. You looked like you were going to shrivel up and die after everything you went through to vanquish me."

Now that she mentioned it, I had dreamed of Leticia a lot after that.

"I was only borrowing your vessel, but I could see everything. And I saw how you let that miserable princess betray you and destroy my precious stone."

"Eek."

Leticia glared daggers into my soul. I had no excuses there.

"I sent you one last dream shortly after time was rewound," Leticia went on. "In it, I distinctly recall asking you to come to my side. What have you been doing this whole time? And then, just when I thought I must start my vengeance alone, you decide to show up after all!"

"S-sorry, but I had my reasons," I stammered. "Hey, wait, does that mean when we met earlier in the forest and you didn't remember me, you were just faking—?"

All of a sudden, Nonorick started throwing a hissy fit. "Hey, hey, hey! Stop flirting right under my nose, you two, or I'm gonna lose it!"

Leticia gave a displeased grunt. "Kaito and I finally get a chance to talk, and you just have to go ahead and ruin it... Very well, I suppose this can wait. There are more pressing matters at hand, are there not?"

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"Rh... Gh..."
```

"Uh... Hh..."

Leticia snapped her fingers, and the ice spears pinning Lilia to the ground vanished. Both she and Leon were lifted off the blackened sand and suspended magically in midair. Then Leticia clicked her fingers again, and a large metal cage slammed down over the pair.

"Now, we must not forget to heal these two as well," said Leticia, turning to face the fallen Yuuto and Mai and clapping them both on the shoulders. Just like with Lilia, a wave of magic spread out from where she touched them, healing the battered duo.

"...The light...it's warm...," Mai said, groaning.

"My wounds are healing...," said Yuuto. "Not only that, but my stamina and mana are returning as well."

"And for you, Kaito," said Leticia, turning to me. "I have a very special spell prepared."

"Oh, you don't need to - Mph!"

She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me without letting me say another word. As she did, a golden light enveloped her.

"Mwah!"

"Hey!" cried Nonorick. "I thought I told you to cut that out!"

Mai's eyes went blank. "...Dear brother?" she asked.

"Come on, Mai, try to keep it under control," offered Yuuto.

Meanwhile, I could do nothing but writhe beneath the watchful gaze of my partners in crime. The kiss lasted all of ten seconds before Leticia finally let go.

"My, Kaito, you have been wasteful with your mana. But you should be all topped up again now."

Nonorick, however, was displeased. "You told me this wasn't going to be fun and games, but look at you!" he cried. "How come I don't get to kiss anyone?!"

"That kiss," said Leticia, "was not just fun and games. It served an important purpose. This nitwit here went and used up nearly all of his mana, plus he has a lot to restore, so it would take a while otherwise. The fastest and surest way of transferring mana is through fluid contact."

"..."

Leticia's facile explanation conveniently ignored the fact that her ridiculous power level made such measures completely unnecessary. I avoided pointing this out, however, for fear of exacerbating the prickly gazes already directed our way.

"Now then, I'll put up a barrier to keep our conversation private," said Leticia. She twirled her finger, and a semitransparent wall of light enshrouded us. "So let's talk business."

Mai and Yuuto came over to join us. "Yes, let's," I said, clearing my throat.

This entire time, I had assumed Leticia saw Lilia as her beloved sister, and would turn against me after I killed her. I had known I needed to be prepared to fight her, if it came to that, but to be honest, I still didn't feel ready, even now. She had showed me what it meant to love, and to repay that lesson with violence was too much to bear. Recently, I had been having nightmares in which she cursed me, spat at me, ordered me to die. Nightmares from which I awoke with a cold sweat and a broken heart. They had happened more times than I could count on all my fingers and all my toes.

So I wanted to cry. To fight alongside Leticia again was beyond my wildest fantasies. But this wasn't about her—it was about revenge.

My doubt was lifted. My path was clear. We didn't need peace and love where I was going—just a thick, black, inky hate that stained everything it touched. I was a monster that lurked at the bottom of a swamp, and I needed to stay there until my vengeance was complete. Otherwise, everything I had worked so hard to obtain would be for naught.

"Though having said that," said Leticia, "I'm afraid I don't have an awful lot to

contribute. The extent of my plan was to earn Lilia's trust and betray it, like she did to me. Now that's done with, I was merely going to have Nonorick help me torture her to death."

"Hmm, I see..."

I nodded. It sounded like they didn't have a plan of their own, which effectively meant we had gained Leticia and Nonorick to aid in our own vengeance. Plus, Lilia had joined the onstage cast.

As chance would have it, I had considered some revenge scenarios involving both Leon and Lilia already, as I had assumed the two of them were lovers. When I saw Lilia with Leticia and Nonorick, I figured I had been mistaken, but it all came together just a few moments ago.

"It looks like you've already started on Leon," said Leticia, "so how about we share? You take him and leave Lilia to me."

Leticia grinned and cocked her head gently to one side.

"Besides," she said. "Doing it together is far more satisfying than doing it alone, is it not?"

Her eyes were like blackened pearls of tar. I could just barely make out their original crimson hue. I thought back to the first time I'd ever seen them, when they stunned me into silence, unable to speak a word. Back when the gulf between us had felt like a vast, interminable void. Back when we'd lived in different worlds.

...Now our eyes were the same.

"You bet," I said. "Wait until you see what I've cooked up for us this time."



"Pleased to meet you. My name is Lilia."

I had first met the woman at a ruin on the empire's soil. I had learned of its existence from ancient texts, but as ill luck would have it, the guild came across its location while I was still traveling. It would be considered far too dangerous for a member of the royal family to join the official expedition, so I had little choice but to assume the guise of a wandering archaeologist.

As for Lilia, she always kept her hood raised in order to conceal her demon heritage. Her skills as a mage were more than sufficient to get her onto the team, and it was common knowledge that one never pried too deeply into an adventurer's background.

We entered the ruin and began our investigation. After a while, just as the rest of the team were about to return to the surface, I wandered off by myself. The ancient texts had spoken of a secret passage, and by following their instructions, I was able to gain access to the innermost depths of the ruin.

It was there I came across an ancient monolith, covered in writing. I set about deciphering it, and when I had finished, Lilia called out to me.

She said, "Are you searching for a means to slay a god, as well?"

Lilia was another fool, like me, chasing after the same foolish dream, and it didn't take long for the two of us to become close. We were fighting against a fate that only we understood, while the rest of the world went about their peaceful lives.

For a year or so, we delved into ancient ruins, risking our lives in search of knowledge, sharing in joys and sorrows. It was no surprise that we became intimate. I may have been on a mission to save the world, but I discovered that Lilia was the first person I wanted to protect specifically.

"We must save this realm, Leon. The place we both call home."

"Yes. We must overthrow God and create a world without any more tears."

To me, the words we exchanged in bed that night were no less than a solemn vow. I was not only fighting for the world. I was fighting for her as well.



"Aaaaaaaaggghhhhhhhhh!!"

The faint sound of a scream drifted into my ears from far away.

Hmm? Wh-what happened to me...?

A throbbing pain coursing across my entire body roused me awake, and the blurriness of my mind began to take shape.

"First things first, we need to have you remember what you did. How's this feel?"

"Urgh! Wh-what are these memories? I...took the arcstone? You...are the hero? Then who is the kingdom's silver-clad champion? ...No, wait, we defeated you, and then...we..."

"Yes, you killed me. I remember it well, and now, so do you."

Everything came back to me when I heard that voice.

"Urgh..."

"Oh, looks like our other leading actor is awake. Perfect timing."

"Kaito..."

I opened my eyes to find the monster we had birthed.

It didn't seem like we had been moved to another location. The earth was blackened and scorched, but I could still smell the mana in the air. In fact, it was even stronger than before.

The Fairy Tree is dead, as is the queen and her orb. Perhaps the ley-line energy has already begun accumulating.

Soon, the realm would be saturated with locations like this, rich in mana. At least it was aiding my natural regeneration. As I was still puzzling out the situation, Leticia spoke.

"I suppose you could say it has been a while, Leon. You're looking a lot manlier already."

She was Lilia's younger sister, and the possessor of the arcstone. I had thought her one of my few allies.

"...So, I suppose you have decided to betray us, then?" I asked.

"Yes, I have. That's why I've was working to earn your trust this whole time."

I couldn't fail to notice the murky look in her eyes as she said that.

...I see. Then this is another monster we gave birth to.

It seemed they had not seen fit to restrain me, so I sat up and gave my

surroundings a cursory glance. A short distance away knelt Lilia, panting with ragged breaths. The Fairy Spring lay behind me, bursting with ley-line energy, while ahead of me stood my captors, Kaito and Leticia and their teammates I'd met at the guild, Nonorick, Mai, and Yuuto. They all seemed to be in full health again.

The odds I can fight my way out of this are slim...

I grimaced as I faced the unwelcome truth. My main concern was getting Lilia to safety, but such an outcome didn't seem likely.

At the very least, it appears this vengeance of Kaito's requires keeping us alive for a while longer. For now, I should wait to see what he does.

Any rash decisions seemed destined to end in failure, but there wasn't much merit in waiting around, either. As I deliberated over what to do, Kaito suddenly clapped his hands.

"Now, then. It's time to explain the rules. Leticia, tell Lilia what she needs to know."

"Leave it to me, Kaito. But first, I shall create our playing field. We could do with a bit more space around here."

Immediately, a crimson flame leaped from her palm and incinerated the trees around us. Before I knew what was happening, everything had turned to ash, down to the very last blade of grass. The ground became glowing molten rock, and when Leticia waved her hand, it sank down into the earth, while the surrounding soil moved in to cover it, like a pair of sliding doors. When she was done, all that remained was a barren expanse.

"Hmm, hmm. It's a lot easier when there's so much mana in the air. What do we need next? ...Ah, I've got it."

Leticia snapped her fingers, and the earth at the edge of the expanse rose up like walls, taking the form of an octagonal stadium. It was roughly twice the size of the training grounds in Zolkia, but most concerning were the empty seats. Directly ahead of me was a box like the ones usually reserved for distinguished guests.

"Put a barrier around the whole thing, and we're done. Hmm, hmm. Not bad,

if I do say so myself."

Leticia held her arms high, and a pyramid-shaped barrier enclosed the colosseum whole. It looked so strong that I couldn't believe it was the work of a single person. I would have little chance of penetrating it alone. A second, smaller barrier enclosed the seating box.

"Looking good," said Kaito.

"Did you expect anything less? Now, come, Sister. Let me guide you to the seat of honor."

"Urgh..."

Leticia snatched Lilia by the hair and began dragging her along the ground. My captors all followed them away, save for Kaito.

"You mentioned rules," I said. "What are you planning?"

"That's a bit of a stupid question, isn't it?" asked Kaito. "Can't you guess by now? I mean, what else is a colosseum for? Fighting. Do battle, and be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams."

He sneered.

"Beyond...my wildest dreams?"

"That's right. I know exactly what you want, and this is the place where you can win it."

He gestured theatrically, like a mad clown.

"Here you will fight wave after wave of deadly monsters. All you have to do is defeat them. Not exactly complicated, is it? And if you make it through..."

The former hero cracked a wicked smile and spoke his rotten words.

"...then, in exchange for your life, Lilia will go free."

"This barrier," he continued, "will cease to be, once all life within this arena is extinguished. That includes you, of course. If you pass my trials and die, I promise I won't lay a hand on her."

"...And why should I believe your promises?"

"You are free to think otherwise, but it won't change anything. However, if it'll motivate you, then how about this? I want to watch her suffer the grief of loss. I can't do that if she's dead, can I?"

"...You've become a true monster, Kaito."

"Well, you only have yourself to blame for that, I'm afraid."

Kaito's dry words made perfect sense to me, now that he had granted me my previous memories. Perhaps I truly had sacrificed too much in the pursuit of justice.

"You're not getting out of this one," Kaito went on. "Either you fail the trials and die with Lilia, or you pass them and sacrifice your life for hers."

Kaito's eyes were deep, dark, and murderous.

"That being said," he continued, "this is a game. And it wouldn't be a game without a way to win, would it?"

Kaito glanced to his left, where a horde of monsters appeared on the shore of the spring. In all of my travels, I had never seen creatures of this kind. At first glance, I thought them to be a variant of an ogre or some such, but upon closer examination, I noticed that transparent mucus dripped from their muddy green skin, and that the upper body of a small figure—most likely a fairy—grew from their heads. Their necks were also draped in the cadavers of fairies, like some kind of macabre scarf. I needed not to understand any more of the monsters' nature to know that they were vile and depraved.

"Oh," said Kaito, noticing my alert response. "These creatures aren't who you'll be fighting. They're your precious allies. Don't worry."

The look in his eyes meant I could do nothing but.

"These are your restoratives, your power-ups, and your penalties all in one. What's that? You don't understand? Then listen up! I'm only going to explain this once."

Kaito explained with pompous affectation, while the monsters began marching in perfect lockstep, like an army of darkness.

"By now, your body is similar to that of a fairy, thanks to the effect of my soul

blade. Incidentally, these guys were also made using fairies. They look quite frightening, as I'm sure you agree, but they're not actually corporeal. They're made out of mana, the same way fairies are."

"...You're sick."

Kaito confirmed my initial suspicions. These monsters were nothing but chimeras—artificial creatures constructed through some foul alchemy.

"Thank you very much," Kaito answered. "I was hoping you'd say something like that."

The creatures by his side were an affront to all life in this world. But Kaito only smiled.

"Back to the point," he said. "You probably wonder where I'm going with all this. These guys are going to be your health potions in order to see you through the fight."

"Health...potions?"

"Indeed. We've healed you a little bit, but you're still in a rough spot, aren't you? I wouldn't want you croaking right after I went to the trouble of setting this whole thing up, so if things start looking bad, just eat one of these guys. Their mana will become part of you, healing you and increasing your strength."

"…"

"There are fifty of them in all. You've got fifty lives before it's game over. So long as at least a single one of them remains, your opponents will neither strike the killing blow nor interfere with your attempts to heal. Every time you wind up at death's door, I'll feed one to you."

I could hear the excitement in his voice, as if he could hold it in no longer.

"Mind you, these creatures aren't *exactly* like health potions," he went on. "Since they're just pure mana, you won't get sick or full up from consuming too many of them. Sounds too good to be true, right?"

I was unaware it was possible for a human to be so twisted. Had we really pushed him to become like this?

"So fight, fight to your heart's content. And then..."

All of a sudden, Kaito's voice changed, his hateful plea leaking out through the cracks in his twisted smile.

"...die."

It was not a prayer. It was a curse. The next moment, I heard the monsters stomp over to their positions by the wall. They each stood upright and motionless, emitting only a ghostly moan.

Just then, a personal barrier enclosed around each of the creatures. The center of the arena was the only area I could access.

"Well, then," said Kaito. "I'll go take my seat. I recommend you start off by devouring one of your extra lives... Oh, that's right. I still have to come up with a way to use the other two hundred chimeras I have left over. Let's make them spectate, shall we?"

Saying this, Kaito waved his soul blade, and the empty stands instantly filled with more of the horrible beasts.

"Right, then, I'm off. Show me a good fight, will you?"

Kaito left. My only exit—the colosseum door through which the chimeras had entered—vanished as though it had never been there at all. It was replaced by a stairway to the seating area. That also seemed to be surrounded by a barrier, as I saw Kaito leave a slight ripple as he passed though, after which he ascended the steps to the box where his allies were waiting.

Meanwhile, things were happening in the arena, too. On the wall opposite the Fairy Spring, beneath where Kaito sat, a summoning circle appeared in a blinding flash of light. I continued to observe it carefully, while searching for a way out.

Could I break through the barrier? ...No, not a chance. Even at full strength, such a feat would be beyond my power.

The barrier itself was completely invisible, yet so dense with mana that I could feel its presence without seeing it. I could think of no way through except by following Kaito's orders and waiting for an opening.

All of a sudden, a huge inverted tetrahedron appeared in midair. On the

upper part were inscribed the digits 1000, while on the sides were projected images of the people sitting in the box seats.

Lilia...

Her exhausted form was with them, bound to a cross, but her eyes yet burned with determination.

That's right. We swore to save the world. We cannot give up, no matter how dire the situation becomes!

I clenched my fist and renewed my courage. Just then, Kaito spoke up.

"Oh? You haven't eaten yet. What's the matter, not hungry?"

"You would have me devour this monster?" I replied. "What do you take me for?"

"I took you for someone in need of healing. Look, you'll love it. Just bite into that part around its neck, and you'll absorb its mana into yourself."

"I shall pass your trial without stooping to such degradation."

"Whatever, it's your funeral."

He could not expect me to eat a humanoid monster alive. It was beyond the pale. Especially not one with such a grotesque appearance. Besides, there was no guarantee that it wasn't another of Kaito's tricks.

"Now it's time to start the main event! There are one thousand monsters to defeat in total! Until this counter reaches zero, you fight for your life!"

At his words, the summoning circle on the far wall glowed brightly, and a horde of monsters stepped through.

"...Orcs?"

I hadn't known what to expect, but this was not it. Orcs were an even match for any D-rank adventurer, but they were nothing but a disappointing challenge for me. Still, I braced myself for what lay in wait. There were no guarantees when it came to Kaito's abilities; he had gotten them from the Goddess herself.

"""Bluuuuuuhhh!!"""

The horde numbered twenty. Three of them drew close, to test my strength. I

still had a sinking feeling about this, but I threw my fist at the first orc's club nonetheless.

"Bluuuhhh!!"

"Wh-wha—?! Grh!!"

For some reason, the orc was far stronger than I was; it knocked me off my feet and sent me flying backward.

"Grh... Wh-what happened?"

"That's why you should have listened to me," Kaito said, gloating. "You're pretty much a fairy now, remember? And fairies don't last long without their precious tree. Check your status—you'll see what I mean."

"Wh-what?!"

STATUS



Leon Gailed Lv146→Lv 41

Age 37 • Male • Leonid Beastfolk

(Fairy Polymorph: Hidden→Unhidden)

HP: $567/(17,545 \rightarrow 1,345)$ **MP:** $369/(10,545 \rightarrow 945)$

Strength: 18,368→**824 Stamina:** 16,398→**759**

Vitality: 15,545→514 Agility: 18,587→629

Magic: 13,337→314 Resistance: 14,047→409

Intrinsic Abilities: Infallible Nose, Divine Wildform

Skills: Martial Arts Lv 55→Lv 5, Track Lv 28→Lv 4, Stealth Lv 45→Lv 4, Brawler Lv 68→Lv 8, Control Body Lv 52→Lv 7, Strengthening Magic Lv 44→Lv 4, Breath Control Lv 38→Lv 5, Earth Sorcery Lv 38→Earth Magic Lv 5, Wind Sorcery Lv 59→Wind Magic Lv 6, Gravity Sorcery Lv 18→Gravity Magic Lv 5, Wildform Lv22→Lv 5

Status: Mana Deficiency (Severe)

"But no need to worry," Kaito went on. "This is what I gave you restoratives for. Just eat them, and you'll be back to your normal strength in no time."

" ..."

"Oh, yeah, and there's one other rule I forgot to mention. There are two ways you can lose this game. Two ways in which neither of you get to survive. The first is if you lose all your lives, Leon. If you die and there are no chimeras left, then Lilia here is... *Khhrk.*"

Kaito drew his thumb across his neck.

"The other way to lose applies only to Lilia. If she gives up before you win, then both of you die."

"What...?"

The sound of that put me on edge. If Lilia gave up? What did that mean?

I didn't have to wonder much longer, for at that point, Nonorick stepped forward.

"Ohh, ohh, me first, me first! "\"," he said, swinging his swords around. "Whoohoo! Finally, I get to do something! Let's get this party started!"

"No...," I muttered, as Nonorick raised his favorite white blades. "No... You can't! This is madness! Stop it at once!"

"Let's open you up and see what's inside!"

"Hrgh! Haghh ...!!"

My words of protest could not stop Nonorick from slicing open Lilia's abdomen.

"Lilia!!"

I let out a scream as the images on the pyramid provided a close-up of the blood and gore.

"While your fight is going on," explained Kaito, "we'll be having a little battle of our own. As soon as Lilia says, 'Kill me,' we'll grant her wish, and you'll be monster food."

"You monsteeeers!!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! There you go, Leon! You almost sound like a person again! Decided to hop off your pedestal and come join us?"

Kaito's scornful voice echoed around the arena.

"Did you really think Leticia and I were just going to leave Lilia alone? What a grade-A moron you are! No, I'm afraid your battle is going to be accompanied by a symphony of her screams! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Laughing, laughing, laughing. Kaito went on laughing from the bottom of his heart.

"Of course, just torturing her is no fun, so we've made sure Lilia is part of the game as well," Kaito continued. "Each of us takes turns going to town on her for five minutes each. While that's going on, Lilia has a magic stone filled with mana in her hand. All she has to do is drop it to activate this magical healing circle on the floor beneath her."

He tapped his foot, and the image on the pyramid changed to show me the circle engraved there. The blood falling onto it caused it to glow, and just as Kaito said, it seemed to be keeping Lilia alive.

"Her blood also activates the circle, but only enough to stave off death—and certainly not enough to dull the pain. If Lilia uses the stone, however, we'll stop torturing her for precisely two minutes. We'll also give her a two-minute break between each person's turn. And as a freebie, we'll even stop during the time it takes for you to eat one of your extra lives. But each time she uses the stone, one of your lives will go bye-bye."

Twisted smiles of purest evil loomed over me like storm clouds. But it wasn't only Kaito who saw fit to shower me with mockery. His allies, Mai and Yuuto, stood grinning behind him, while Nonorick's smile seemed as innocent as a child's.

But only Leticia spoke next, her eyes and her laughter sharing the same darkness as Kaito's.

"So romantic, is it not?" she asked. "You and your lover, your fates intertwined. Sharing your lives in the most literal sense of the phrase! Or

perhaps, it's more appropriate to say that each of you is slowly killing the other! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

They were monsters, every one.

""Now, let the games resume!""

"""Bluuuuuhhh!!"""

The orcs, who had proved unnaturally courteous during Kaito's explanation, began stampeding toward me once more.

"Let me try some of your blood, Lilia... Mm, what a shame, this doesn't taste like virgin blood..."

"Ggghh!! Ggggrrrhhh...!"

"Curses, curses, curses!"

My stats and skills had dropped significantly, but my fighting techniques were ingrained in my memory. Plus, my foes were just ordinary orcs, not variant species or unique monsters.

Normally, I wouldn't even bother with monsters as weak as these, but with my current stats, such a large horde posed a significant problem.

On top of that, something else was affecting my concentration...

"Hmm? Hey, isn't it time to switch yet?"

"Hee-hee, I don't think so! It's still Nono's fun time!"

"Agh! Ggrh! Hgrh...!"

"Mrmrmr! Kaito! Should we not do away with this bothersome taking turns nonsense after all?"

"Sorry, you've got to wait. It'll be more fun that way, I promise."

"Mix it up! Mix it up! Mix up all your guts! "

"Haah... haah... Hgrrrrg...!"

Lilia's inhuman suffering went on, merely part of some sick game to them.

"...Grh! What the ...?"

I only glanced in her direction for an instant, but the horrifying sight caused me to freeze in terror. The villain who'd sliced open Lilia's guts reached his arm inside her, causing her to scream out in agony. For some reason, it brought to mind a scene I'd seen once before, of the ghastly corpse of a child who had offended a fairy and met the same grisly fate.

My hesitation led to an opening that one of the monsters did not fail to seize.

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"Grh! Guhhh!"

"Bloooogaah...!"
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The orc's club connected with my shoulder, throwing me off-balance. Hopelessly outnumbered, I could only stand there and take it as their clubs relentlessly bore down on me. Just when I was no longer able to tell whether the screams I heard were my own or those of my dear Lilia, the beating suddenly stopped. I looked up to see the orcs standing quietly over me, like trained hounds.

```
"Brumuuugh..."

"Brbrbr..."

"Blaaah..."
```

"Okay, that's one life gone, I'm afraid. Use your restorative, and the game can continue. Refuse, and your deaths will be boring and swift. What's it gonna be? Ready to throw in the towel?"

Kaito sounded oddly excited as he spoke. Meanwhile, one of the chimeras stepped forward.

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Do I really have to eat this this...?
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The thought of it was ludicrous. According to Kaito, all I had to do was bite into the creature's neck, and I would absorb it as mana. His explanation gave me no peace of mind whatsoever, but I no longer had time to question it.

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"Hrgh... Hrgh... Ugh..."
```

I heard something crack up in the stands. The magic stone had slipped from Lilia's powerless hand and shattered on the floor.

"Aww, does that mean I have to switch out now?"

Like dining knives in a piece of meat, countless white daggers had been stabbed into Lilia's stomach, which had turned a painful shade of crimson. When she dropped the stone, the magic circle activated, healing her wounds and causing the knives to slide out of her and clatter to the floor.

But while the damage to her body had been reversed, the toll on her mind remained.

"That means we take away one of Leon's restoratives. Leticia, would you do the honors?"

"Gladly."

One of the chimeras, barrier and all, floated away from my stockpile and into an empty spectator seat.

"I'm sorry...Leon... I'll hold on...tighter...next time..."

"L-Lilia..."

It was clear to me now. There was no use hesitating. I had made up my mind long ago. I would do whatever needed to be done and pay whatever price.

"Damned if I do, and damned if I don't. The only way out is to keep fighting on."

I had sacrificed much to come this far. I couldn't give up now. I had to press forward, no matter what that necessitated.

I crawled on my belly toward the chimera and clamped my jaws around its leg.

"Hrh? Gaaaaaaaghhh?!"

In an instant, I swelled with power. It coursed through my body, revitalizing my battered flesh like rainfall on the parched land. But at the same time, it felt like every cell in my body was being torn apart and put back together in an endless cycle.

"Heh-heh-heh. Painful, isn't it?"

"Y-you... What have you...? Graaaah!!"

The pain was so acute that I lost my bearings. My world spun. I could feel only agony. It was so intense that it obliterated my newfound strength, along with the solace of relief. All I could think was that I had been deceived.

"I told you, didn't I? These creatures aren't just your restoratives and your power-ups—they're your penalties. You didn't think I'd pass up the opportunity to cause you even more suffering, did you?"

"I...see," I panted, as the pain finally subsided. "You truly are the lowest of the low."

"Oh, don't worry, I know," replied Kaito. "I couldn't just rot away in some sad, forgotten corner of the world; to live, I needed to become a monster, like you."

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"Haah... Haah... Haah..."
```

Now that I could think straight again, I realized that some of my lost power had returned. Not all of it, unfortunately, but it seemed that each of these creatures contained no small amount of it.

"All right, that's two minutes, on the dot. Time to retry the level."

I saw Kaito's face in the pyramid. At his announcement, the orcs resumed their attack.

```
"""Bluuuuuuhhh!!"""
"Stand aside!"
```

"Bugh?!"

I slammed my fist into the first one's face. That punch already felt more solid than any that had come before it.

"You'll need to do more than this to stop me... To stop us!!"

The longer I took, the greater the strain Lilia would endure. To save her, I needed to bring this farce to a close as quickly as possible.

And if only one of those creatures contains this much power...

Perhaps it wasn't time to give up hope just yet.



"How's that? Hurts, doesn't it? Come on, tell me how much it hurts."

"Hrggrrrrrrhhh!!"

Aah, it feels so good to unleash the burning vengeance I was forced to keep hidden this whole time. I can feel myself getting better already.

"Next, we shall try tearing off your feet. Did you know? My big brother also had his feet bitten off by that overgrown lizard, after you sent Ardelius to kill him."

When I first came across my brother's body, I found the evil dragon nibbling on his leg. The power of the arcstone still lingered, and the dragon was feeding on this. That had led me to believe that overgrown lizard had been the one to kill him, but my investigations alongside Lilia revealed that it was actually Ardelius who dealt the killing blow.

I had always thought those two were the only objects of my revenge. It was only after Kaito left that I realized I had been misled. Leon and Lilia stole the arcstone, and the roots consumed me. I'd died at the hands of the woman who was behind everything, and Kaito could do nothing to save me.

For so long have I awaited this moment.

"He was a good man, my brother. Terribly unfit to be the demon lord. He liked reading, was a picky eater, was good with children, and hated war. He was like a warm ray of sunshine."

"Grgh!! Uuurghhh!!"

After the world was at rest, my consciousness was taken from Kaito by Guren and brought back to me. As a result, I started to reconsider what Lilia had been saying. It was clear she had been feeding me incomplete information from the very beginning, and as I filled in the blanks, I came to learn that not only had Lilia been the one to kill my brother, but she had also masterminded the whole thing.

"Brother knew and accepted you were going to kill him. Did you know that? Yes, he must have known, or else he wouldn't have gifted me this knife."

On the day of his murder, Brother had summoned Lilia to speak with her

privately, one-on-one.

I produced a softly glowing dagger. It was the focus for a ritual to transfer the arcstone before its incubation was complete. Supposedly, the hero had made peace with the demon lord of two generations ago, our grandfather, and gifted our family this knife before returning home.

However, because time was short, the ritual was rushed, and the knife lost its power as a result. Now, it only served as a memento of my brother.

"Big Brother knew you would try to take the arcstone, but he also knew there was far more power in it than you could manage. You couldn't possibly absorb it all, so the excess would spiral out of control. That's why he gave it to me."

"Grhhhhh!! Aaaaaahhh!!"

The knife was nothing but a relic now, but it was more than sharp enough to pierce Lilia's eyes. Eyes that could see magic. They made a watery squelch as I plunged the blade into them.

"Why?!" I screamed. "Why did you kill him?! Why did my brother have to die?! It doesn't make sense!!"

"Haah... Hgh... Hgh... Gh..."

Before she could even catch her breath, I unleashed my uncontainable fury and slashed at her free arm with my knife.

"Haah... Haah... Haah... And then, after slaying him, you betrayed me, killed me, and then killed Kaito for good measure, using the very power you stole from me."

I could no longer control my lungs. My fingers tightened around the knife in my hand.

"Aah, ignorance truly is bliss, is it not? Were I not cursed with this knowledge, I could go on living in peace and happiness...right up until the moment I outlived my usefulness to you."

"Grh... Agh..."

When I pulled out the knife, so much blood had pooled in the wound that some of it spurted out and stained my cheek.

"But there's no point in wishing for a life like that now. Because I want to live. I want him to live, too. So I can't forget what I know. I have tasted loss. Tasted death. And I cannot go back to that pain I know so well."

Perhaps Kaito wouldn't have died if I had caught on to Lilia's deception the first time. I could have spared him the pain of his own betrayals.

"I care not for the good of the world. I care not for the fate of the gods. You killed me, Lilia. You violated my trust. My dear brother and my darling Kaito both died at your hand. That's the only thing that matters to me now."

I flicked the blood off the knife and sheathed it, then caused my palm to glow with flame.

"You will pay. You will pay."

"Mgyaaaaaaaaaaghhh!!"

Placing my hand to her skin, I seared the flesh of her face.

"How does it feel, Lilia? For the one who came running in your time of need to turn on you? To know that someone you trusted was never on your side in the first place? Seeing the one you love most suffering, and knowing there's nothing you can do to stop it?"

The scent of roasting flesh and scorched hair filled my nostrils. I tightened my grip on her face.

"It...it hurds...helb..."

So strangled was her voice that it sounded as if she were drowning. Once more, the stone in her hand slipped from her weakened grasp and cracked on the ground.

"Phhah! Ahh..."

Lilia let out a gasp of relief paired with regret as the power of my magic circle washed over her, swiftly regenerating her burned face, her stab wounds, and even her punctured eyes.

Now I was to leave her in peace for two minutes, though even that solace was

merely temporary and woefully insufficient for Lilia to recover fully.

This truly is a well-designed game. These two minutes imbue her with a reason to go on.

It was just enough time for her to watch Leon, reminding her of her purpose and ensuring the torture would not break her so easily. So long as he was down there, fighting in the very arena that I constructed, Lilia would find the strength to go on.

I couldn't help but smile at seeing her exhausted state. This was my second turn torturing her, and since I had caused her to drop the stone, it would become my turn again soon enough. The fun would go on until Lilia could endure all five of us back-to-back.

Sooner or later, one of them will reach the end.

And when that happened...

"Leon... I'm sorry..."

Yes, suffer. Suffer, suffer, suffer.

Glimpse the light at the end of the tunnel, and then...

"Heh-heh-heh. I hope you're not ready to give up yet, dear sister. We've only just begun."



How much time had passed? I didn't know.

How many times had I dropped the stone? I couldn't remember.

Three whole rounds had passed before I finally held out for five minutes against a single person.

One down, only four more to go.

"Haah... Haah... Haah..."

"I know I don't have any personal beef with you," the young man standing before me said, "but don't think that means I can let you off easy."

"Ugh..."

The second. This was still only the second.

"I wonder if you could comprehend my pain. The agony of watching your loved one disappear before your very eyes. Watching them scream for your help, even though there's nothing you can do. It's a bit like what you're going through now, isn't it? So how does it feel?"

Being a vampire, Nonorick delighted in shedding my blood. By his third turn, I was so used to the pain that I was able to keep the stone firmly in my grasp until the time was up, even though he fileted my arms and legs like a fish.

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"…"
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"Don't feel like talking, huh?"

The boy who stood before me now had the appearance of a mild-mannered youth, but he was no less sick-minded than the rest of them.

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"I...did nothing to you..."
```

"True. But nonetheless..."

"Rgh!! Agh... Gh..."

After tearing my sleeve open, he transformed his arm into frozen slime and pressed it against the bare skin of my arm. The chill seemed to sap away what little vitality I possessed, spreading across my limb and crawling up my shoulder to my face.

"You betrayed Kaito, my best friend, and Leticia, his girlfriend. Why would I ever show mercy to you?"

With a cold smile on his lips, he threw back his arm, ripping the skin from my flesh.

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"Rghhhhhhh!!"
```

My arm seared with such excruciating agony that I wanted to end it all. But far more lay in store for me yet.

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"Agh... Ugh..."
```

"That's enough, Mai. It's my turn next."

"Haah... Haah... Really, dear brother? I'm out of time already?"

Three. I finally made it past three.

After experiencing everyone's torture twice, I gradually started becoming accustomed to the pain, gaining the ability to endure it enough to avoid dropping the stone.

I wasn't sure whether to be glad that I'd passed the halfway point or to despair that there was almost half left to go. I couldn't even recall what I'd been through or estimate how much longer I could hold out.

Even with my body healed, my scars screamed. But despite the agony coursing through my veins, the stone remained firmly in my grasp.

"I've gotta say, I'm impressed. I really didn't think you'd last this long."

According to the rules I had been told in the beginning, each person would torture me for a maximum of five minutes. I was to endure every session without dropping the magic stone in my hand. If I failed, the count was reset.

Each time I survived a round of torture, I was given a two-minute healing break. That was a poisoned chalice, for it cleansed my nerves and reset my sensitivity to pain.

And the worst part was...

"Geh-heh-heh!" "Gee-hee-hee!" "Gah-hah-hah!"

"Grh... Gah... Guhhh!!!"

Leon...

Through it all, I was forced to behold the suffering of my beloved. A one-man war against cruel and overwhelming odds. At this moment, he was facing off against an Ogre King and its many minions. Needless to say, he was hopelessly outnumbered. Even with his training, it was not enough.

My tormentors forced me to watch until Leon was beaten senseless and unmoving, then tossed into the Fairy Spring like a forgotten rag.

"Oh dear, Leon. That makes twenty deaths, on the nose. Lilia's only used her stone eight times. What are you doing?"

"Gh... Hah... Hah..."

Leon crawled toward one of the repulsive creatures our captors had created. Fighting back his disgust, he sank his teeth into its flesh and immediately let out a bloodcurdling yell.

"Gaaaaaaaghhh!!"

With my eyes restored, I could see the worldforce pushing its way into Leon, tearing him apart from the inside out. It was true that this energy made him stronger, but at the same time, the process of his body breaking down and regenerating caused him excruciating pain.

We're almost there, Leon. Don't give up. You cannot give up.

According to the counter above the arena, there were already fewer than five hundred monsters remaining. I had no doubt that Leon would eventually defeat every last one, so all I needed to do was to hold out until then.

Two more. Just two more. The pain meant little to me by now. Only the hero and Leticia were left.

"All right, break time's over. Now it's my turn."

But he was no hero, just a monster. He turned from appreciating the sound of Leon's screams and cast me a smile.

"Hurry up and get it over with..."

I gripped the stone tightly in my hand. I wasn't going to lose. Leon and I would overcome this together.

And even if I died and Leon lived on, he would carry on my will, our mission.

"Oh? I see you're actually able to talk now instead of just screaming. Does that mean you're getting used to the pain?"

"Nothing you can dish out affects me anymore. I will never break—! Urgh!!"

He grabbed my hair and pulled up my head. His lips were parted in a horrific grin.

"That's where you're wrong, I'm afraid," he sneered. "You haven't gotten used to the pain in the slightest. You've only learned how to deal with it. Lying to ourselves already, are we? How sad."

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"Grh... Urgh..."
```

He jerked my head back and forth, tearing at my roots. Then he suddenly stopped.

"All of you are scum," he said. "Dirty, rotten bastards. Villains of the highest order. But unlike the others, you seem to actually have a heart that feels guilt. I want to ask you something."

He stared deep into my eyes, as though looking right through me.

"Leticia told me why you did it. You needed to eliminate our roles to stop this world from bleeding dry, was that it? I guess it's as noble a cause as any. So tell me, did you pity us? Did you feel sorry for us, forced to bet our life together on a miracle? Did you sympathize with us? Weep for us? Yet still saw fit to kick us while we were down?"

I thought back to how things had gone the first time.

"It's true," I said. "What we did was cruel—there's no arguing that. But we had no choice. We were fighting to save the world. You understand that, too, don't you, Hero? We were all fighting for the same thing."

"Hmm, I see. Yeah, I figured."

It seemed my words resonated with him, so I went on.

"Even Leticia. She may have lived for revenge, but she loved this world. She wanted to separate the human and demon realms, so that war could never again bring tragedy to—"

"Shut the fuck up!"

"Agh!!"

"Don't pretend our love was the same as yours!"

He tugged my hair again.

"It's...true...," I choked out. "Our paths...may have differed... May have run... counter to each other... But all we both wanted...was to save the world..."

"No, you're wrong! The world you're talking about is something far, far away! That wasn't what we wanted to save!!"

"Agh!!"

All of a sudden, he released my hair and clasped his fingers around my throat instead.

"The world we wanted... The world we fought for was something very close and dear to us! It contained our friends, our family—everything that made us happy. It isn't anything like what you're talking about!!"

"Ghh ... Agh ...!"

"Listen to me very carefully, because I told Leon this as well: There's only one thing that's real, and it's everything you two turned your backs on. You cut us off, shunned us, betrayed us!!"

"Pah!!"

Just as I thought he was going to snap my neck, the pressure of his fingers eased, and he withdrew his hand.

"You killed us. And for what? A world you know nothing about."

His voice had become weak, tragic. As though I were the torturer and he the victim. However, I didn't have time to dwell on it, for the next moment, I was racked with a burning pain.

"Aaaaaaaaggghhhhhhhhhh!!"

The next thing I knew, my wings and tail had been shredded. My torturers had severed them multiple times by now, but in this instance, they were torn into thin strands, hanging limply from me like hair.

"Oh, why am I even telling you this? I know there's no point. What a waste of precious time."

His moment of weakness receded into distant memory. Where once stood a man, there was now only a demon.

"The game continues," it said. "Let's see you scream, howl, weep and wail, sinking into a swamp of despair all the while."

I reaffirmed my grip on the magic stone. I was determined not to drop it, lest my oath to safeguard this world's future be in vain. After what seemed like an eternity, the end of my prolonged torment came into view. The excruciating torture extinguished my memories, my thoughts and feelings, and just as I started to forget who I was or what I was even doing here, I realized that I'd managed to reach the last of my five captors. The fact that I'd managed to keep my grip on the magic stone was nothing short of a miracle. If I could hold out for just five more minutes, it would all be over.

"So, this duty falls to me, does it? I must say, Lilia, I'm starting to get a tad emotional. I never imagined vengeance would feel so satisfying. It's all thanks to Kaito and the others that we came up with so many wonderful ideas."

"Leticia..."

I'd survived the hero's torture, my wounds had been refreshed, and now I faced my final challenge.

Leticia, the demon lord.

I would be subjected to the most agonizing pain the queen of demonkind could command.

"Five minutes," she said. "I shall take the time to mutilate each part of you in painstaking detail. Let us start with those demonic wings upon your back."

"Grh! Gaaaaaaghhh!!"

A light appeared in her hand—the glow of purification. It was a demon's worst nightmare, as light was the most effective of the attributes against our kind. No ordinary demon could command that power, which burned my wings not with heat but with an indescribable cleansing pain.

"For one minute, I shall carefully deconstruct those wings of yours."

Agony. Unbridled, unfiltered agony. It hurt so much, I felt I was losing my sanity. And after that hellish minute passed, my wings dissolved away from the base.

"Next, your arm. We don't want you to drop the stone just yet, so I'll make do with just your left."

With her sharp nails, cloaked in a violet aura, she made a small scratch on my left hand.

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"Hgh... Gh... Ah... Ah... Ah..."
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The poison entered my body, searing its way up my arm. As it advanced, my fingers turned purple, and my flesh began to rot. After another agonizing minute, my entire left arm decayed away into nothing.

"Now for your tail."

Leticia waggled her finger, and a hole appeared in midair, through which countless small insects emerged. The swarm of bugs bit into my tail, tearing it to pieces.

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"Grh...! Gggh! Stop...! Please stop...!"
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After another minute, my tail disappeared from the base up.

"Next, your right leg."

The next moment, a sour-smelling liquid engulfed my limb.

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"Rgh... Rgh... Ugh..."
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The acid slowly melted my leg away. One minute later, and it was completely gone.

"And finally, your left."

Two stone columns appeared out of thin air. They slammed together, trapping my leg between them and shattering the bone.

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"Grh...! Agh... Ggh..."
```

The pillars slowly rotated, grinding my leg to dust. When another minute had finally passed, the stone pillars tore off the limp flesh completely.

"Yes, yes. That's exactly what my brother looked like after you manipulated Ardelius to kill him, tore out his heart, and left his corpse for the evil dragon. The only difference is that you are still alive. Well, and that you are a tad larger than him."

By this point, I had lost everything except the arm that still gripped the magic stone.

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"...Agh...... Ugh..."
```

My withered throat could not even muster up a scream, yet still I did not drop it.

"Well done, dear sister. I truly mean that. I'm deeply proud of you. You have passed our test and satisfied the conditions. You know what you must do now, do you not?"

"Gh... Cough! Cough!"

Leticia smiled a sweet and charming smile, just like old times, and placed a hand imbued with healing power to my throat.

"I am not a monster. I shall allow you to talk, right here at the end."

When she said those words, it finally felt real. I had passed her torture and survived her vengeance.

"Leon..."

"Lion's Warblow!"

From down in the colosseum, I heard his voice. He had been battling dragons of each element, and now only the fire one remained. The scoreboard indicated only thirty-eight monsters were left, while from what I could tell, there remained around ten of the creatures called "Fairy-Eaters" that restored his health.

"Gruuuugh!!"

At last, the final dragon fell to Leon's fists. By now, he seemed to have recovered much of his lost strength. He still stood at perhaps 70 percent of his full power, but it was such a relief to see him in good health again.

"Haah... Haah... Bring out the next one!"

Leon appeared weary and only half-aware of his surroundings. But that was fine, as I didn't want this humiliating state to be how he remembered me.

"Do you remember our promise, Leon?"

"Haah... Haah... What is it? Bring out the next foe so I can end this!"

Alas, Leon could not hear me. How saddening.

"I leave the world in your hands, my love. You must protect their future..."

Still, I could not help myself from spilling out my heart.

"Now," I said. "I have survived your trials. I have weathered your vengeance."

Our task may have elicited only scornful laughter from those who heard it, but we considered it our life's mission.

"Uphold our promise!" I screamed. "Kill me, and free Leon from this place!"

I demanded the execution of our pact. Our captors had told me that if I survived five rounds of consecutive torture without dropping the magic stone, then I could offer up my life to save Leon. Leticia had sworn a magical oath, so I knew it was no lie.

But Leon looked aghast. "W...wait. What? That's not what you told me! What is the meaning of this?!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, did I not mention? We gave you both the same offer! It all came down to who completed their trial first!"

The hero chuckled with glee.

"N-no... That can't be... You're lying! I only have fifty-four left to go! You can't just end it! Wait! Waaaaait!!"

Leon dashed over to the barrier and began pounding his fists against it. It was strange. Leon was always so stoic, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him so distraught.

He would be sad after I was gone. Of course he would.

But I had faith. Faith that he would find the strength to carry on.

Even if I died here, Leon could live. And so long as he was alive...

"It's okay, Leon. You will carry on our task without me..."

"Hmm? I wouldn't be so sure about that, dear sister."

A chill suffused me, like pouring ice into my blood through a stab wound. It froze my mind to the core.

"Y-you mean you aren't going to uphold our deal?!"

Leticia came up and hugged me gently from behind. She whispered into my

ear, so softly that only I could hear her, in a horrifying voice that made it feel as though hundreds of insects were crawling down my spine.

"No, no, of course not. I went to all that trouble to prove my oath with magic, did I not?"

"Then...what do you mean?"

"Heh-heh-heh. Tell me, Sister. What do you think is really healing your precious Leon? Restoration magic works because of the mana contained within the spell. Healing potions work by accelerating the body's natural recovery rate. So how do you think Leon is able to recover and grow more powerful by eating monsters?"

"I...I suppose he's taking their life-force into himself? I'm afraid I don't see the __"

"Correct. You can work out the rest on your own, can you not? He's taking their power into himself. Replacing his own body with that of the fairies."

"..."

I didn't understand. I just didn't understand. The gears in my head turned, but no answer was forthcoming, leaving me with only a terrible feeling about what was to come.

"Still hasn't clicked yet? Silly sister. Then let me explain it to you, slowly. After we kill you, I will dispel the barrier, as agreed. Without anything to block it, all the ley-line energy—the very same energy that the Fairy Tree was previously using to produce fairies—will flow into Leon. And just like a fairy, Leon's body is mostly made up of mana."

"...Ah."

At last, the gears clicked smoothly into place.

Without the Fairy Tree, the ley-line energy would steadily build up. Right now, it would be pooling outside the barrier, in far greater concentrations than a single body could contain. Leon's corporeal form was almost nonexistent at this point, consisting almost entirely of mana. If he were exposed to the ley-line energy, he would be unable to resist absorbing it into himself. And then...

"He'll grow bigger and bigger, and finally..."

"...Pop."

"Rgggggghhhh!!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-la!! And that's not all! Remember how I said Leon has taken those monsters' mana into himself? Well, those monsters are called 'Fairy-Eaters' for a reason, you know! They possess a skill called 'Cannibalism.' Do you know what that does? It activates automatically when the bearer is near death and a valid target is nearby. Even if the stream of ley-line energy knocks Leon unconscious, he will be able to go on devouring the Fairy-Eaters and increasing his capacity to hold mana."

With that, Leticia got up, walked around in front of me, and began gathering mana in her hands. First, she would kill me. Then, without her lifting so much as a finger, Leon would die, too.

"Aaaaaaah!! Pleeease! Please, don't! Please! Stop! Don't kill me! Please, please, please don't kill meeee!!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! It was all for nothing! All that time you spent desperately holding out like a complete and utter moron!! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

"No, no, please! I'm begging you, Leticia, don't do it! I was wrong! I'm sorry! Just please don't kill me!"

"Sorry! Have you forgotten what I said already? You are going to die. And it will be me who kills you. No matter what, I shall be the one to end your life with my own hands! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Leticia's mad voice bounced off the walls of my mind as everything flickered black and white. I felt my consciousness fading, and everything blurred, except for the image of Leon frantically striking his fist against the barrier.

"Stop it! I demand you stop this insanity, Hero! This is not what you promised! You promised if I endured your gauntlet, I could offer my life to let Lilia go free! I was so close!"



It was cruel beyond words.

"Why?! We've tried so hard and given so much! We don't deserve this!!"

"My, dear sister, you're starting to sound quite wretched, really. What's become of that ridiculously polite tone of voice you usually use?"

A tremendously powerful fireball appeared in Leticia's palm and began to stretch upward.

"No, no, no! Please don't! Please! I'll do anything, I'll do anything! I'll be your slave, I'll lick your boots, whatever you want! Just please don't do it! Please please pleeease!!"

"Ah, music to my ears! Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Leticia's magic became a pillar of flame, taking on the form of a sword.

"Aggghhhh! Aaahhh! Aaaaaggghhh!!"

My heart succumbed to despair.

"This is the end, Sister. Feel what we felt—my brother, Kaito, and I. Steep in how powerless you were to save the one you love, and die."

I couldn't move. Right now, Leticia looked just like...

"...the demon lord... A true monster..."

"Yes. I've known that for a long, long time."

Then she sliced my neck, and my severed head fell to the ground. In my final moment of life, I watched the fires consign the rest of my body to ash.



"Stop! I beg of you, please end this madness!!"

Standing before Lilia, Leticia constructed a sword of fire. I needed to stop her,

but the barrier before me was impenetrable.

Kaito peered down at me, a gleeful smile across his lips. I had been close, so close to defeating the thousand monsters he had prepared. On the verge of ensuring that Lilia, at least, would escape this predicament alive.

Yet even that glimpse of salvation had been naught but lies, a machination concocted by the deceitful Kaito. In the end, I could do nothing but watch as Leticia's spell turned my beloved Lilia into charred cinders.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"

As her severed head dropped to the ground, a fierce anger overcame me.

I'll kill them. I'll kill them. I'll kill them all!

But before I could act on this impulse, my body was racked by a fierce storm of mana.

"...Huh? Aaaaaaaaaggghhhhhhhhhh!!"

It felt like I had been tossed, bound and helpless, into raging river rapids.

"Hrgh?! Hrgh?! Hrgh?!"

Something was entering my body against my will, and I was powerless to stop it. Mana, flowing into me in unmanageable amounts. When I devoured the Fairy-Eaters, it had felt like my body tissue was expanding, but this sensation was different; it was as though the mana was forcing its way between my cells themselves. Just as the wave of power threatened to wash me away, I suddenly began feeding on the Fairy-Eater beside me, against my own will.

"Grhh!! Gggghhhhh!!"

As I devoured it, my mind grew clearer, and I felt once more the agony I had been subjected to so many times before. As my power grew, so did the unfilled space within me, and the foreign mana rushed to fill it. Amid the excruciating pain, I realized that it would eventually tear me apart.

From then on, I drifted between haze and stark understanding, my only constant experience being that of torturous agony.



"Why do I always cry after it's over?"

After Lilia's death, we dispelled the barrier, as Leticia's oath demanded, and took to the skies to escape the ensuing storm of mana. From there, we watched Leon's demise.

"Graaaaaaaaaahhhh!!"

The man looked nothing like the Leon we knew.

"He's become a ravenous beast...," muttered Leticia.

He was taller than the tree line now, almost fifteen meters in height, rampaging through the forest, crushing trees underfoot and messily devouring the remaining Fairy-Eaters.

"Gruuuuuuuuuuuhhh!!"

I guessed that by this point, he was barely sentient. He was nothing but a monster on a painful journey to the end of his life.

After eating the last Fairy-Eater, Leon looked around and set his sights on the magical spring, the source of the ley-line energy.

"Leticia," I said.

"I know. It shall pose no danger to us. But it does rather raise the question of what you were planning to do without me?"

"I would have teleported farther away and watched from there," I replied. "It's lucky you're here to give us front-row seats instead."

The sky was beginning to brighten, and dawn fast approached. How had the night gone by so quickly?

The end was nigh. I looked back down at Leon, who was lowering his head toward the spring.

"First, I took away the power you so desired. Second, I made you know my despair—of losing someone dear to you right before you could save them. And finally... Finally, I offer you exactly what you need."

What I saw was a prisoner tying his own noose.

He opened his mouth to drink from the spring, and then...

...KABOOOOOOOOM!!

Magical light seared my retinas, and a trembling shock wave swept the land. Leticia's spherical barrier cracked under the impact of the blow. The violent blast lasted several seconds, and when it cleared, we saw that the explosion had cratered out everything for kilometers around.

"That's all power is, in the end."

I muttered this as my tears spilled to the ground.



Thus He Came to the Other Side

That day, the entire town of Zolkia was in an uproar, especially the guild.

"Sigh. This is another fine mess you've left me with, Master Valeria."

Owing to his superior's prolonged absence, the deputy guildmaster had taken command. The stress had just about put him at death's door.

I suppose I don't blame him...

Prince Leon had also not been seen or heard from since appearing at the guild two days prior. He was likely out searching for the guildmaster, but there was no clue to his whereabouts, other than that he had been heading to the nearby forest—one that, according to legend, was home to the fairies.

Additionally, a loud explosion was heard coming from the forest at around dawn the following day, and one particularly early riser at the guild reported seeing a pillar of light in the sky above the trees. The guild responded by dispatching an emergency investigation team to the forest.

I hope the crown prince is okay... If not, perhaps I should start looking for a new job...

There would be hell to pay if Leon went missing under this guild's jurisdiction. At the very least, the upper management would all have to step down... Hmm, now that I thought about it, that would be a neat opportunity for me to rise through the ranks.

Well, not like that's going to happen anyway.

They said that Prince Leon was stronger still than the kingdom's hero. He was like a character out of a children's book. He even refused bodyguards because they only slowed him down.

"Well, then, sir. I shall get to work at once. It wouldn't do to leave the reception desks empty."

"Oh, Johanna. Thank you."

I excused myself and left the flustered deputy to his problems, then made my way back to the first floor, where I stumbled upon some kind of disturbance in the main lobby.

"I thought I told you to pack it in already, old man!"

The voice belonged to an angry adventurer, who was clutching an older gentleman by the collar.

Oh, I wish they'd give it a rest. Don't they know we have enough on our plate as it is?

"Every damn day you put up the same dumb request! Who in their right mind is ever gonna take it?!"

"Ughh... Rghh..."

"Hey! Cut that out right now!" I yelled. "No violence in the guildhall!"

I sighed inwardly and sank my face into my palm as the rambunctious adventurer lifted the old man off the ground.

"Johanna, babe! You don't get it, do ya? Sometimes, you just gotta pummel some sense into these senile old farts!"

My attempts at mediation fell on deaf ears, and the adventurer cast me a threatening gaze.

"Your paltry intimidation won't work on me," I reiterated. "Need I remind you that an adventurer who starts an altercation with a client shall face immediate demotion?"

"Grh... Fuck it!"

"Ugh...!"

After a moment's thought, the adventurer seemed to see sense, roughly unhanding the old man and causing him to fall flat on his backside.

"Listen here, gramps," he said. "You ain't gonna find anyone here crazy enough to harvest fairy wings for you. Don't even bother clogging up the quest board with that crap!"

"B-but the rules say I'm entitled to request anything, as long as it's not illegal..."

"That ain't what I'm sayin', old man! I'm saying you're wastin' your damn time and ours! Who's gonna go out and hunt fairies for the peanuts you're payin'? Nobody's even proved they exist! And still, every damn day you're in here, whinin', 'Oh, won't somebody take my request?' It's fuckin' maddening!"

"Ohh... I'm sorry the reward isn't to your liking...but this is all I have..."

"Then don't bother makin' a request, dumbass!!"

"All right, Guile," I said, stepping in. "I think it's about time you stop punching above your weight class, Mr. D-rank."

"But somebody's gotta tell him, babe...," said the adventurer, scratching his cheek. It seemed my blunt retort had caused him to settle down somewhat.

"Sir," I said, addressing the older gentleman. "I apologize for the behavior of this adventurer here, but at the same time, I must admit it's vanishingly unlikely that anybody would take this quest."

""

"You are, of course, free to make whatever requests you wish within the bounds of the law, but I just think fairy wings are a little unrealistic..."

I attempted to reason with the old man, tactfully omitting the part about his miserable excuse for compensation.

"Perhaps you could tell us why you're after fairy wings specifically? We may be able to find a substitute that's a little more reasonable. Plus, if people know the reason, they might be more willing to take on the pay— Understand?"

"...No. It has to be fairy wings..."

The old man only muttered the same words over and over again. For the last three years, he had been coming here with the same request. Why he wanted the wings was unclear, but he was obviously desperate.

That's why I've avoided broaching the subject with him so far, but...

"You ain't listening to a word we're sayin', old man. Just give up."

Losing his patience, Guile reached for the old man again.

"Wait," I cried. "I said not to... Huh?"

"...Stop that."

Their voice barely above a whisper, someone grabbed his arm.

"Huh?! What the hell?!"

Nobody saw him coming. It was like he had just stepped out of nowhere. He wore a low hood, but I recognized his voice.

"Didn't the lady just tell you?" he said. "Adventurers shouldn't start altercations with their clients."

"Argh! Rgh! L-let go! Let go of me!"

The hooded man gripped him so tightly that I could hear Guile's bones breaking.

"Whoops. Sorry about that. I don't know my own strength sometimes."

"Whoa!!"

The man suddenly let go, and this time, it was Guile who fell flat on his behind.

"I-it's you," I stuttered.

I caught a glimpse of his face. That, and his voice reminded me of the boy who had been made an S-rank adventurer only recently.

I think his name was...Kaito Ukei.

"H-hey! Listen to me! Where do you get off, butting in on other people's conversations?"

G-Guile! Don't you know who this guy is?!

The lowly adventurer lashed out at Kaito in a sorry attempt to regain his pride, but Kaito completely ignored him. Instead, he spoke to me.

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"Excuse me," he said. "You're that receptionist, right?"
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"Huh? Oh, y-yes."

An S-rank adventurer was above such idiotic disputes, it seemed. But then Kaito did something I didn't expect at all.

"I'll accept your request," he said to the old man. "Hand me that form."

"Huh? T-truly?"

"Yep. Give it here."

Huh? Huh? Huh?

I could only watch, stunned, as Kaito acquired the quest form from the old man, took it to a nearby desk, and signed his name to it.

"Can you check this is all in order?" he then said to me.

"Er... Yes. Th-the quest is to harvest fairy wings. No deadline; requested amount, one or more; reward, five silvers. Is that okay?"

"Yep, that's fine."

"Then the gentleman's request has been accepted."

I took Kaito's form and signed my name on it as well.

"Hey, don't ignore me! I'll-!!"

"Shut up."

"Hrk?!"

Kaito's S-rank intimidation was more than enough to leave Guile quaking in his boots. He didn't even manage to finish his sentence.

"Now then, the fairy wings. I think you'll find these to be in order."

"Huh?"

"What?"

Kaito emptied his pack onto the counter, producing a large heap of beautiful, rainbow-colored wings.

"Ohh... Ohhh!!"

"I kept you waiting a long time, old man, but here you go. Hope it's enough."

"W-wait a minute," I stammered. "What do you mean? Are these real?!"

I didn't even believe in fairies, so I suspected the wings might be fake.

Then again, if imitations are good enough for the client, then...

But the next instant, the old man spoke, as if entranced by the sight.

"N-no... These are real. They look exactly the same as I remember..."

With timid, fearful steps, he approached the counter and reached out his hand.

He scooped up a handful of the wings...and crushed them in his grip.

"Sob. Whaaaaaaaaaghhhhh!!"

The old man burst out crying. Tears rolled down his face, and a wail worked its way out of his dry, cracked throat.

I wasn't sure why the old man reacted that way, so I turned to Kaito for an answer, but...

"Huh? Kaito ...?"

By the time I looked up, he was already gone.



"Well then, shall we be going?"

"Yeah. I've done everything I can here."

With Leticia by my side, we resolved to put the town of Zolkia behind us.

"So, what brought you back here in the end?" asked Yuuto.

"Just a little closure," I replied cryptically. "I had the option to settle my debt a little, and so I did."

The reason, of course, was the old man at the guild. In my first life, he had

been attacked and killed by monsters on the outskirts of the fairy forest. He must have been trying to earn a little more money to increase the reward on his quest and ventured out too far.

The date now was even later than when I first met him, so I had assumed he had already died the same way. I was a little surprised, then, to see him alive at the guild.

Is this what they call "the butterfly effect"?

I didn't know what had changed to allow the old man to escape death this time, but miraculously, he'd lived to see his wish come true and the race of fairies exterminated.

Their home, their tree, and their queen. All of it was now just dust on the wind.

"You look happy, dear brother," said Mai, smiling sweetly at me. "That's nice."

"Who are you, my therapist?" I replied.

I mean, I was happy I managed to get that weight off my chest, but I hadn't intended to show it so openly.

"Yeah, yeah, all's well that ends well. Now, why don't you let Nono here give you a happy ending? We can duck behind those trees over there and—Aieeeeee!! Letty, that huuurts!!!"

"You have only yourself to blame," Leticia told him. "I shall not abide a harem unless I have vetted and approved each member personally!"

"Please don't give me a harem at all...," I whined.

Besides, Nonorick is a dude. I know he looks like that, but he is actually a guy, don't forget.

"Dear brother? Need I give you a lesson in proper morals?" asked Mai, as a dark cloud gathered around her, yet somehow without inducing a singular change in her joyful expression.

"Ha-ha, you sure are popular with the ladies, Kaito," Yuuto said, laughing.

"Gahahh! Bow-bowaa!"

Even Guren, who had joined our party this morning in his dragon pup form, roared and belched a tiny flame, as if threatening me.

"Et tu, Guren? Give me a break."

The party atmosphere was as relaxed as ever. Would it kill them to act like we were heading for the front lines for a second?

"Sigh. And according to what Leticia told me, it's a real war zone out there..."

I thought back to what she had said the previous day.



After watching Leon's death, we headed back to Zolkia and rented a large room at an inn on the outskirts of town. Since we'd stayed up all night and were full on the satisfaction of our revenge, we slept like babies, and by the time we woke up, it was already past noon. We decided then to finally confer and share what we knew with each other.

"My name is Leticia," said Leticia, starting off the round of introductions. "Leticia Lu Harleston. Demon lord, and also Kaito's girlfriend. That there is Nonorick. He's good with a blade and found his way into my service under the guise of a bodyguard. In truth, though, we have been working toward my revenge together."

"Call me Nono, guys and dolls! Ooh, isn't this nice, a whole party of cuties! I can't wait to— Aagh! Owowow!!"

"You're not sinking your fangs into my sister and best friend that easily, Nonorick."

I let his lecherous face taste my viselike grip.

"My name is Mai Ukei," said Mai. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Miss Harleston."

"And I'm Yuuto. Howdy, all."

While I reprimanded Nonorick, my two compatriots shook hands with Leticia.

"Oh...er... Charmed, I'm sure. And...how do you two know Kaito, if I may ask?"

"Why, I'm his darling little sister."

"I guess we're like...best friends?"

"Ah," said Leticia. "I suppose I should have guessed from the name. So you both hail from Kaito's world?"

Leticia gave a friendly smile, but for some reason, she seemed to be acting oddly reserved around the pair.

"What's up, Letty, cat got your tongue?" teased Nonorick. "Oh, oh, don't tell me it's a love triangle! Is it?!"

"No, you fool! I'm just nervous! Don't you understand how eagerly I've awaited this meeting?!"

"Not really?"

But I understood. Because I, too, was looking at a scene I once thought impossible. That of introducing Leticia to my friends and family.

"Right," I said. "Let's skip over the details and go straight to the team meeting. To start things off, I have a question. Why are you alive, Nonorick? I distinctly recall cutting off your head."

"Hmm, curious, are we?" replied Nonorick with a coy smile. "That's actually because I'm a true vampire! See?"

He opened his mouth, displaying his sharpened fangs.

"A true vampire? You're kidding me..."

I thought back to that egotistical bastard I once knew. He had told me he was the only true vampire left, but with Kuu, and now Nonorick, I had two reasons to suspect that claim. I had been meaning to ask him about it, but I had no idea where he was. Maybe it was better to just forget the whole thing.

"Well, I guess that makes sense, then," I said. "That's certainly the only explanation I can think of for how you survived that wound."

"Hmm?!" Leticia's ears perked up at this revelation. "Hold on a minute, Nonorick! Are you saying you and Kaito were enemies?!"

"Oh, I wouldn't say enemies," Nonorick said, grinning. "We just did a little

hate-fucking, that's— Aaagh! Owowowow!! Why?! What did I do?!"

Leticia's fists swiftly enacted a smackdown on Nonorick's blond head.

"You're talking nonsense again, that's why!" I yelled. "Don't make stuff up; we were fighting to kill!"

"Whaa?!" gasped Nonorick. "You would never actually want to kill me, would you?"

"If I didn't before, I sure do now! Anyway, that's not what happened, so please put down that flaming sword, Leticia!"

"Kaito, I'm willing to compromise and allow you a harem, but I must always come first, do you understand?"

"If we're talking compromise, how about you drop the weapon?!"

You realize this hotel is made of wood and straw, right?!

Oh dear. Why does having so many people always derail the conversation?

"Getting back to the point," I entreated. "Leticia, how much have you told Nonorick?"

"Nothing," said Leticia. "I only offered blood in exchange for him assisting with my revenge. The most I could accomplish myself was to kill Lilia outright, after all."

"...Right, I see."

"What's that? Something you haven't told me? Ooh, ooh, let me know, too! I love secrets!"

Nonorick squealed and squirmed with delight.

Well, I suppose if he's helping out, I might as well...

I thought Nonorick was nothing but a bloodthirsty maniac, but from how he'd acted during our vengeance, perhaps I misjudged him.

"Okay, then. Perhaps it'll be easier if I tell you what's going on. It's a long story, so settle in..."

I brought Nonorick up to speed, while also informing Leticia of everything that

had happened in my do-over so far.

"...I see," said Leticia when I was done. "So now you're trying to regroup with Minnalis and Shuria."

She gave a satisfied nod. Nonorick, however, had grown oddly subdued as a result of my tale.

"Kai? Is what you said true? That by using the Holy Sword of Retribution, you can make people share their vengeance?"

"Huh? Why would I lie about that?"

I knew I couldn't prove anything that I said, but I found it strange he got hung up on that particular detail.

However, that wasn't why Nonorick was asking. The true reason was something I never would have imagined.

"Please, Kai! Use it on me!"

"Huh?"

"You see, a long, long time ago, there was someone I really, really wanted to kill. But they died before I could get strong enough. Ever since then, I've been wandering, unsatisfied and unable to get it out of my system."

Everyone fell silent at Nonorick's solemn words.

"But if you use that sword on me, I can take revenge at last! Please, Kai, let me join your party."

Listening to him, I felt like something finally clicked for me.

Nonorick...he's like me if I never chose revenge.

The only difference was that I had been given the choice, while Nonorick had not.

I always wondered why I could never find it in myself to hate him, even as my blade parted his flesh. I figured it was because I learned my style of swordplay from him, but now I knew it was down to something deeper. He was a kindred spirit.

But...is that a good enough reason to make him my partner in crime?

I understood that Nonorick wanted to take revenge, but the object of his vengeance no longer existed. Nothing I offered could make up for that.

However, as if sensing my troubles, someone unexpectedly gave me an answer.

"What are you hesitating for, you nincompoop? Use him!"

"Leticia?"

"Did you not say this before? Two is more fun than one. Two can come up with much better plans, put much more effort into torturing your targets, breaking them, grinding them down into mush."

"That's..."

One of the first parts of my story, from right when Minnalis had joined forces with me.

"Nonorick isn't just here to kill, so why not make him your partner in crime?"

"...I guess you're right."

"You always overthink things, Kaito. That's why you're going bald before your time, you know?"

"I'm not! My hair's as thick as ever!"

I wouldn't have hesitated if I'd known it would lead to this much embarrassment. Sighing, I conjured the Holy Sword of Retribution.

"Oh, but me first, of course," said Leticia.

"What a mess. This is supposed to be a solemn affair, you know."

With another sigh, I stabbed first Leticia, and then Nonorick with the blade. As usual, it emitted a searing black light and then dissipated into nothing, but not before delivering us a zoetrope of memories, merging our fates.

"Quite delightful. I didn't expect it to feel like that," Leticia commented. Nonorick, meanwhile, began acting like he had just been born again.

"Ah-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha! Yes, yes! This is amazing! This burning, festering, tearing feeling inside me!! *This* is what I've been searching for!"

Meanwhile, I felt my spiritual connection to my two missing accomplices restored.

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"Ah, the line's back up. Minnalis, Shuria, can you hear me?"
"Master!"
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"Kaito!"

It had been so long since I'd heard their voices. Still, they sounded distant and crackly, as if the Soulspeak connection was not fully stable, probably owing to the vast distance between us.

"It's good to hear from you," I transmitted. "Are you two okay?"

"We're fine, Master. What about you? Has anything happened?"

"Are you all right, Kaito?"

"I'm fine, don't worry. Where are you two right now? We should try to meet up if we can."

"About that, Master. There's something we need to tell you. Come to the See at once, to the Holy Crystal. If it's destroyed, we'll all be... ... by the..."

"Watch out for the kingdom and the empire... ...hurry..."

"Minnalis? Shuria? I can barely hear you! What's happening?"

Their voices were drowned out by noise. I shouted out to them, but there was no reply. And then, all of a sudden, the connection dropped, like a dying walkietalkie.

"Hey," said Nonorick. "Were those the two girls you were with back when we met in Dartras?"

"It sounds like Minnalis and Shuria have noticed it, too," said Leticia "Though it cut out before they were able to go into details."

Everyone was now able to listen in on the Soulspeak network, so I didn't need to tell them what I'd heard.

"They said to beware of the kingdom and the empire," said Yuuto.

"And to head to the See? And a Holy Crystal? Dear brother, what were they

talking about?"

"That's the Church's country," I answered. "The Holy Crystal is what powers the great barrier that covers the continent. That barrier weakens any demons who pass through it."

I then turned to Leticia. "Noticed it, too?" I inquired. "That sounds like you know something we don't."

"Before I explain that," she said, "I should first talk a bit about what I've been doing all this time. I touched on it earlier, but..."

Leticia began telling me what had happened to her so far. Apparently, she had gone on living alongside me after I killed her the first time around. At first, her soul dwelled in the magic stone she gave to me, but over time, it transferred to my body. All that time, she saw and heard everything I did, and she could even communicate with me, in a fashion, through dreams. Over time, she recovered her power, ultimately transferring her soul into Guren, when the three of us encountered him in my do-over.

After that, she returned to her own body, where she began plotting her revenge against Lilia. Along the way, she learned about the divine foe who sought to drain this world of life, and about the holy vision that had resulted in my summoning.

"Not that I give two tosses about any gods," Leticia tactlessly explained, "but I thought the kingdom worshipped the Great Spirit instead. And even though you gave up on being the hero this time, they've suddenly produced a mysterious champion out of nowhere. I wished to investigate that more, but it seems we shan't get the chance."

I wondered if perhaps the Great Spirit couldn't simply be a god by another name, but judging by what Leticia had said, it wasn't that simple.

"Do you remember our earlier reunion? At that time, we were heading to the kingdom, when a bunch of those Offshoots suddenly appeared from a nearby military fort."

"...Huh? What the hell? What's that about?" I asked.

"On that front, your guess is as good as mine," Leticia replied. "I'm just telling

you what I saw. That's why we changed our plans and headed to Zolkia, so that we could register as adventurers and acquire information through the guild."

That explained why Leticia had gone to all the trouble of trying to become an S-rank adventurer.

"Wait, wait. It doesn't make any sense! Where are the Offshoots coming from if you're still healthy?"

"That's exactly what we wanted to know! I still possess the arcstone, in case you're wondering. I plan to make full use of its power until I either achieve my vengeance or it's about to consume me."

There was still more than a year before Leticia's transformation took hold. Even if we were to play it extra safe, using the arcstone for another six months or so shouldn't pose a problem.

"Anyway, that's my story," Leticia concluded. "I was just about to exact my vengeance when you showed up. It was so perfectly timed, I thought you must have planned it!"

"If I'd planned it, I would have come up with a better reunion than that..."

"Quite. I still remember how you cried. 'No! I'm never letting you go! Never again!'"

"Shut up. I've already tried to put it out of my mind," I muttered, averting my eyes from Leticia's cheerful gaze.

"In any case, I sent Guren ahead to scout the See and report on the kingdom's movements. He is under orders to psychically contact me if anything happens... Rgh, I don't know if I should be amused by this marvelous timing or dismayed by the results..."

Leticia suddenly adopted a sour look halfway through our conversation.

"Did he just tell you something?" I asked.

"Yes, and it seems we were too late," she replied.

"The royal and imperial forces have just entered the war...alongside an army of Offshoots."



The front lines of the war had been thrown into chaos by the sudden emergence of a new foe. One that was neither human nor demon, an army of plantlike creatures.

"What the hell's going on?! Who are they? What are they?!"

"""Bwaaaaaahh..."""

Over time, the front lines had been pushed back from the shores of the continent, toward the holy city, where the crystal resided. This steady defeat was amplified after the kingdom's hero retreated following a battle with Ardelius, the Baron of Flames.

Then, just as all seemed lost, with the demons poised to take the city, *they* appeared, swaying and lurching like zombies.

The twin armies of the kingdom and empire, with glassy eyes and vacant looks, accompanied by humanoid soldiers formed of plant material.

"C-Captain! Captain!!"

"Grh! Dammit! Dammiiit!!"

A Gilmusian squad found themselves cornered on multiple fronts, and the horde of mysterious plant creatures engulfed them. The abhorrent army delivered indiscriminate slaughter, its chimeric troops employing their rootlike tentacles to engulf anyone they encountered, regardless of loyalty.

The royal and imperial soldiers, meanwhile, were smaller in number, but ruthlessly loyal and unquestioning, and possessed of monstrous strength.

In no time at all, the tide of battle swung strongly in favor of its newest aggressors, and their control spread across the map like a seeping blot.

"Grr! Stay back! Back!!"

"""Bwabwabwah..."""

One man, a lieutenant of the demon armies, fired blast after blast of his Wind magic at the never-ending creatures while advancing toward the holy city. The plan was to shatter the Holy Crystal and dispel the great barrier, thus allowing

the demons to call upon their full strength. Ardelius was presently on his way to the cathedral, where the crystal resided.

I just have to keep these creatures away, so they don't interfere!

"Come to me, the four winds! Imperial Zephyr: Wind Blade Dance!!"

Four tornadoes appeared around him. When the demon pointed, these tornadoes gathered and shot off radially in that direction, shedding blades of wind all around them.

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"""Bwaaaahhh!!!"""
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The wind blades sliced the monsters to ribbons, leaving nothing but a cloud of dust.

"Phew, that's better. Now I can actually see what I'm— Gruh?!"

"Kill all obstacles. Plant the seeds."

"Y-you... G-ghuh..."

The demon turned to see that one of the glassy-eyed humans had somehow sneaked up behind him and delivered a mighty punch that had torn hole straight through his heart. Then the human released something into the hole.

"Aaaaaghhh! No...no! What are you doing to me?!"

"Kill all obstacles. Plant the seeds."

"Stop it! Stop it, I'll...grhhh...gaaaah!! No, no!! Stay out! Stay oooout!!"

The demon fell to the ground, writhing in agony, then suddenly went still. Suddenly calm, he stood up and looked around with blank eyes.

"Kill all obstacles. Plant the seeds."

His eyes searched out unassimilated matter, eager to carry out his new orders. He felt clear of mind and purpose, and even more powerful now. Perhaps he could even defeat Ardelius, his master, who he had never even considered defying before.

Then he looked to the sky and saw something unassimilated.

Five people, and one creature. A boy, who moved as if running on the air. A

girl, who levitated through the sky with magic. Another girl, who moved just like the first boy. A girl who commanded the wind, much like the demon himself did, a boy with monstrous gray wings, and a Fire Dragon following the group.

"Kill all obstacles. Plant the seeds."

The demon took to the skies in pursuit.

"Out of our way, loser!"

Alas, without even getting the chance to test his newfound might, he was cleaved in two by the stroke of a single sword.



"Damn, what's going on out here?!"

After teleporting to the outskirts of the holy city, we were immediately thrust into combat. We took to the skies and headed straight for our destination, me and Nonorick using Air Step, Leticia using flight magic, Mai utilizing the Wind magic of Anemol Arsenal, and Yuuto giving himself wings with Monstrous Metamorphosis.

Of course, the flashiness of this maneuver singled us out for attacks from below, but...

"Come to me, the ice-sodden slush. Muddy Hail: Ice-Stone Petrification!"

"Kilo Flame, Kilo Water, Kilo Smash, and try a Kilo Spark on for size!"

"White Ramble!"

"Wind Blade Dance!!"

"Iron Dragon: Upper Body!!"

"Grh... Graaaaaaaaghhh!!"

...nothing was able to lay so much as a scratch on us. For starters, we had the combined might of the hero and the demon lord on our side, but the rest of our party was also pretty overpowered by this world's standards. The spawn of the Demonlight Tree were no match for us, and while those glassy-eyed soldiers we encountered once in a while were far tougher than they seemed at first glance, one solid blow was still enough to dispatch them without us having to break a

sweat.

However...

"There sure are a lot of them," noted Leticia. "No matter how many we fell, more keep coming."

The newest force seemed to cover the entire battlefield. Just what had transpired to cause this?

"Dear brother, you must not let your mind wander. That is when you make mistakes."

"Oof. Guilty as charged. In that case, let's head to secure the crystal."

I wasn't fully aware of what the stakes were, but Minnalis and Shuria had told me to protect it, so that was what I would do.

The mana in this area was under heavy distortion as a result of the unending combat, which left me unable to contact Minnalis and Shuria via Soulspeak. I could sense they were here, though, and guessed they were probably trying to reach the cathedral like I was.

"Let's hurry," I said. "Ardelius is after the crystal as well, and most likely, Metelia is there defending it."

"Two of our sworn enemies in one place!" squealed Nonorick. "Let's get there and kill them as fast as we can!"

"I don't think I need to remind you," I cautioned him, "but don't forget why we're here."

Ardelius and Metelia were not our primary goals at the moment.

"Don't think I'll let you off lightly if you kill too quickly," added Leticia. "Ardelius killed my brother. I shall be the one to take his life. We may be partners in crime now, but I shan't budge on that."

"Hmph, fine, I get it. Boo..."

"But our first priority is to secure the Holy Crystal, right?" asked Yuuto.

"And if we can, we are to neutralize and capture Ardelius and Metelia, correct?" asked Mai.

"That's right," I said. "We can't kill them yet. Not Metelia, at least; there's something I want to ask her."

Metelia. Somehow, it seemed like she had retained her memories of the first time as well.

I'll make you tell me everything up front, Metelia. I wouldn't want my vengeance to be polluted with regret.

She had appeared from out of nowhere and sent me back to my world without my memories. For so long, I had burned with the desire to kill her, yet even now, I didn't know why Metelia had initially betrayed me.

"Right. So...get out of my way."

I sprinted through the air, finally arriving in the skies above the holy city itself. From our vantage point, we could see the Lunarian soldiers desperately holding out against the Offshoot army. The city seemed to have already been evacuated, likely on Metelia's orders. Clever girl. That meant we could fight all we wanted without worrying about collateral damage.

I'll have to watch out, though; we could end up clashing with Ardelius and Metelia both at once.

Already I could see the spires of the cathedral. We would be arriving in less than five minutes.

"Get out of our way, dammit!!"

Enemies fell by the wayside as we made our way to it. The stained-glass skylight in the roof would take us straight to where the Holy Crystal was kept.

"Just you wait, Metelia..."

"Ardelius... Oh, how shall I kill you?"

"Sigh. Are you sure you understood our priorities, dear brother? I'm really starting to worry."

"It is starting to look like they might just kill them."

My mind was clear. Perhaps it was because I had Leticia with me.

I didn't think it would make this much difference just having my girlfriend on

the team. I'm a man of simple pleasures, I suppose.

However, my self-deprecating didn't alter the fact that I felt like I had changed. I always used to lose myself in the moment, get carried away, and forget my priorities. That was because this world had broken me and forced me to the bottom of a deep, dark pit.

"Hi-yah!"

I shattered the angel depicted on the stained glass. Leaving Guren up top in his dragon form, the five of us dropped into the cathedral. When my boots hit the solid marble of its solemn floors, I saw it.

An elf man I'd never seen before was standing in front of Metelia and Ardelius. Sharp wooden stakes stuck out of their hearts.

"Wh...what the ...?"

"What...have you done?"

Leticia and I were speechless. We didn't understand. We couldn't comprehend what we were seeing. Metelia shook as blood sprayed from the wound. Ardelius's body turned to sand as a fissure ran through his demon heart.

"Well, now, who do we have here?" The figure grinned. "I must commend you on your excellent timing, ladies and gentlemen."

Why was he smiling? Why was he smiling? Why was he smiling at us? Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you fuck you!!

"You...bastaaaard!!"

"You...imbiciiile!!"

Before another thought could cross our minds, Leticia and I acted.

"Devour him, Azure Flame Wolf!"

"Evil Dragon Hellfire Abyss!!"

The two creatures of fire unleashed by our attacks intertwined as they hurtled

toward the mysterious elf.

It was a reflex, a laughable attempt to extinguish the ugly sight before us, but nevertheless, these two flames contained enough power to incinerate anything in their path. My power as the hero had almost returned to its peak, and fire was the strongest out of all of Leticia's exceptional affinities.

However...

"The ashen flower choketh all. Petal of Cinder: Flanecia."

A wall of pink and gray petals blocked our attacks.

"Ohh, scary, scary," the man taunted. "Your swift assistance is much appreciated, Princess."

Light footfalls tapped against the marble as another figure stepped out of the gloom.

"A-Alicia?" I said, stunned.

"Good to see you again, Ex-Hero. It's been a while."

It was Alicia Orollea, princess of the Orollea Kingdom. The girl who'd summoned me to this world and ultimately betrayed and killed me.

"Wh...what the hell are you doing here?!"

I couldn't keep up. Things were moving too fast for my brain to follow. And while these external events caused my mind to spin, the deepest, innermost recesses of my consciousness were scorching me from the inside out, screaming at me to cut the princess down where she stood.

"Dear brother, you must stay calm!"

"You shall pay for what you've done, perfidious wench!"

"H-hold up, Letty! They're on another level! It's crazy! My senses are going wild!"

I heard Mai's voice. Leticia's anger. Nonorick's panic.

They reminded me I had people here to protect. To rely on.

I couldn't afford to deny reality now. I needed to understand what was

happening.

"Did you two kill Metelia and Ardelius?" I asked.

"I did nothing of the sort," the princess replied. "It was all the work of that high elf standing over there."

"High elf...? What's one of those doing here? Who are you?"

"Oh, just think of me as an unpredictable joker!" the elf answered. "I'm only here to liven up the stage!"

It seems he has no intention of giving straight answers.

"So who's that in the armor? My replacement?"

"..."

My rage had initially blinded me to the presence of another figure, dressed in full silver plate mail, standing behind Alicia without a word. Despite their majestic appearance, however, their presence was unimpressive, and I couldn't sense much power emanating from them.

"Tee-hee. Why don't you guess?"

"Hrgh!!"

As soon as I mentioned the armored figure, however, Alicia grinned a broad grin, like a poisonous flower in bloom. Psychological disgust took hold, and I battled the urge to vomit.

"...On second thought, I don't care that much," I answered. "So long as I know you two are working alongside that elf there, that's good enough for me."

It was looking vanishingly unlikely that further conversation would produce fruitful results, so there was no need to waste any more time.

"All that matters to me is that you took my sworn enemy away from me."

A thick lump of hate worked its way up my throat, spilling through the cracks between my lips.

"Especially you, Alicia. You're screwed. Oh, you're really screwed. I only regret that you can only die once."

"What a sorry excuse for a man you are. But I'm afraid I don't care about you at all anymore."

"Now, now, chums, let's just settle down, shall we? You wouldn't want to miss the big show because you were busy tearing each other's throats out!"

The time for words was over.

"...Leticia, are you with me?"

"Of course I am, you fool. That man will die."

I was calm and analytic once more, but that didn't mean my anger had gone away. If anything, it had only condensed into a thicker, molten blob.

"Mai, Yuuto. Sorry to drag you into this, but I'm going to need your help. If this high elf took out Metelia and Ardelius at once, then he's bad news. And something's up with Alicia, too. She stopped both of our attacks like it was nothing. I don't know what happened to her, but we'd better be careful."

Yuuto and Mai were by no means weak, but they were still lacking in experience. Battle sharpened the mind, and in a fight like this, where we didn't know what our foe was capable of, quick-wittedness could be the difference between victory and defeat.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, my friend, but I don't intend to fight you. The actors on this stage have been switched out," said the elf.

"Shut the hell up!! You don't get to decide that after what you did! I'll kill you! I'll freaking kill you! You better not die too quickly, or I'll— Wait, is that the Holy Crystal?!"

With a magician-like wave of his hand, a shining gem appeared in the elf's palm. I had seen it before in my first life.

"Come one, come all! It's curtains on the tragic hero and his path of revenge! We stand now at the dawn of a new tale, an epic myth of gods and men! Bear witness to the moment it all begins!"

"Grh! No!!"

Alarm bells went off inside my head. Before I could stop the elf, however, the sacred crystal shattered into luminous shards.

I heard a crack like that of an enormous pane of glass, as if transmitted directly into my head, and watched as a pillar of light rose into the sky.

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"Rrghh?!"

"What is happening?!"

"D-dear brother...!"

"Urgh...my head!!"

"Shut up, shut up, shut uuup!"
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The light blasted the roof off the building, and a wave of force pushed me back.

What the hell? Nothing like this ever happened the first time! ... Rgh!

The crystal had shattered last time, too, but it hadn't produced such a devastating effect.

The pillar began shrinking, but I got the distinct feeling that our troubles had only just begun. As it converged onto a single point, I heard a clear ringing tone, like the sound of a bell. For a moment, time seemed to halt, and the sound cut out, like the calm before the mother of all storms.

Then a voice came from out of nowhere.

"Entering final stage of manifestation sequence."

Suspended in midair at the center of the beam was the silent armored figure. The voice was as clear and calm as spring water.

Then, slowly, the armor began to crack, before finally splintering like glass and revealing the captivating form of a woman I'd never seen before.

Her snow-white hair was partially tied up at the back, with the remainder falling to the length of her toes. Her features were unnaturally pretty and regular, her expression emotionless, like a doll's, and her loose-fitting robes exuded a solemn and majestic air.

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None of us could utter a word, but I recognized the feeling. The sensation of being looked down upon from somewhere high above.

"Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!! The manifestation is complete! Lady Lunaris walks the earth at last! All my hard work has paid off! Ha-ha-ha!!"

"..."

The elf's mad laughter echoed off the walls. The Offshoots and the glassyeyed soldiers all began rising into the air like the Rapture had come, and Alicia and the high elf rose to join them.

Lunaris? That's Lunaris?

"Hmm. How strange it is to inhabit mortal flesh," she spoke. "It feels... restrictive...even with a unit as exceptional as this one."

It was terrifying. Utterly terrifying. Alarm bells were going off in my head, and I didn't even know what she was capable of. I sensed that her mana felt exactly the same as that of the enemies around us, but all I knew was that this woman was a force to be reckoned with, whether she was really the Church's Goddess or not.

My brain just kept screaming at me like an idiot, saying nothing of value, polluting my thoughts.

Perhaps that was why I didn't react until it was too late.

"I ought to test the bounds of this vessel. Blessed Aureole."

"Huh ...?"

Before I could do anything to stop it, Lunaris pointed a finger at us. A halo of light appeared for an instant around the tip, before a blinding beam shot toward us and pierced Mai in the stomach.

"Hmm. It seems my aim was somewhat compromised."

"Gah...Ghhh!!"

"M..."

The strength left her body in an instant, and Mai collapsed to her knees, thick red blood pouring from her lips.

"MAIIIIII!!"

Leticia rushed to Mai's side, holding her up and administering a healing spell,

but it was no use.

"What's wrong?! My magic isn't working!!"

Lunaris, however, was unperturbed, merely flexing and unflexing her fingers before fixing her gaze our way once more.

"The hero, the demon lord, the true vampire, the two interlopers, and the fully grown Fire Dragon... All the anomalies, helpfully gathered in one place."

"Dammit... Rgh!!"

As soon as I looked into her eyes, I felt frozen with fear from the inside out. Even if I had known it was coming, there was nothing I could have done to stop her previous attack. When I realized that, a cold sweat dribbled down the back of my neck.

Just then, the elf man stepped in.

"Pardon me, Your Gloriousness, but I wonder if I couldn't trouble you a moment before you proceed with the cleansing? You see, one of those six has rather caught my eye, and with your permission, I'd like to bring them onto our side."

"...Hmm. Very well. Proceed."

The Goddess lowered her arm.

Hmm? What does that mean? Is this guy still after something?

Still, whatever the reason, it had bought us some time. I needed to patch Mai up and get out of here before— "Excellent. Then tell me, boy. Will you not reconsider your loyalties? You've seen firsthand what I can do. This is your last chance...Yuuto Kanazaki."

"...Huh?"

A barbaric smile crossed the elf's lips.

"Y-Yuuto? What's he talking about?"

"...I'm sorry, Kaito. I tried...but there's only one person who matters to me, and that's Shiori."

A massive pair of wings sprouted from Yuuto's back, propelling him up toward

the Goddess.

"Yuuto? What are you doing?!"

"Now, My Lady," said the elf, "Would you not remove the chains that bind our new ally?"

"I see. Your aptitude for strategy is indeed impressive. Very well."

Lunaris waved her hand, and Yuuto was wrapped in a bright light.

"Hrg...Kah!!"

All of a sudden, I heard a sound like snapping metal, and my spiritual connection to Yuuto was severed. I didn't need to check to know that the Goddess had just voided our revenge contract.

"Wh-why are you doing this?! Are you betraying me, Yuuto?!"

"Kaito, I...I met this elf man once before, in town. He told me he could bring Shiori back to life."

"What?!"

"I know, okay?! I know how much this hurts you...but I have no choice!"

"Come now," said the elf to me. "Don't blame your friend. What are the tawdry bonds of friendship before the burning fires of love? Yuuto's only human, after all."

But I could see nothing but red. Yuuto betrayed me? He betrayed me?! I could see nothing. Nothing.

"I'll kill you, Yuutooooo!!"

I screamed so loud, my throat would tear, but Yuuto only turned and said...

"I'm sorry, Kaito. For everything."

He placed his hand on the elf's shoulder.

"Hmm? What's the matter, boy?"

"And I'm sorry, Shiori, for throwing my life away like this. *Bomb Boulder: Full Body.*"

As soon as Yuuto spoke those words, his flesh began transforming into

glowing crimson rock.

"Wh-what?!"

"Y-Yuuto! What are you thinking?!"

Vermilion rays burst from the seams in his body, and Yuuto wrapped his arms around the high-elf man.

"Kaito, run!!" he yelled.

The Bomb Boulder. A monster made of rock that lived in volcanic areas. When it died, it expended all of its remaining life and mana to produce a self-destructive blast.

"Wait, Yuuto! No! Stop! Don't do it! Yuutoooo!!"

By the time I realized what Yuuto was doing, it was too late to stop him.

The elf began to panic. "Wh-what?! What's the meaning of this?! What's your game, boy?"

"...Good-bye, Kaito."

Yuuto cast me a weak smile and twinkled with crimson light.

"I'd rather not have to listen to that."

At the last fraction of a second, a barrier appeared around the doomed pair, encasing and containing the ensuing explosion.

"Hmm. Quite powerful...for a mortal."

"What?!"

After the explosion died down, the inside of the barrier was completely empty. There was no trace of either Yuuto or the elf man, as though neither of them had ever existed.

"Mortal units have a habit of behaving in...unpredictable ways. For the time being, I have no further use for you."

Lunaris gave an unconcerned wave of her hand, and the barrier shrank into nothing.

None of what I was seeing felt real. All I could do was stare in amazement as it

unfolded.

"Now then, I must track down the whereabouts of the local god. Since it seems you anomalies are not powerful enough to pose a threat, I do not need to waste time killing you."

Lunaris calmly smiled.

"Then I will finally be granted divinity. Finally, finally, final...ly?"

For the first time, a trace of worry crossed the Goddess's face.

"What is...what is happening? I cannot command the unit? Is the God interfering with my control?! Impossible! Direct divine intervention in this world should not be possible!"

She was so perturbed that it was difficult to imagine how calm she had been only a few moments before. It was then that I heard a voice like toxic nectar.

"Aah, finally. Finally, victory is within my grasp."

"...What? You? Are you the one who did this?" asked Lunaris, reverting to her usual emotionless mask.

"That's right, Great Spirit, it was all me. Or do you go by 'Lady Lunaris' right now?"

A bewitching smile, like that of a captor to their helpless prisoner.

"Cease this interference, whatever it is," said Lunaris. "If you do not, I will be forced to—"

"Oh, Goddess, Goddess. I'm afraid you can never be part of this world."

A smile that took full control of any who witnessed it.

"At the moment of your manifestation, I assumed command of it all. That vessel you were so keen to usurp...and this army of humans implanted with the World Tree seeds used to spread your power throughout the land."

"Wh-what are you seeking to do?! Are you attempting to become a god in my place?!"

"Oh, no, heaven forbid. A lowly existence such as myself could never take that honor."

It was the smile of a poisonous flower that sank all who beheld it beneath an ocean of toxic sludge.

"It shall be my dearly departed sister. She shall feed on your power and be reborn."

"Y-you speak madness! Her soul is long since gone from this world!"

"Oh, no. Lamnecia's soul has been very close to me this entire time."

"Grh... Gah... I-impossible... My power...! Aaaaaaaghhh!!"

A bloodcurdling scream filled the halls of the cathedral. And at that moment...

"Master!" "Kaito!"

A pair of familiar voices rebooted the stalling gears of my mind.

"Minnalis! Shuria!"



Four figures arrived on the scene. The first two were my precious partners in crime, but they were joined by the true vampire I had met the first time around, as well as by a woman who looked somewhat familiar.

"Hmm, looks like we were a little late," said the woman.

"Hmph. What a sorry lot. And I see there is a familiar face amid the crowd. What are you doing here, Nonorick?!"

"Eek. I could ask you the same question..."

"We'll chat later!" shouted Minnalis. "Right now, we need to get out of here!"

Then she shattered the crystal in her hand. The teleportation spell within it activated, producing a magic circle that encompassed the whole lot of us.

"W-wait, Minnalis! What about Yuuto?! We have to—!"

We couldn't just leave him behind. We couldn't. He needed to be with us. I needed to get him back. I needed him back!!

I tried to run out of the circle, but Minnalis and Shuria held me.

"No, Master!"

"You can't!"

"Let...let me go! Yuuto! Yuutooo!!"

I struggled against their grasp as the light of teleportation intensified.

"What's the matter, Ex-Hero? Running away already?"

"A-Alicia!!"

"That is fine. I shall need some time to bring Lamnecia back to life."

That smile. That same, cold, monstrous smile I saw on the day I fell into hell.

"Until next time, Ex-Hero."

The smile etched itself onto my memory as the light of the teleportation spell eclipsed the world from sight.

"Alicia! ALICIAAAAAAAAAA!!"

I screamed, losing count of how many times I had torn my throat that day,

and my mind was carried away to oblivion.

And once again...

...I lost something very important to me.



NERO KIZUKA

Illustration by SINSORA

"I will complete my vengeance at any cost!"

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