



The Hero Laughs
While Walking the Path of
VENGEANCE
a Second Time

3

The
Spelunker
of Deceased
Dreams

NERO
KIZUKA



The Hero Laughs
While Walking the Path of
VENGEANCE
a Second Time

3



MINNALIS

SHURIA

“I do
hope you
will keep me
entertained.
Hee-hee!
Hee-hee-
hee!!”

“What a
beautiful
night. The
moon is
clear and
bright, but
admiring
it shall
come later,
when your
crimson
blood lies
splattered
beneath its
glow.”

“My
name is
Leticia.

A super-
ultra-
mega-
pretty
name,
is it
not?”

DEMON LORD
Leticia Lu Harleston

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NERO KIZUKA

Illustration by **SINSORA**



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The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of Vengeance a Second Time, Vol. 3

NERO KIZUKA

TRANSLATION BY JAKE HUMPHREY • COVER ART BY SINSORA

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NIDOME NO YUSHA WA FUKUSYU NO MICHI O WARAI AYUMU Vol. 3

BOMU NO MAJYUTSUSHI

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The Hero Laughs While Walking the Path of VENGEANCE a Second Time

NERO
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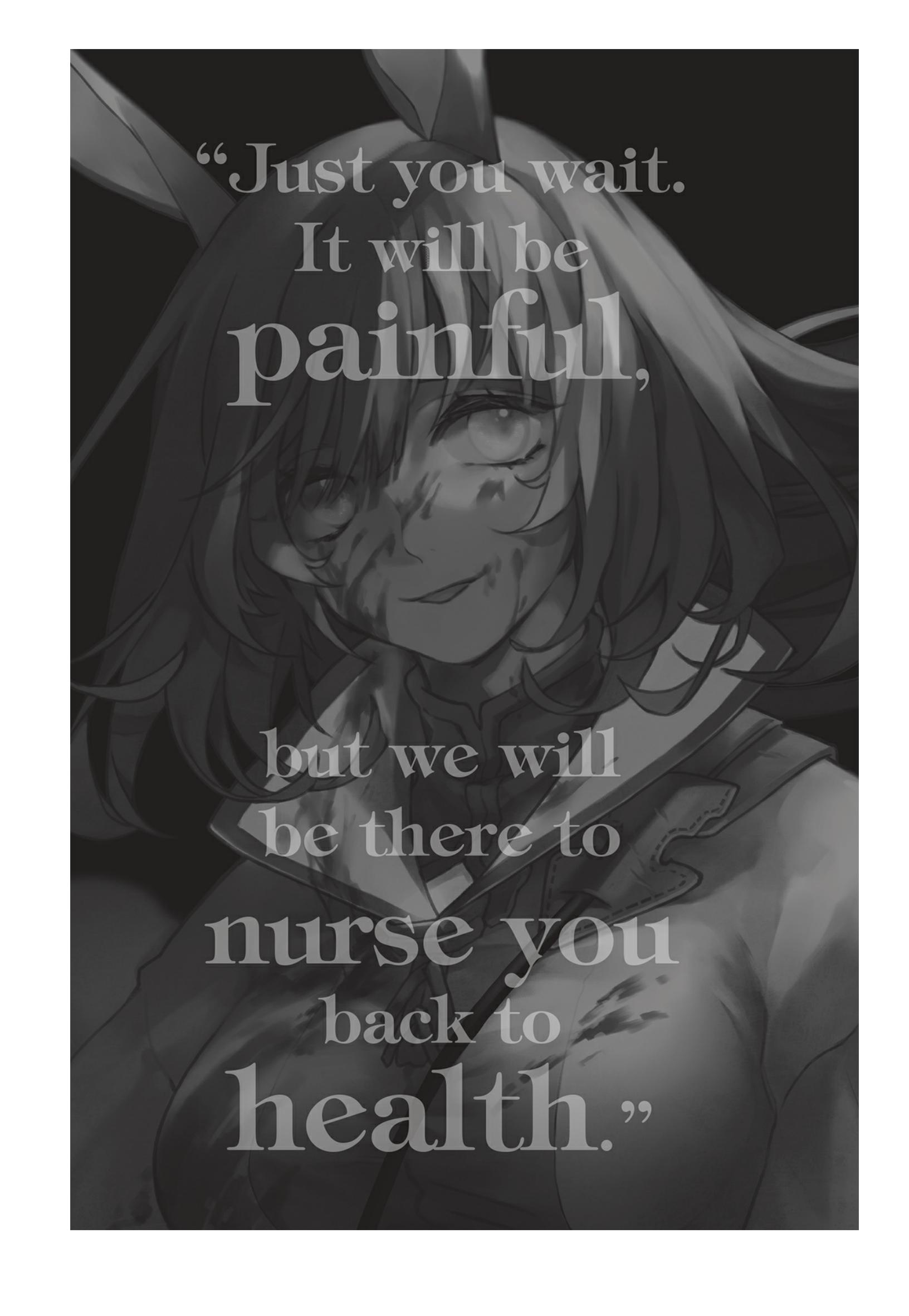
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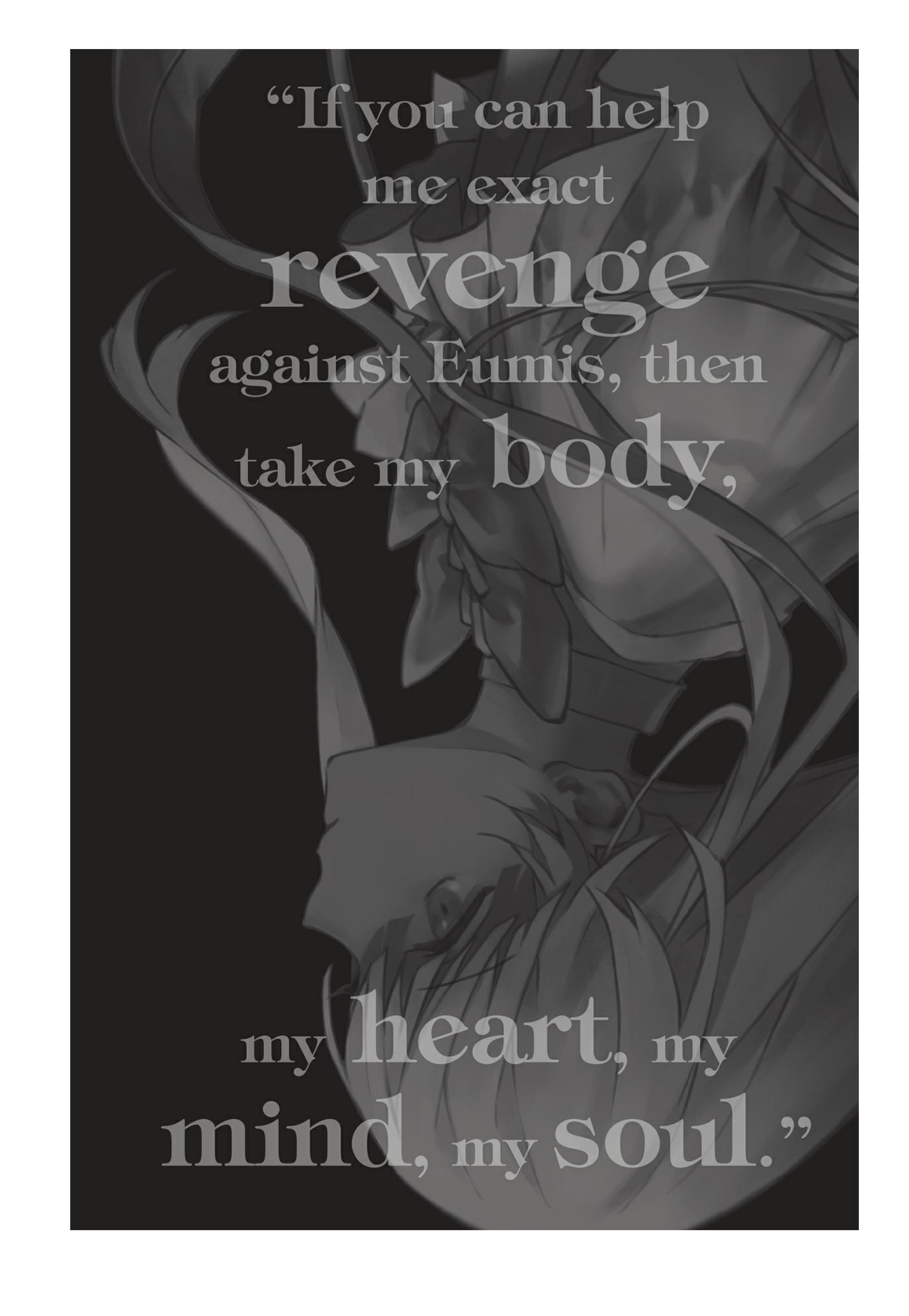
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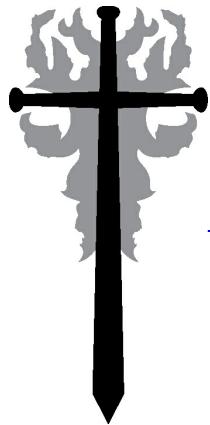


“Just you wait.
It will be
painful,

but we will
be there to
nurse you
back to
health.”



“If you can help
me exact
revenge
against Eumis, then
take my body,
my heart, my
mind, my soul.”



PROLOGUE

O Lady of Light, please spare my little sister..."

I was praying at the town chapel, as I had been doing every day since Shelmie fell ill. The medicine to treat her was so expensive that I wouldn't be able to afford it, even if I worked for the rest of my life.

It was then that Eumis appeared.

"Oh my, you're even more adorable than I imagined," she said to me.

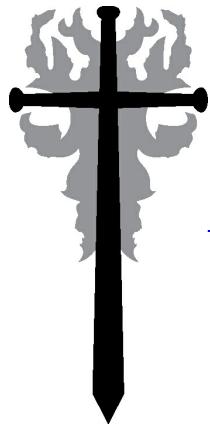
"Huh?"

"Are you Shuria? My name is Eumis. I'm your elder sister. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

As I stared in confusion, she cupped my cheek, smiled lovingly into my eyes, and whispered: "You've worked so hard, haven't you? Good girl."

Hearing that made me happy.

So very happy...



CHAPTER 1

The Girl Who Devoured a Demon

Hmm? I don't know who you are, but I like the smell of your soul, boy. Though, you do seem familiar somehow... But no matter. You look scrumptious. I shall feast on you next."

"Ha, thanks. I guess that means a lot coming from a demon. Doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

I sneered at the demon's words and readied the Mystic Blade of Soulfire in my hand.

"By the way, you're no ordinary swordsman, are you, boy? You sliced my arms off real good."

"Is that a problem?" I retorted. "You all don't have bodies anyway."

"Hmm?" He gave me a curious look. "I doubt you could tell that just by looking. Does that mean you've dealt with my associates before?"

Demons were a kind of spirit, a bundle of mana possessing a will of their own. Just like spells, they came in six varieties: Fire, Water, Wind, Earth, Light, and Dark. Unlike Affinities, however, there were no Null or Miscellaneous spirits. Instead, there were two other types: angels and demons.

These two groups did everything in extremes, so I wasn't particularly fond of either of them. For now, though, I only had to think about the spirit in front of me.

“Something like that,” I responded. “Anyway, I wouldn’t say you guys really ‘associate,’ do you?”

“You have a point, my boy. I never did get along with my own kind. None of us do. And so? If you knew all that, why bother trying to wound me?”

The demon smirked as he regrew his lost arms. The ones on the floor dispersed into nothing, becoming mana once more before they joined back with his body.

It was Shuria who spoke next. “Why...?” she asked quietly. I glanced over to find her kneeling, the hem of her dress stained by the dirt floor of the basement.

“You just sit tight,” I told her. “Don’t die before I can recruit you.”

And with that, I turned back to my opponent.

“Let me give it to you straight. You’re kinda in my way. You wouldn’t mind getting lost, would you?” I pointed at him with the Mystic Blade of Soulfire. “I’d like to keep my mana usage to a minimum, so I’ll let you go if you make yourself scarce.”

“Run away? Me? You must be joking, boy. Why would I do that when there’s such a tasty-looking morsel in front of me?”

“I see. In that case...die.”

As I channeled mana into my soul blade, it erupted into pale-blue flames. The demon recoiled at the light, which gave me a chance to lop off his forearm. The limb fell to the ground, azure fire dancing across the wound.

“Oh? You’re a spellsword, boy? Well, too bad. You can’t harm me, and those flames won’t change anything!”

Ignoring the demon, I continued to hack at the arm on the ground, mincing it into tiny pieces.

“Are you deaf? There’s no point! Any time you cut a bit off me, I can just...”

Suddenly, the demon’s face fell.

“Wh-what? What did you do to me?”

“Oh, I wonder?” I smiled. “What do you think?”

A demon’s body contained neither flesh nor bone. Rather, it was a shell composed of partially materialized mana. If I mixed my mana in with his, he wouldn’t be able to reabsorb it without first separating it again—a task akin to sorting grains of sand. And while the demon stood there floundering, the blue flames had quickly disintegrated his severed arm so significantly that it was now completely irretrievable.

This was the Mystic Blade of Soulfire’s true power. It didn’t just grant me incorporeality. That was merely one application of its ability to give my mana ghostly form. I could also use that same power to hinder a spectral opponent, as I had here. Additionally, the blue flames spouting from its blade could deal damage to life-forms that lacked a physical body.

“I-impossible! H-how could you...?”

“Wrong answer.”

“Grargh!”

Normally, demons were immune to all but Holy Magic, the highest tier of Light incantations. Consequently, they tended to ignore their opponents’ attacks completely to focus on casting slow, powerful spells, and their actual fighting ability was relatively poor. Deprive them of that one advantage, however, and they would have a lethal opening.

Stepping in close, I performed a rising slash to tear off the demon’s other arm, along with one of the wings sprouting from his lower back.

“Damn you!”

“Wrong again.”

The demon attempted to completely dematerialize and flee, but the passive ability of the Mystic Blade of Soulfire allowed me to see spirits even when they were incorporeal. With a single diagonal slice, I severed his right leg at the hip, and his left at the knee, then proceeded to dice them up so finely that the limbs couldn’t be reabsorbed.

“H-how?! How can you see me?! I’m not even corporeal!”

“Do I really look dumb enough to give my advantage away? Besides, you can see our souls, so it’s only fair.”

“*Damn you! Who the hell are you?!*”

The demon’s top half toppled to the floor. With only one wing remaining, he was now completely immobile, and I was close enough to cut him down immediately if he so much as tried to cast a spell.

“Your kind puts too much trust in your immunities, and your evasive skills are all the worse for it. There, how’s that for an explanation? Aren’t I nice?”

I grinned at the trembling spirit, but he gave no response. He *had* asked me to explain, right? How rude.

“*W-wait! Please! I was just...following orders! My contract! Eek!*”

I channeled more mana into the Mystic Blade of Soulfire, causing the blue flames to burn even brighter. He recoiled in terror.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “Demons can’t help or harm anybody without contractual approval. I know that.”

“*S-so...let me off, please? Look, I’ll leave the girl alone! Her soul was just my payment; I’m not contractually obliged to take it. And I’ll never make another deal again! Just...*”

“Just? Just what?”

I raised my soul blade above my head.

“*Just...do me a favor and let me live... Please?*”

“Oh, no can do. There’s nothing I hate more than strangers asking favors of me.”

Because I’d learned the hard way that no good ever came of giving help to people who asked for it.

“*S-stop! Let me gooo!*”

“No.”

Just as I was about to swing my sword down and end it, there came a voice.

“Please wait!”

“Hmm? What do you want?”

It was Shuria, clinging to my waist. The girl whom the demon had been tormenting moments before. I briefly considered the possibility that he had charmed her with his magic, but I had been paying close attention the whole time, and I had seen nothing of the sort.

“You can’t, Kaito. Please don’t kill him.”

When I saw the fire lurking behind her scarlet eyes, however, I was ashamed I hadn’t realized it sooner.

“I must be the one to end him,” she said. “Please don’t take that away from me.”

“Ah, of course. How could I forget? I could never stand idly by while someone snatched away one of my mortal enemies.”

If another person swooped in and took out my opponent without knowing the depths of my hatred, then looked at me like they’d done me a favor, I think I’d murder them on the spot. It wasn’t like I objected to other people taking part in my revenge if we had different motives, but I couldn’t allow them to exclude me from it entirely. Watching from the sidelines would be like sitting upon a chair of searing iron.

Hmm. Well, it’ll take a while for the demon to regenerate.

I flashed a quick glance at the fiend, who was scrambling to retake his lost mana and activate his regenerative powers. Had he still not realized what I’d done, or was this simply the only option left to him? Either way, I had plenty of time to complete my recruitment first.

“Hey, Shuria. I actually came today to offer you an invitation,” I told her.

I quelled the flow of mana into the Mystic Blade of Soulfire and recalled the sword into myself. Then I turned to face Shuria and lightly pushed her back, whereupon she fell to the ground, hands between her legs, and stared up into my eyes.

“I know what you’ve been through,” I said. “You want to take revenge on

Eumis, don't you? You hate her so much, it's all you can think about."

As I spoke, Shuria pulled the most disgusted face I'd ever seen. If looks could kill, this one would tear you apart. I knew it well.

She was thinking I could never understand how she felt.

She was appalled that I was rattling off about her thirst for vengeance, as though I could empathize.

I continued, "You hate this demon, don't you? And you'd never allow his existence to be snuffed out without having a hand in his death yourself."

She was right. Even if we were cut from the same cloth, we weren't *partners* yet. For that, we had to truly understand each other. It wasn't enough to have a few points in common. I really *didn't* comprehend her pain, nor she mine. No number of words could get it across.

"But right now, you're not strong enough to do the deed. Weak as this demon is, you still can't land so much as a single scratch on him."

"Th-that doesn't matter!" she cried.

I hit her back with a fierce, intimidating glare that was laced with mana. Rooted to the spot in sheer terror, Shuria lost whatever urge she had to resist.

"It's pathetic. But that's not the end of it. You won't have a hand in Eumis's death, either. I'll kill her myself. I don't care what she did to you. Suffer in powerlessness forever for all I care."

"Graaargh!" Shuria screamed. Overcoming her fear, she launched herself at me. No plan, just a mindless assault at the enemy standing before her. I effortlessly stepped aside, grabbed her by the scruff, and tossed her face-first into the dirt floor. She squealed as I stepped on her back.

"Grr! Get off...!"

"Right now, you have nothing. You've lost it all. Because you were clueless. Because you didn't try to understand."

"..."

"It was not power you lacked—it was determination. Your heart was full of

love, when it should have been filled with enough poison to paint the whole world black.”

“...Know that.”

“You only saw what you wanted to see. You never tried to understand her motives. You just said, ‘I trust her,’ like that *meant* anything. *That’s* why you’re suffering now. It wasn’t because of anything you did. It was because of what you *didn’t* do.”

“I get it! I get it! Stop lecturing me!”

The flames in her eyes flickered. Black flames of pure, directionless rage. They would devour her before long.

“You’re in pain,” I told her. “If you promise to give up on revenge, I’ll let you go.”

“Grr! Gah! Do not...mock me...! Eumis is mine and mine alone!”

“Do as I say, and you can leave this place alive. I’ll hand you all the money you want, and you can go live in a nice house in the countryside somewhere. I really do feel sorry for you, you know.”

“Keep your coin!” she cried. “A life like that is no better than death!” Shuria howled like a trapped beast. She really would expire if she couldn’t exact her revenge. “I’ll kill her I’ll kill her I’ll kill her! I’d sooner die than cast my anger aside!”

Any trace of rationality had left her. She was in hysterics, acting solely on emotion.

But what she’d just said, they were the first words of a newborn rebel desperately clinging to life.

“I see,” I remarked, removing my foot. As I did, she sunk her teeth into me. Not lightly, to warn me off, but as if to tear my flesh apart.

“Yowch. You don’t show mercy, do you?”

“Wh-why aren’t you fighting back?” she asked, relaxing her jaws in suspicion.

“I was testing you. Believe me, I know how awful the things I just said were.”

“...”

She locked eyes with me, trying to probe my true motive.

“But remember what I told you? This is an invitation.”

“An...invitation...?”

“Yep,” I said, squatting down before her.

“You told me you’d rather drop dead than cast your anger aside.” I paused and looked her in the eye. “That’s what I’m here to offer you. Die and be reborn.”

Then I held out my hand and asked, “Shall we take revenge together, Shuria?”



Today had been like a nightmare. Everything I had was taken from me.

No, that wasn’t right—I realized for the first time that it had all been an illusion to begin with.

Still, it had been a dreadful day. I’d lost so much.

And yet...

“It’s pathetic. But that’s not the end of it. You won’t have a hand in Eumis’s death, either. I’ll kill her myself. I don’t care what she did to you. Suffer in powerlessness forever for all I care.”

I threw myself at him before I could stop myself. But I wasn’t strong enough to hurt him, of course, so he tossed me to the ground. He was like a wicked sorcerer from a fairy tale.

It was as if he knew everything about me. He presented me with every one of my flaws and laughed in my face.

And he threatened to take my sworn enemy away from me.

“You’re in pain,” he said. “If you promise to give up on revenge, I’ll let you go.”

How could he say that? It was enough to make my ears ring.

“Do as I say, and you can leave this place alive. I’ll hand you all the money you

want, and you can go live in a nice house in the countryside somewhere. I really do feel sorry for you, you know."

What's the point in that? I can't go back. I'm broken. There's nowhere for me to return to. There's no way I can just live a quiet life by myself anymore.

"I see."

He stepped off me, and I looked up at his face. Kaito was smiling at me. The threatening aura I felt before was nowhere to be found.

Isn't he a spirit? I thought briefly, but I could no longer find it in myself to care about such things.

If I did nothing, if I didn't fight back, he would take away my mortal foe, the only thing I had left. Then I would truly have nothing. I couldn't let that happen, even if it killed me. So I went for his leg. Surely, he would just dodge it and finish me off. Of course he would. He came to save my life, and look at how I repaid him. I didn't even take him up on his offer when I'd had the chance. He had every right to kill me.

I'd refused my chance to give up on revenge.

Because when I'd been lying there broken, ready to give up and accept death, I made a choice. I decided to do something about it, swore that I would see it through to the end.

Yet strangely, my foolish attack struck true. I had meant to tear him apart, but I could not continue against an unresisting opponent.

"Wh-why aren't you fighting back?"

"I was testing you. Believe me, I know how awful the things I just said were."

"..."

Then, for the first time, I looked into Kaito's eyes. They were deep, dark, and empty, like a bottomless swamp. I contemplated this man who would take my vengeance away from me.

"But remember what I told you? This is an invitation."

"An...invitation...?"

"Yep."

The emotion in his voice was now totally different. It pried apart the pieces of my shattered mind and wormed its way inside.

"You told me you'd rather drop dead than cast your anger aside. That's what I'm here to offer you. Die and be reborn."

He grinned. The smile of a devil.

"Shall we take revenge together, Shuria?"

His hand looked like a normal human's. But it belonged to an infernal creature. To take it would be to plunge myself into an infinite darkness from which there was no escape.

"...Together?" I asked.

"That's right. Choose. Between becoming my partner in crime or becoming a bystander. If you take my hand, you will be granted great power, but there will be no turning back. Your vengeance will fuse with mine, so even after we're done with Eumis, you'll have to continue working toward my goals. Our contract is bound by something thicker than blood, and I'm not being metaphoric. If I die, you die, and vice versa."

His voice came to me as if through deep water. This man was surely the real demon here. Like the ones from my books. An evil being who lured mankind into straying from the true path. But that was okay.

"That is all fine by me," I said. "I only want to know one thing. If I take your hand, will she suffer? Will I be able to see her brought low by pain and ruined with grief?"

That was the only thing that mattered to me. Together or alone, I didn't care so long as I could exact my revenge.

"Why are you still talking like a bystander? We'll be partners in crime. She won't just suffer; *you'll* make her suffer. This is what I've been saying. *You* have to decide. *You* have to choose. *You* have to think about it. I'm not going to do it for you. You have to make it happen."

"...Oh, you really are just like a devil. Here to lure me astray without any

comforting words or hard promises.”

“You already know what a lifetime of being dependent on others gets you, don’t you?” He grinned. It was so dark, the word *smile* didn’t seem to fit. But I knew the look on my own face was probably the same.

That hand was everything I had ever wished for. It offered me salvation, but it would make a demon of me.

“Please, Kaito,” I said. “If you can help me exact revenge against Eumis, then take my body, my heart, my mind, my soul. Take everything and turn me into a devil like you!”

I reached out and took it.



“Please, Kaito. If you can help me exact revenge against Eumis, then take my body, my heart, my mind, my soul. Take everything and turn me into a devil like you!”

She wrapped her tiny, pale hand tightly around mine.

“First, I’m a ghost, then a spirit, and now a demon?” I remarked incredulously. “You’re all over the place. I hate to break it to you, but I’m just an ordinary human.”

I pulled Shuria up to her feet and conjured the Holy Sword of Retribution—in its shortened form for making contracts—into my hand.

She stared at me in disbelief. “What ordinary human can turn their body into mana and conjure swords out of thin air?”

“...Well, this blade right here will answer one of those questions for you. The other, I’ll explain later. Here, take it. It’ll tell you what to do.”

As Shuria took hold of the weapon, a deep, dark, yet dazzlingly bright black light burst from the blade, as if in acceptance of her.

“What a strange glow,” she murmured. “It’s cold, dark, and hot.” Her scarlet eyes twinkled as she gazed at the sword in wonder. Specks of black light drifted about the blade, like confetti inaugurating the rise of a new avenger.

Then as though she was embracing a prized possession, she turned the tip of the sword in on herself and plunged it into her chest. The blade shone before disappearing into a shower of brilliant particles like the blooming of a flower. There was no sign of a wound where the girl had stabbed herself.

Shuria murmured as dreaming. “Kh... Ah... Mm...” She was reliving my memories, just as Minnalis had. I, too, watched the scene through her eyes and witnessed again an experience even more powerful than if I were really there. The second time didn’t get any easier, and try as I might, I found myself unable to bear it without scowling in disgust.

By the time the last of the dark specks of light had winked out, there was no longer any distinction between her vengeance and mine.

“It’s nothing like having it explained, is it?” I remarked.

“No. I was surprised. I never expected to meet someone who has gone through something so similar to what I have.”

Shuria let loose a mixed sigh, tinged with resolution.

“It felt very strange. But...what a wondrous power you have given me.”

She opened and closed her hand several times before glancing around the room. As her eyes fell on what she was searching for, her face brightened, and she let out a quiet chuckle.

“What a wonderful thing to be left lying around. Let us make him our first subject.”

It was a stuffed cat, sitting in the corner of the room. Shuria walked over to it and crouched, holding her hand out over its belly.

“Pussycat, pussycat, where did you go?

“Death has come to the land of snow.

“In the magic kingdom, time stands still.

“Come on, little pussycat, eat your fill.

“...Dance for me: *Puppet Possession*.”

Combined with Shuria’s swelling mana, her strange, singsong chant sent a

number of red, yellow, and black particles dancing into the air. The mana flowed into the doll until, at last, the particles, too, were sucked inside.

"Mm... Ah... I feel giddy... The MP drunkenness... Ah-ha... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Now, rise!"

Slowly, but surely, the doll reacted to Shuria's voice. It sat up, shook, and rose to its feet.

"Huh," I said. "Now that's interesting."

"The interesting part comes next!" Shuria grinned. "Hee-hee! Hee-hee-hee!" she giggled, swept away on a wave of emotion. The doll turned neatly to face its master and bowed. Shuria flashed it a satisfied smile and bestowed on the puppet its first orders.

"Devour that pitiful clown. And make sure you savor it, okay?"

"Hee-hee-hee! Hee-hee-hee-hee!" the doll cackled and nodded. It turned and waddled toward the demon, trailing a knife and fork in its hands along the floor. I had planned on finishing the spirit off myself, but it would have been rather rude of me to intervene, so I instead opted to take a step back and watch what played out.

"C-curse you! Who are you? What are you?!"

The demon's regeneration was only half complete, but in a last-ditch effort, he had quickly recreated the rest of his body with a minimal amount of mana. As he tried to flee, however, the stuffed doll kicked him to the dirt floor.

"You dare mock me? Get off!" yelled the demon, shaking his hand to free himself from its grip.

"Hee-hee-hee!" laughed the puppet.

"Wh-what?!"

Ignoring him, the stuffed animal raised its knife, which grew to an enormous size, before swinging it down and severing the demon's arm.

"Ha...ha-ha..." the demon chuckled in relief. "That knife's not like the other guy's sword. I can just absorb that mana back into me like so..."

However, his relief proved short-lived.

“Didn’t Shuria tell it to ‘devour him’?” I pointed out. But before the demon could work out what that meant, the faithful puppet gave a helpful demonstration.

“Hee-hee-hee!”

It stabbed a fork into the demon’s severed arm, then sliced up the limb with its (now normal-sized) knife before tossing a chunk into its mouth.

The demon watched in shock. “...*What?*” The pussycat doll gobbled up the rest of his arm before his very eyes while he struggled to process what was happening.

“Whoa, whoa, what the hell? It ate it? That thing ate my arm?”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha!” The mocking tones of Shuria’s laughter rang out before the puppet joined in with a mischievous chuckle. “What’s that look on your face? Is something the matter?”

As the demon’s question went unanswered, the pussycat doll turned to face him once more, then clanged its knife and fork together twice.

“Dammit! Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit! What the hell is wrong with you?! First, a sword that burns mana, now a doll that eats it? That’s not fair! It’s against the rules!”

“*Pfft!* Pretty rich, coming from a demon,” I remarked. I hadn’t wanted to intervene, but he walked right into that one.

“Don’t you get it?! You lower life-forms are beneath me! So how come—? Goddammit!”

The pussycat doll continued to do battle with the demon, if such a phrase applied to this one-sided slaughter. Though the demon couldn’t feel pain, terror gripped him all the same. That was plain to see on his face as the doll consumed his body from the extremities inward.

Eventually, the only thing left was the demon’s head. *“How could I be done in by a filthy human and a damn elf...?!”* By now, the mana that composed his body had completely dispersed. Before long, the rest of him would decompose

to join it.

“Aww, that was boring. I wish my doll could’ve had a little more to do; it was his first fight and everything... You’re no fun.”

“Don’t worry, Shuria,” I consoled her. “We’ve still got Eumis to go, remember? We don’t need to stretch out this part too much.”

“I know...,” she said dejectedly as she crouched. “Okay... I’ll make this the last one.”

Then she turned, smiled cheerfully at the demon, and gave the toy its final order.

“I’ll be watching until the very end. Now, clean your plate!”

“*Damn you aaaaaaall!*”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hee-hee-hee!”

The doll plunged its cutlery into the demon’s face and plucked out his eyeballs, feasting on them before tossing the head into the air and swallowing it down in a single gulp. The puppet belched and clashed its knife and fork together one last time for good measure.

The next instant, the toy began to change. Dark patterns swirled across the surface of its white fur like clinging shadows, dying it a deep black.

But meanwhile, an even more astonishing transformation was taking place before me.

“Huh? I feel warm... Hot, even... Mm...,” muttered Shuria as a cloud of black mana enveloped her.

“Shuria?! What’s happening? Are you okay?!”

I panicked. I didn’t know what was going on, but any threat to her life was also a threat to mine because of our contract. Minnalis’s, too.

“Hmm. I don’t think it’s anything bad,” Shuria speculated. “It just feels like I’m burning.”

She didn’t appear to be in pain. Whatever this phenomenon was, it must not

have been life-threatening. As I stood and watched, the eddy of black mana dispersed, and all was normal again.

Except...

"Oh, you're just full of surprises, aren't you?" I remarked.

"...Did I transform?" asked Shuria, looking down at herself. Her white porcelain skin, so soft that you could sink your fingers into it, was now an almost sensual tawny brown. On top of that, the color had faded from her beautiful blond hair, leaving it completely silver. Through the holes in her torn outfit, I could see that a black-inked tattoo of some sort was covering her stomach. The orange light of the candles illuminating the basement reflected off her hair as she ran her fingers through it.

This must have been a consequence of the doll regurgitating the demon's mana.

"A dark elf, huh?" I mused. "Ha-ha. How lucky you are. I couldn't make you a demon, but this is the next best thing, don't you think?"

"A dark elf?"

"That's what they call elves with dark skin like you. At least in my world, they do."

Elves were not an uncommon race. I had seen a fair amount walking around various cities. Many of them leveraged their superior talent for magic to make a living as adventurers. But an elf with dark skin... Well, I had never even so much as heard of one, let alone seen one.

That's why I had always assumed they didn't exist. But when I checked Shuria's status screen, I noticed that in addition to her new "Puppet Possession" ability, her race had changed from *Human (Elf Blood)* to *Dark Elf*.

STATUS



Shuria

Lv33

Age 14 • Female • Dark Elf

HP: 292/332

MP: 780/780 (Assigned: 525)

Strength: 133

Stamina: 213

Vitality: 194

Agility: 288

Magic: 679

Resistance: 582

Intrinsic Abilities: Scarlet Eyes, Puppet Possession

Skills: Notice Lv 1, Stealth Lv 1,

Water Magic Lv 1, Wind Magic Lv 1,

Meditate Lv 3, Carve Lv 3

Status: OK

STATUS

Shuria

Hidden Statistics

Finesse: E

Reaction Time: E

Recovery Rate: F

Status: OK

Magic Affinity

Fire: 0 **Light:** 0

Water: 0 **Dark:** 0

Wind: 0 **Null:** 21

Earth: 0 **Misc.:** 154

Acquired Titles

Elf Blood, Hexed, Slave to Revenge,

Puller of Strings, Fallen Elf

"Well, it doesn't seem to be dangerous, at least," I reassured her.

"I'm a dark elf... I like it. I really feel as though I've been reborn," said Shuria, giving herself another once-over.

"Come on, let's go. The demon's dead, and I already used up a lot of MP getting through this place's wards. We need to leave before Eumis comes back, assuming she hasn't realized I'm here already."

As we walked over to the stairs, however, Shuria stopped in her tracks.

"Oh, wait. I have to set them free."

She turned back and gestured to the pussycat doll (which now boasted a marbled pattern of black-and-white fur), and the toy set about slaying the wretched undead that lay rotting in the cells. The undead were immortal, but without mana to sustain their bodies, they soon fell apart; even their bones returned to dust. Before long, there wasn't any indication that they had been there at all.

"Let's get out of here," I told her when it was done. "There's not much time, and we've got a lot to discuss."

"Indeed."

As we reached the base of the staircase, Shuria turned and took one last look around the cellar.

"I will kill Eumis if it is the last thing I do. I will take the pain she inflicted on others and return it to her tenfold."

Her words were wreathed in dark flames. There was nothing more for me to say. With the moans of the zombies now gone, the basement was silent. As she ascended the staircase for good, the black-and-white pussycat followed behind her.

Puppet Possession Skill Level: 2

Temporarily reduces max MP and turns an inanimate object into an unliving servant. The servant's abilities depend on the environment, the amount of MP offered, and the type and intensity of emotions expressed during casting.

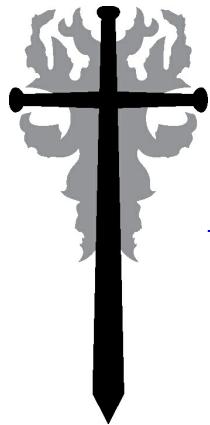
Amount of MP donated cannot exceed max MP.

A number of familiars up to twice this skill's level can act autonomously, and the caster can exert manual control over as many as they can handle. While acting autonomously, a servant can absorb the mana of certain targets through ingestion. Each servant can only take on one type of mana at a time. If a servant obtains a new variety of mana that is stronger than what it currently possessed, the old type is replaced.

????????????????????????????????????

????????????????????????????????????

Absorption List: Demon-Eater



CHAPTER 2

A Dream Beginning to Rip

Day xx Month xx

My research into magic items has hit a standstill. I simply do not have enough magical ability to continue. Without some way of increasing my power output, further progress is impossible.

This does not mean I am giving up. I *will* have my name carved into the stone monument. If I do not, then even my father, loving as he is, will refuse to accept my relationship.

Just you wait, Soriy. When our day comes...

Day xx Month xx

Today's experiment resulted in another failure. Even my area of greatest talent, Wind magic, is only slightly above average, and the insignificant monsters of this region do little to increase my level.

With careful training, it would yet be possible to increase the amount of mana I can handle, but this method is much too slow. Soon enough, Father will begin to speak of marriage. I must accomplish something before then.

Day xx Month xx

I tried adjusting my methods and succeeded in producing an effect. However, it is still too weak. I am far from creating a magic item that will ensure my name is recorded on the stone monument.

They say that you must present a suitable item to the monument itself and that the spirits of dead heroes dwelling within will cause one's name to appear by magic if your offering impresses them.

What do I need to do to produce such an item?

Please forgive me, Soriy. I am weak. The moment we can finally be together grows further by the day.

Day xx Month xx

Today, some businessmen from the city came to see me at the academy. They were intrigued by a by-product of my experiments and wished to discuss bringing it to market. There was much money to be made in the enterprise, they said. I have no interest in becoming an inventor, nor are such petty discoveries enough to satisfy my ambitions, but maintaining my workshop requires coin, it is true, and it is better to have too much than too little. Thus, I sent some off to be sold in the city.

I thought nothing of it at the time, but now that I condense my thoughts into this diary, it strikes me as a rather good idea. If the townspeople know and respect my name, even just slightly, then surely, it will be more difficult for my family to object to my wish.

The wish granted to those who have their name engraved on the monument has long been a solemn tradition of my house, but it is always possible they will choose to defy it anyway. Better to be safe than sorry.

On another note, Soriy was particularly adorable today. I simply never tire of seeing her blush as she speaks my name.

Day xx Month xx

Today, a strange merchant accosted me in the street. The city of Elmia sees all kinds, so suspicious types like this fellow are not uncommon, and usually, I simply brush them off and go about my day. On a whim, however, I heard him out. When he presented his wares, I found something of great interest to me nestled among them. A demon-summoning stone.

I managed to procure it from him for far less than it was worth. Perhaps

the merchant was ignorant of its true value?

Day xx Month xx

I completed my research today. With the proper precautions in place, I succeeded in summoning and binding a demon. These spirits are able to bestow great power and wisdom, albeit at an enormous price.

I asked him if it would be possible to offer the life of a slave, say, to increase my talent for magic.

The demon said yes, then described a hex whereby I could seal a blood relation of mine within a magical circle for an extended period of time to transfer their aptitude into me.

Ah, it appears God is on my side after all!

The only thing I need is a subject. A relative who is both exceptionally gifted in magic and gullible enough to be locked inside a room for the entire length of the ritual.

Fortunately, such a person exists. A half sister of mine on my father's side, the abandoned product of an affair with a maid. Her name was Shuria, I believe. At long last, the end of this dark tunnel is creeping into view.

When I told Soriy my plan and explained that soon we would be together forever, she graced me with a joyous smile and asked if there was anything she could do to help. Oh, what a sweet and generous thing she is!

Day xx Month xx

The scheme is proceeding without a hitch. Lady Luck must surely be on my side for Shuria to require my assistance just as I sought her myself. I was able to secure her trust with promises and brought her back to the mansion.

After that, the demon took his price for his knowledge of the magic circle and the particular flavor of mana required to activate it, and I succeeded in securing several additional test subjects for my experiments.

I told the authorities that a demon attacked the village, and they bought it hook, line, and sinker. Now all that's left is to ensure that idiotic half sister of mine never leaves that room.

Who knows the destruction she could cause with *my* power? If I gave her a reason, it would be a trifle for her to escape the magic circle or, at the very least, escape it and ruin the hex. I cannot count on finding another source of materials so convenient as that village. Even if I did, I doubt the same excuse would fool the authorities twice.

And so it seems that until the hex is 100 percent complete, I must continue to play the role of her kind elder sister.

Day xx Month xx

I have hit upon a momentous discovery. My doting upon Shuria appears to have struck my dear Soriy with the most bitter jealousy, and she seems quite keen on reasserting her possessiveness, particularly in my bedchamber. Though Soriy is no commoner, it is true that her noble house is subservient to ours, and so she has always adopted the meek attitude appropriate to her station. I am beginning to see a new side of her as of late, and her increased affections are very much welcome. Ah, how my loins burn even now!

Day xx Month xx

I received a letter from my parents in the capital. Though they were careful not to be direct about it, they clearly showed interest in my marriage prospects. I burned the letter thoroughly, until not even ash remained. Their probing has grown more pressing of late, perhaps due to my continued refusal to engage in such petty courtship. Ahhh, how I wish to be immortalized on the stone monument so that I may spend my life together with my beloved!

Day xx Month xx

Very soon now, the hex will be complete. I must start thinking about what will happen afterward. Shuria's Scarlet Eyes have piqued my curiosity. Perhaps they could be used in the creation of a divination artifact of some kind.

As for the girl herself, her temporary custody of my talents should make her a fine receptacle for mana. She will make a far better undead than those other failures.

Day xx Month xx

Finally, the day has arrived. The completion of the hex took far longer than I imagined. How much of my talents that pip-squeak of a girl has stolen from me! But by tomorrow morning, every last drop will be back in the possession of their rightful owners.

I think I will take her out tomorrow and show her a beautiful dream. In gratitude for all she has given me and everything she has yet to give. I am a kind sister, after all.



“I see. So that’s what everything was for.”

As I tried to keep my welling emotions in check, I slowly closed Eumis’s diary and placed it back on the desk.

...How disappointing.

How utterly, utterly disappointing. *This* is the reason you wanted to create a new magic item? *This* is why you betrayed me?

She wanted a *statue* to recognize her achievements so she could marry her favorite maid. For that, she’d stabbed me in the back and thrown her own sister to the wolves. She’d built the ladder to her ambitions from the bones of the many.

“...Well, whatever. I thought that maid might be all you cared about, but I suppose you must respect your parents a fair bit, too, if simply killing them never crossed your mind. I guess that means they’ll have to get up on stage as well, then.”

I hid the diary back where I had found it and left the mansion, salivating at the delightful new seasoning I had discovered to sweeten my vengeance.



“Urk... Ahhh...”

Not this nightmare again. I knew it was a dream, but that didn't make the scene unfolding before my eyes any more bearable.

"Here is your medicine! Make sure you drink it all down, please!"

"Hrk! You might as well give up! I'll never give in to you— *Rrrh!*"

"Whether you submit or not is of no importance. You tricked me as well. That's the only thing that matters."

I was in a dark cave, illuminated by brightmoss. There, lying on a bed that was little more than a boulder split cleanly in two, was Soriy. Her arms and legs were cruelly bound with iron shackles, like what you would use on a slave.

In these visions, there was always a girl standing over her, wearing a peaceful smile. Though she resembled Shuria, her hair was silver instead of blond, and her skin was tan, like people who hailed from the desert. But her features were exactly the same, right down to her scarlet eyes.

Standing beside her, like usual, was a young man with dark hair and eyes whom I felt I'd seen somewhere before, along with a brunette Lagonid girl.

Shuria placed a contraption partially inside Soriy's mouth to force it open, then poured in some kind of pea-green liquid before forcing a gag over her mouth, as though she expected her to choke.

"Ngaaah! Aaah! Cough! Cough!"

When that was done, Shuria ripped off the gag and said, "Now then, we finished the arms yesterday, so we'll move on to the legs next."

"Here you are," said the Lagonid girl, handing her a black spike like she always did. It was apparently hollow, and the point on the end could open.

"Thank you," Shuria said in response.

I longed to look away, lest I be forced to bear witness to that terrifying spectacle once again, but alas, my dream offered me no such control over my own body. I could not even close my eyes.

"Hng?!" Rrrgh! Aaaaaagh!"

I could only watch as they drove that wicked prong into my beloved's

beautiful leg.

“Aaagh! Hnnn! Uraaargh!!”

Her vile captors impaled three more spikes, and with each one, my ears rang with Soriy’s screams. And yet somewhere in her voice were the soft, sultry tones she only used with me in the bedroom.

Shuria tittered. “What a deviant you are to be aroused by such treatment, Soriy.”

“Mg... Ahhh... It’s the fault of that tonic you fed me...!” she replied.

“Oh no, the tincture merely dulled the pain a bit. It only goes to show that a little is enough to bring you great pleasure.” She gave a slight smile. “Now the easy part is over. Try not to pass out like you did yesterday, okay? There’s no point in hurting you if you aren’t awake to feel it.”

“Eeek!”

She raised a large bottle containing a black, metallic liquid that moved and jumped at Shuria’s command, as if it were alive. After bringing the bottle close to Soriy, she gently pulled the stopper free.

“Dinnertime,” she announced. The black substance crawled up out of the bottle and slithered down into Soriy’s body via one of the hollow stakes.

“Hgnah!”



As the end of the stake opened up inside her, Soriy let out another sweet yelp. But it didn't stop there.

"Mmmmmaaah! Hng! Oooh! Aaaah! Mmm! Mm! Ah! Aaah!"

"I really don't see how you can be enjoying yourself like that," said Shuria. "If it was *my* bones being dissolved, I think I'd scream."

"My lady... My lady! Miss Eumis!"

"Look, Master. The pleasure she feels is only slightly outweighed by the pain," the Lagonid girl remarked. "She must be quite conflicted over how to feel, the poor thing."

"Hey, it's your toxins doing that," the boy replied.

"I'd prefer if you referred to it as a 'tonic,' Master. It's helping her, not hurting her. After all, it'd be a shame if the agony broke her too quickly."

While my love lay tortured and bloody on the stone, her captors chatted idly among themselves. Yet as much as I yearned to burn the three of them to cinders, I could not so much as move a muscle, even in my own dream. All I could do was watch as the same terrible scene played out again, listening as Soriy cried out in a mixture of pain and passion.

"Hah?! Haaah...haaah... Ah...that dream again. What a terrible way to wake up."

Drenched in sweat, I sat up in bed and sighed. I glanced at the clock and found that it was a little later than when I usually awoke.

"That makes four days in a row. What is happening to me?"

The nightmares had begun shortly after my demon-summoning stone lost its power. They were the same every time I slept. The girl who looked like Shuria and her two mysterious accomplices would torture my dear Soriy. It all felt so real, and there was seemingly no end in sight.

"Perhaps that demon broke his contract and placed some sort of curse upon me."

After offering Shuria to the demon, I'd spent most of the morning after in wild

ecstasy with my beloved. By the time I got dressed, I found that the stone I had used to summon him had reverted to a powerless old rock. I rushed to the secret cellar to find out what had happened, only to see that it was completely empty. There was no sign of the demon or Shuria. Even my host of test subjects had seemingly vanished into thin air.

Perhaps most surprising of all, though, was that the cage at the far rear had simply been cleaved open. I was at quite a loss on how to explain that. It was unthinkable that Shuria, what with her waifish figure, had done it, and any magic power she may have once possessed ought to be completely gone by now. Her elven blood would do her no good without any magic, so she should have been incapable of slaying a demon by every stretch of the imagination.

That meant the demon must have interfered. Though I knew not how, he'd broken our contract, taken off with both Shuria and my test subjects, and found a new stone in which to dwell. I had heard that demons often switched stones after completing their contracts, so it was not out of the realm of possibility.

"Oh dear, I cannot allow Soriy to see me like this."

I poured myself a tall glass of water from the pitcher by my bed and gulped it down before my beloved entered the room.

"Good morning, my lady," she said. "Breakfast is ready."

"Thank you," I replied. "Shall we take it together, then?"

"I—I could not possibly sit at the dining table, my lady. I am but a humble maid."

"Then we shall eat in my chamber where nobody shall see us. Prepare a large platter for us to share. I am not feeling too hungry this morning anyway."

I sent her away with a smile. Soriy seemed unsure, but she nodded and left the room, saying, "I shall bring it up, then."

I just wanted to be with her a while today. I had not mentioned my dreams to her, lest I make her unnecessarily anxious. Though no actual harm had befallen me, I could not help but feel a vague sense of dread. I longed for a time I could be at peace. Though my goals were in sight, there was still much work to be done.

"It is a shame, however, that I was not able to procure Shuria's eyes. They would have made fine ingredients for my research."

Eyes were a precious component of magic items, and plenty had been forged with dragon or fenrir eyes in the past. Perhaps an artifact made using the "Scarlet Eyes" would have won me a spot on the monument.

What a loathsome demon. Helping me to achieve my goals only to snatch them away just as quickly.

"Well, no matter. With my newfound magic power, it is only a matter of time before I succeed in creating a marvelous new artifact."

What's gone is gone. It was better to focus on where to go from here.

"I suppose I cannot wait any longer for everything to fall into my lap. I must travel to continue my study and collect even more valuable ingredients."

Though Elmia was a trade hub, truly rare items were sold in the capital or even in the empire, where they would fetch a higher price. My workshop did not want for supplies, but there was no telling how long it might take for another opportunity like Shuria to come along if I stayed put.

However...

I cast my gaze about the papers on my desk. There were requests for information on magic-item development from the capital, tax reports, and even a notice detailing a large amount of holy water stolen from a nearby church.

I would need someone to take my place while I was gone. As my father's only child, I could not simply abandon my duties.

"I heard rumors that the demon lord has been ramping up her assaults as of late. If a legendary hero was to appear once more, perhaps I could join their party somehow..."

If that happened, I would have a pretext for leaving the city that would not tarnish my good name. Instead of abandoning my domain to follow my own whims, I would be working for the good of the kingdom. My father, an aristocrat in the capital, could not possibly object to that.

Come to think of it, I had heard that the capital had attempted the ritual to

summon a hero. I wonder what became of that?

As I was lost in thought, there was a knock at my door. In came Soriy with our meal perched atop a tea cart.

"My lady, breakfast is served," she announced, carefully transferring the plates to the dining table. "Today's meal consists of grilled pork sausages and boiled cluckbird eggs, with a side of bread and butter. For dessert, we have rawstberry and goat's milk pudding."

"Thank you, it looks delicious."

We proceeded to have a lovely breakfast, feeding each other spoonfuls of food before moving on to mouth-to-mouth. The juices of the dessert were so sweet that I wished to stay there forever, but eventually, I tore myself away and began changing into my outdoor clothes.

"Are you working at the office again? Good luck in your endeavors, my lady."

"Thank you," I said, getting up to leave. Just as I placed my hand on the knob, however, a thought occurred to me.

"Actually, could you do something for me, Soriy?"

"Hmm? Of course, my lady. What is it?"

"Could you roll up your skirt, please?"

"Huh?!"

Her face flushed, but she meekly did as I asked. I watched on in silence as she gripped the hem of her skirt and slowly lifted it to reveal her long, slender legs and lacy underwear.

"I-is this okay, my lady?"

Her legs bore no scars or marks whatsoever. Of course, since she'd been with me last night, right up until we fell asleep, there hadn't been time for her to sustain them.

...I'm overthinking it. I must put it out of my mind.

Perhaps it would behoove me to see a doctor or a priest about these dreams.

I tarried there awhile, taking in the precious sight of my dear Soriy, her face

tinged scarlet with embarrassment, before leaving the mansion to take care of my daily tasks. As far as I could tell, everything was in order. I walked the streets thinking sweet thoughts about my future life together with my beloved.

The same dream again. How long are these going to go on for?

I had lost track of the number of times now.

...At least it is about to end, I thought. I had seen the exact same vision so frequently, I could recite it by heart. And yet tonight, it diverged from my memories.

“Now, everything is in place,” Shuria said. For the first time, she turned to address me directly. “Sister? We’re not done yet. My puppets will dance on the stage you prepared.”

Huh?!

When she abruptly closed in, I could see that her eyes were not the brilliant scarlet I was accustomed to, but more of a deep crimson, like dried blood. Her unwavering gaze was unbearable, but as always, I could not so much as move a muscle.

“We can’t stop now. We mustn’t,” she insisted. “We must continue until the final curtain falls. There is much in store. Please, please look forward to it.”

Then a smile spread across her lips that made me shiver in terror. A spine-tingling dread rushed up my back, causing me to shoot awake in bed.

Last night, Soriy and I had fallen asleep together. I shot a glance beside me, but she was nowhere to be found.

“Khee-hee-hee! Khee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

“Wh-who’s there?!”

As my troubled mind returned to wakefulness, I glanced around my room to find nothing out of the ordinary.

Wait, no. Something was different.

Atop a table sat a patchwork bear. Its design was quite memorable; I recognized it as one of the toys Soriy had bought for Shuria.

How did it get in here...?

"Khii-hii! Khii-hii!"

Astonishingly, the voice appeared to be coming from that stuffed animal. Not only that, but it also proceeded to unfasten a zipper I had thought to be a mere decoration and produced a letter from inside. It gave a neat little bow, as if mocking me, and placed the letter on the table before leaping out of my bedroom window.

"W-wait!" I cried. By the time I reached the open window, however, it had already fled out of sight. As questions whirled in my head, I tried to stay calm and analyze the situation.

The sealed envelope read "Invitation" on the front. On the back, it was signed "*From Shuria and your faithful avengers.*" I thought back to my nightmares.

"Soriy! Soriy! Where are you?! Answer me, Soriy!"

I shouted and shouted, but there was no response. The other servants heard my screams and came running, but none of them had any idea where she had gone. It was as if she had simply disappeared without a trace.

We turned the entire house upside down without finding her. Perhaps if she had been sleeping in the servants' quarters, the other maids would have some clue regarding her disappearance. As it happened, however, I had given her a private room to facilitate our illicit encounters on the pretext that a noblewoman should not have to sleep with the other servants, so none of them even knew at what time she had gone missing.

Wait, no. Soriy was with me that night. I remember seeing her fall asleep before me. In that case...

"...The only clue remaining is that letter."

I held the single sheet in my hand. Even disregarding the scarlet envelope, it possessed a deeply sinister aura. Nevertheless, it could serve as some sort of clue to Soriy's whereabouts. I rushed to break the seal. Inside was an audio message, recorded on my own light-blue paper marked with the family crest.

"My beloved sister," it began. *"The performance begins tonight after*

sundown. If you wish to see Soriy again, then I suggest you attend. Come to the eastern gate at sunset, and I will send for you. I look forward to seeing you there.”

It was Shuria, no doubt about it, and there was a sense of elation in her voice. Not like what I had shown while she was in my care, but pure, unfiltered joy.

This was proof that my sister yet lived and that my nightmares had been anything but ordinary.

“B-but how...?”

I had a hunch, but it simply defied all sense. How could Shuria, a completely powerless little girl, have escaped her cell and survived?

Had the demon allied himself with her? Impossible. There were certain rules that had to be followed when making a contract, so there was no way he and Shuria could have formed a pact, even if they wanted to. And without a contract in place, it would be impossible for the demon to take any action at all. He couldn’t be helping Shuria. It just didn’t add up.

But the fact remained that Shuria still drew breath and was retaliating against me for what I’d done.

I can think about that later. Right now, I have to save Soriy!

“Get me Lomberto,” I demanded, and before long, a vulgar giant of a man appeared before me.

“You called, Mistress?”

Around fifty of the city’s soldiers swore fealty to me. Together, they made up an elite force over which I exercised direct control. Since they were all former mercenaries or adventurers who had proven themselves in battle, they were very useful when I needed to get my hands dirty. My band of killers took care of people who obstructed my ambitions or got too nosy, and they had also aided me with the destruction of Shuria’s village.

As long as I kept them happy, they did whatever I asked of them. At times like these, they were indispensable.

“I have a job for you, Lomberto.”

“Yeah? And what about our pay?”

“Worry not. You shall all be given one gold piece each. Now gather the rest of the men.”

“All of them?” Lomberto’s eyes widened in shock. Assassinations or the like rarely required so many men; five or six at the most typically sufficed. Besides, their usual duties were espionage and intelligence. Today, however, I was not in the mood for that.

“Yes, all of them. This is not an assassination mission. Soriy has been taken hostage, and I need you to go rescue her.”

“Why us, then? Hostage situations are the regular militia’s thing.”

“But they will likely make her captors face justice. I would much rather tear them limb from limb.”

As I glared at Lomberto, infuriated, my mana began to seep out of my every pore.

“Just go and get every man you can find. We begin tonight.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Understanding when to keep quiet, Lomberto quickly left the room, leaving me to contemplate the situation alone.

“...”

There was too much I didn’t yet comprehend. How had Shuria survived? What were those dreams? They had to bear some kind of relation to my present situation, but I’d seen for myself over the past few days that Soriy didn’t have so much as a scratch on her.

I looked outside. The sun was still high in the sky.

Gritting my teeth, I set about planning how I would slaughter Shuria and the rest of her crew for taking away my beloved.



When all was in order, I arrived with my squad at the eastern gate, eager for battle. Our story was that we were headed to the northeastern forest for

training, which explained why we were armed to the teeth.

Suddenly, something appeared before us.

“It’s that thing again...!”

From out of the forest, walking down the road, came the cute little teddy bear that had given me the letter.

“Khee-hee-hee!”

It stopped a few paces from us and beckoned mockingly for us to follow before setting off the way it came.

“Follow that doll,” I instructed the men.

“Got it.”

We set off down the path, trying to keep the toy in our sights.

I was at a disadvantage. I didn’t know the strength of my opponents, and they had Soriy. This puppet, which moved of its own volition, didn’t appear to be a monster, but the men were already on high alert as they entered the forest. After walking for about an hour, we finally arrived where our enemies were lying in wait.

“Good evening, Sister, distinguished guests,” came a soft, clear voice. “I offer you my most heartfelt welcome.”

We had come to a clearing devoid of even grass. An empty, circular field. It was as though the forest itself had anticipated our battle.

In the center was a tall tree, barren of every last leaf, and in its branches sat three shadowy figures. One of them, a young girl wearing a black one-piece dress, gave us a cruel smile, her long silver hair gently drifting in the night breeze.

“Shuria... Is that you?”

“Yes, Eumis, it is. It seems I was unable to perish and find myself reborn instead.”

She chuckled. I could see no trace of her former self in her visage. Her features, her clothes, and the very air around her were all different. Even her

face and voice, which hadn't appeared to have changed at all, now seemed as though they belonged to someone else.

Bathed in moonlight, she peered down at me with burning red eyes and a seductive smile on her lips. The scene seemed so ethereal that it was almost as if I was still dreaming.

But those eyes were devoid of the light that once filled the Shuria I knew.

"What a beautiful night. The moon is clear and bright, but admiring it shall come later, when your crimson blood lies splattered beneath its glow."

A chill ran up my spine, like a frigid tongue of ice had licked my back. Shuria dropped down, as did her two companions, whereupon the enormous tree they had been sitting in quickly rotted and died as though flung forward through time.

The bear that had served as our guide gave another evil chuckle. "*Khee-hee-hee!*" Then it trotted over to its mistress, who patted it softly on the head.

"Good work, Teddy," she told it affectionately.

"I thought I'd seen those other two before," I ventured. "Didn't I meet you outside the city when you were fighting the Black Orc?"

"Oh, you remembered us? That's a surprise. I wouldn't have expected you to deign to commit our faces to memory," said the dark-haired young man, and his female companion joined in.

"For someone with the brain of a flea, her memory's not half bad."

The pair shared a smug grin.

"...Utter trash," I spat. "It seems we cannot talk this through after all. Return Soriy to me."

Now I was sure that these two had helped Shuria escape. I had certainly seen their skill for myself in how they had occupied the physically resistant Black Orc without a shred of magic between them. But I couldn't allow myself to be unsettled, neither by them nor by Shuria's transformation. I still had the upper hand, and with my newfound power, I could bring this battle swiftly to a close.

But to my surprise, Shuria responded in the affirmative. "But of course, dear

sister. I shall fetch her at once. Kitty, be a dear and bring her here, would you?"

She clapped her hands, and from out of the forest emerged the very last toy I had ever bought her. In place of its knife and fork, which were now strapped to its waist, the puppet instead gripped a chain in its paws.

"Hee-hee-hee!" the pussycat doll chuckled with its unchangeable face.

Groans rang out from behind. "Urgh! Aaagh!"

"Soriy!" I cried.

I watched as the frightful feline dragged my beloved along on all fours. Her clothes were ragged and torn, and her arms and legs were bound in iron fetters. Around her neck, they had fitted a sturdy leather collar, like the kind one might use to break in an animal. The pussycat doll tugged on the chain to lead her to me.

"Kitty, you can let her go now."

"Hee-hee!"

The puppet tittered and swiftly drew its knife, slicing apart Soriy's bonds in a matter of seconds.

"Eek!" she cried.

"Go on," urged Shuria. "Your work here is done."

"Oh, um..."

Soriy looked around in bewilderment before slowly making her way toward me. Then she broke into a run and embraced me with eyes full of tears.

"Miss Eumis! Miss Eumis!"

"Soriy!" I cried, hugging her back as tightly as I could. "My love, what have they done to—?"

But no, this wasn't her at all! No sooner had I realized this than I heard Lomberto's voice. "Get away, my lady!" he cried, swinging his sword at her. I tried to force her off me, but we were both a moment too late.

"Khee-hee-hee!"

The figure thrust a hitherto-unseen blade into my chest, a warped knife with eight multicolored crystals inset. Then the doppelgänger twisted its face and cackled. It was that strange teddy bear's laugh.

"Hrk!"

As I leaped back to make distance, the fake Soriy simply watched me go. Then Lomberto's blade sliced its arm clean off.

I quickly followed up with my own attack. "Witness the terrible shout of the wind spirits! *Lightning!!*"

"*Khee-hee-hee, HEE-HEE-HEE!*"

My blast of electricity sizzled the assailant, and it disintegrated away into nothing.

"Oh my. I should have known that you wouldn't be fooled by appearances alone," said Shuria, as though it was of no consequence, before she chuckled once more. "Tee-hee-hee! Now the real show can begin. It isn't only going to be yours truly up on stage tonight."

I was furious that she would use Soriy in this manner to get at me, but I set aside my anger as best I could and pulled the dagger free from my chest. When I did, it, too, dissolved into the air.

"What have you—? Ghaah! M-my head...!"

Before I could finish my statement, a rush of memories came flooding back. I clutched my head in pain, but no. It wasn't my head that hurt. It was my very soul. It felt like part of me was being overwritten.



I wonder if it worked?

I had never expected to use it this way. I'd never tried this before, and to be perfectly honest, I wasn't even sure if it was possible. I had only thrown out the idea as a mere hypothetical because I knew how silly the argument sounded. Perhaps if I'd realized it earlier, I could have tested it on Zuly and her party. Oh well, too late now.

One of Eumis's hangers-on called out to her. "My lady! You bastards!" He

scowled at us. “What have you done to her?!”

“What do you mean? We’re simply jogging her memory a little,” I replied with a smirk.

The blade the fake Soriy had stabbed Eumis with was none other than the Eight-Eyed Sword of Clarity, into which I had channeled as much of my mana as I could.

This soul blade has the power to view and record a person’s status screen, after all. But what does that board actually draw upon? It can’t be the body; if that’s the case, it won’t display the person’s name. The brain, then? But that doesn’t make sense, either, because the blade displays even the names of newborn, who don’t have the language skills to understand them.

Which means it can only be the soul it draws upon. At the very least, it’s obvious that something like a soul exists in this world, because undead creatures like wraiths exist.

So if status is recorded in the soul, then that means the information recorded in the Eight-Eyed Sword is a copy of a person’s soul. Which means, theoretically, it should be possible to directly feed Eumis the information contained within her soul from my first time around.

I know, it sounds crazy. Too good to be true. I had been lucky enough to keep my *own* memories, let alone anyone else’s. It would be nice if it worked, though.

And if it didn’t, it wouldn’t drastically change anything. I would just have to alter my plans a little. But if she did remember, if she knew why I was doing this, it would make her tortured screams all the sweeter.

That aside, it seemed to me that the dagger was indeed working.

“Haah... Haah...” Eumis panted. “Wh-what did you do...? What are these memories...?”

“I think *you’re* best equipped to answer that question now, aren’t you?” I shot back.

“...You’re...Kaito Ukei. A hero from another world. I thought I killed you...

Didn't I? These...these are *my* memories."

Her unsteady words were nonetheless proof that she had at last recognized me for who I was. An emotion bubbled up within me. Pure, unbridled delight.

"...Ah-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! Oh! ...Oh! Oh! Oh! You don't know how delighted you make me, Eumis! How glad I am that I can see you face-to-face once more! It's been a long time since you killed me, but now it's finally time to continue our dance. Lights! Camera! Action! The curtain rises on *The Foolish Hero*, act two! And you're to play the leading lady, witch!"

I didn't know whether her memories had replaced the old ones or were simply saved alongside them. It didn't matter to me. All I cared about was that she remembered.

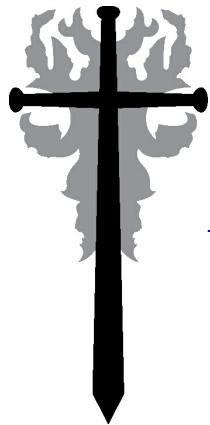
"...I don't know what's going on, but it seems you are intent on opposing my dream," she said.

At any rate, the die was cast...

"That's right, I am! And now I shall fulfill my vow! I'll kill every last one of you! Starting with you, Eumis! I'll drag you down to the depths of despair, of grief, of agony, and there, you'll drown!

...and I would shatter that die to pieces, leaving no indication on which face it fell.





CHAPTER 3

The Sound of a Dream Rent Asunder

At long last, the time has come. I am ready in mind, body, and soul.

First, I needed to overwhelm her with sheer force.

“What drivel! I do not need to see your status screen to know that I far outclass you! *Lightni*—”

Suddenly, Eumis froze, a terrified look on her face.

“It won’t work,” I explained. “The blade I stabbed you with was coated in a special toxin that prevents you from using magic. Even if your equipment can counteract it, you won’t be able to cast so much as a Fireball until it finishes doing so.”

“Hmph...”

Eumis scowled and retreated to heal. Now that she had all her memories and abilities, she would probably be ready to act again in about three minutes. More than enough time to complete the opening act.

“Now, let the slaughter commence. Be sure to watch from your box seat, Eumis. Your appearance is coming up next.”

First, I’d give her a viewing of my warm-up—smashing her private army to pieces.

For this, I had prepared the Soul Blade of Beginnings and the Mystic Blade of Soulfire.

Like an exploding bomb, both our band and our enemies rushed into action.

“Stay calm, there’s only three! We far outnumber them! Crush them all!” bellowed their leader, the man called Lomberto, as he guarded Eumis.

There were nearly fifty of them. That meant we got fifteen each. Then again, these were the men responsible for the destruction of Shuria’s village. It would only be fair to give her the lion’s share. I would have to exercise restraint.

“...Ha-ha-ha! Come on, what are you doing?! You’ll have to try harder than that!”

We split off in three different directions, and like ants to sugar, a couple of the hired hands swarmed around me. They were too strong to go down in a single blow like those monsters the other day, but that was okay. I only needed to ensure they wouldn’t be a nuisance later on. They could slowly succumb to their wounds as they watched the rest of the show.

“Wh-what the...? Graaagh!”

“He’s too fast...! Gyaaah!”

“N-no, don’t! Gblh!”

I scratched their eyes and sliced the tendons in their legs. As they fell to the ground, I bent their arms backward, so that the shattered bones pierced the skin and inflicted as much pain on them as possible. Before long, three mangled bodies lay strewed across the ground.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Hmm? Oh, whoops. Looks like one of you passed out.”

And I’d wanted them to feel the life leave them slowly, too. Now he’d die from blood loss without ever waking up again.

Well, losing one was no problem. There were plenty more here, after all.

“What’s the matter?” I taunted. “Scared already? I thought you guys were supposed to be ex-mercenaries?”

The soldiers’ initial frenzy was already beginning to waver, and they found themselves hesitating to throw themselves back into the fray. Unfortunately for them, I wasn’t so generous as to sit back and wait for them to rediscover their courage.

“Graaaargh!”

Leaping into the crowd of men, I impaled the front two in the elbows through the gaps in their plate armor. I tried not to sever their arms, as I didn’t want them passing out from the pain again.

“Die, you little shit!”

With both my weapons “otherwise engaged,” a third foe saw his chance and sprung on me. It was not a foolish move; to capitalize on your opponent’s moments of weakness was a central tenet of battle, and everyone here understood that. He had erred, however, in recognizing what I had done as an opportunity.

I conjured a paper-thin, transparent wing-shaped blade with a red handle. The Wing Blade of Detoxification. With a single slice, I lopped off the man’s nose, lips, and eyelids, leaving his face almost perfectly flat. His screams were most pleasing to the ear.

“Gyaaaaagh!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you shitheads!” I retorted.

After that, I sheathed the Wing Blade and pulled my two other soul blades free of their targets. Sticking them straight through the wailing man’s feet and pinning him to the ground, I gave his unguarded torso a mighty kick.

“Grghaaah!”

My mana-infused blow was nothing to sneeze at, and between my soul blades and his flesh, it was clear which was the weaker. Breaking apart at the ankles, his body flew backward while his feet remained in place.

Seeing this, one of the men broke formation and tried to flee, screaming, “No! He’s a monster!”

Using “Air Step,” I leaped high into the air to get a bead on him. “Trying to run, are you? Don’t leave me all alone here.”

I tossed one of my mundane longswords at him, which pinned his foot to the ground. “Gyaaagh!” he yelled out in pain.

The other lackeys around me were too afraid to even turn their backs to

retreat.

“Dammit! Who is this guy? Can you cast your spells yet, my lady?” cried the one called Lomberto.

“Almost! Just buy me some more time!” replied Eumis.

“You must be joking! The only thing I’m gonna buy against this guy is my own headstone! I’m gettin’ out of here!”

“What?! You would betray your employer?”

“Shut your trap, rug muncher! Money’s no good if I’m dead!”

Yet still, there were those foolish enough to try fleeing. *I had better make an example of him*, I thought, flinging my throwing knife. It impaled the leader of the mercenaries right in the shoulder.

“Grgh! Gyaaagh! Aaaagh! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts!”

The man’s eyes went wide in shock, and he fell to the ground, wailing and screaming like a broken record. The knife had been coated in one of Minnalis’s poisons, which I had made her prepare specifically for this purpose. The concoction ramped up its target’s pain sensitivity until their whole body was racked with agony, but since it didn’t obstruct proper blood flow, they wouldn’t pass out. My partner in crime had specially crafted it to drain away the target’s life more slowly than conventional toxins.

“Come on, don’t run. You’re harshing the vibes. If you want to survive, you’re going to have to deal with us.”

“““Eep!“““



I didn't even have to use "Intimidate" this time to get them scared.

"Now, come at me like you mean it. I'll slaughter the whole damn lot of you."



"Gyaaagh!"

"Please stop!"

"M-my arm! It's meeeltiiing!"

"Oh god, it burns! It buuurns!"

"Ah-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Come now, whatever's the matter? Surely, you big, strong men can have your way with one little girl, can't you?"

Their blades were slow. Their reactions were sluggish. Their movements were clumsy and easily dodged. The dirty work these men typically engaged in amounted to threatening shopkeepers or slitting people's throats in their sleep. Not exactly prime opportunities for honing their skills. They were no match for me. This was not even a fight. Like Master said, it was a slaughter.

Oh dear, I must not forget my place. I am merely a supporting actress tonight. I must rein in my desires.

"Die, you rotten bitch!" yelled one, swinging his sword.

"You should watch your tongue, maggot," I shot back, slicing off the hand holding his weapon.

"Hgyaaagh?!" As the man cried out in pain, the blood splattered from his wrist across my cheeks. I screwed up my face in disgust, for more reasons than just the mess.

Still, it was very difficult for me to avoid killing my foes. Master made it look so easy, but there was no way I could stab without hitting the vitals or flaying the skin of a moving target with just my sword like he did. I needed more training.

That's why I was targeting areas that would not prove fatal, such as the eyes, ears, and fingers, plus the genitals if they were men or breasts if they were women.

"You don't mind losing those, do you? You won't need them where you're going!"

"Ugh! Gyaaagh!"

"Oh, can it. Castration is supposed to help dogs calm down. Oh, but I suppose you're just a maggot, aren't you? Not quite as smart as a canine."

I kicked him to the ground, his mouth frothing, and moved on to my next target.

"I do hope you will keep me entertained. This may be the last time I get to cut loose all by myself! Hee-hee! Hee-hee-hee!!"



"What the hell is this doll...? No, my eyes! My eeeyes!"

This one killed the kind old man who'd always given me fresh vegetables.

"Sister?! No, it's a foul illu— Urk!"

That one had massacred the friendly neighborhood kids, smiling all the while.

"Stop! I'm on your side— Blgh!"

"I-it's not me! I can't control myself— Ghuh!"

And these two wretches had gleefully put Mother and Shelmie to death.

"Hee-hee! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ahhh, look at how terrified you all are!"

Kitty gouged out eyes, sliced off noses, ripped off ears, and cut out tongues before gorging on them, while Teddy transformed himself into people the targets knew, then attacked them in their moment of hesitation.

I, on the other hand, commanded their swords and armor with Puppet Possession to make them turn on their allies and even themselves.

In terms of level, I was very weak, but my new ability was quite effective against these humans because they'd all chosen to wear such perfect metal armor. Even if they were physically strong enough to fight back a little, I could slow them down enough for Kitty and Teddy to finish them off. Well, I say "finish," but I wasn't killing them just yet.

“Oh dear, does it hurt already? I’m afraid there’s still a lot more to come if you’re to feel the pain of those you murdered.”

I could take my time and enjoy watching them perish. For three minutes, on this stage that Kaito and Minnalis had prepared for me, I would personally snuff the life out of everyone responsible for the slaughter and capture of my village’s people.

“Ah-ha! Louder! Suffer! I want to hear you scream as loud as you can because my friends and family didn’t ever get a choice!”

I commanded a corpse in full plate armor to slaughter the rest of them.

“Stop! Please! We were just doing a job!”

“Don’t make excuses! If you had no choice, then what of those people just going about their lives, trying to make what humble livings they could?! What choice did you give them?!”

“Gyah! Aaargh! Stop! Gyaaagh! Ghhh!”

Consumed with rage, I sliced off the man’s arms and legs one by one, before impaling him in the throat.

“...Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to kill you so soon. Now we can’t have any more fun...”

I ground my teeth. Three years. Three long years I could have spent back at the village, having fun with my family. Three years they spent as abominations locked in that underground cellar.

These insects would succumb to their wounds in less than a few hours, so I wanted to make sure they felt as much pain as I could get away with in that time. I wanted their minds to shatter.

“Yes, I want you to break. All of you! Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Kitty and Teddy joined in my laughter, as if resonating with my emotions.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

“Khee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

“Eek! Gblh!”

“Grh! Gah! Gyaaah!”

“Hee-hee! Oh my, I’m getting wet just thinking about it!”

There’s still lots more merriment to be had. Kaito and Minnalis had reassured me that I could have as much fun as I liked and they’d make up for any I lost.

There’s not a lot of time. So I’m going to ensure I savor it slowly, like a lollipop, until the very last second.



The splishing and splashing sounded like footsteps in a field after the rain, but the scene before my eyes was nothing so tranquil.

“Ohhh god, it huuurts!”

“Gh... Ugh...”

“Waaaaah! Waaaaah!”

“My arm’s gone...! Where are my legs...?”

The scent of blood wafted on the cool night air. Beneath the light of the moon, the earth was like a sea of crimson. In it, *broken* people twitched and spasmed, adding to the chorus of weak moans and wails. It was the perfect overture to Eumis’s demise.

Though the corpses of those she had used in her attempts at power now lay around her, it wasn’t like they had been anything more than pawns to her. Now that they were broken, she would merely throw them away.

“The lake of fire returns all to cinder. The wicked flame takes all! *Demon’s Fire!*”

With a flick of her wrist, dark flames appeared and engulfed the fallen mercenaries.

“Oh god, it buuurns!”

“I’m meltiiing! I’m dyyying...!”

“Bbblblblbbl...”

“Oh dear, you finished them off. Well, they were going to bleed out anyway,”

I said.

I had taken special care to crush the wounds of the soldiers whose limbs I'd severed so that flesh and bone would seal in most of their blood. Minnalis and Shuria weren't yet skilled enough to pull that off, so their victims would only have lasted thirty minutes at most. Mine, however, could have gone on living in agony for another two, maybe even three hours. During that first hour, they could have even been restored to full health without any lasting symptoms.

Well, I suppose that just proved Eumis didn't want to save them if they were of no further use to her. In either case, their fate was sealed.

"That's not all," Eumis muttered. "My Demon's Fire can..."

"I know, I know. I guess that means you're still the second one at heart," I reasoned. If my record of Eumis's first soul had overwritten the second one—if she was now the Eumis I was familiar with—then she wouldn't have seen the need to explain powers I was already familiar with.

I had been thinking about the memory transfer in terms of data, like it was something from my world, but it wasn't as if the information I stored on my soul blade was a perfect representation of a person's soul, either. Perhaps I just didn't have right intuition for it yet.

Still, as far as my vengeance was concerned, it was good that Eumis regained her memories, even if it did end up making her stronger; now she had access to the spells we'd developed together.

"Demon's Fire is a combination of Fire, Earth, and spirit magic that creates a chimera of a flesh golem and an undead called a Tenebris-Ignis Giant," I explained. "I knew you'd use that all along."

The dark flames incinerated the soldiers, leaving only charred bones, which started gathering together, assembling.

"Grr! But still, there's nothing you can do about it now! It seemed like I wasted a lot of my precious time tracking you down in that timeline. As recompense, I'll crush you where you stand, so that not even a speck of you remains!"

"Hey, you sure you want to do that?" I replied. "Kill me, and you'll never know

where we hid your precious Soriy.”

“That shall not be a problem,” Eumis growled. “With my necromancy, it will be no trouble to extract the information from your corpse. As much as I’d love to experiment on an otherworlder’s cadaver, I shall have to purge your horrid existence from this world immediately because you laid a hand on Soriy. The same goes for that beastfolk girl, and Shuria, too.” She gave a fearless shrug. “The filth ought to be all eradicated in one fell swoop, don’t you agree?”

But beneath her smug facade, she was evidently fuming at us. Good. That way, we could get maximum enjoyment out of torturing her.

“*Grrroooaaargh!*”

“*Grrraaoooragh!*”

With a pair of tragic wails, two golems lumbered up out of the earth, their very existence a blasphemy against all life in this world. The bones that composed their nearly six-meter-tall bodies were melted like black tar and cloaked in purple flames. The creatures looked less like constructs made to protect their master and more like the kind of unholy servants a demon would call upon. And owing either to the fires they wreathed themselves in or their overall menace, they appeared even larger than their physical size would suggest.

“Right. Follow the plan. I’ll take these. You two, fall back and begin preparing for the next stage.”

“Yes, Master,” came Minnalis’s reply. “Be careful not to overdo it.”

“That’s right, Kaito!” added Shuria. “If you kill her before I get a chance to, I’m never talking to you again!”

“You guys have no faith in me at all, do you...?”

““That’s because we know how deeply you yearn for vengeance!”” they both replied.

Well, I suppose I didn’t have a snappy comeback to that. As nice as it was that the Holy Sword of Retribution linked our hearts and minds to make us unable to betray or act against one another, it could be a real pain at times like these. I

couldn't hide anything from them. I might as well have not even bothered.

"Just get on with it. I can still hold back. I'm not so hungry that I'd eat our main ingredient before the oven's even heated up."

I briskly shooed them away, and Minnalis and Shuria left to prepare.

"Now then, let's get this show on the road."

"Are you sure you want to ruin your chances like that? You finally had me outnumbered. Do you really think you're strong enough at this time to take me on all by yourself?"

"Of course I am. I'm not the only one who's weaker at the moment. Just because you've regained your memories doesn't mean your stats are any higher."

Well, her Finesse has gone up, I suppose.

Looking at her status screen, I noticed it had risen to B+. Also, with Shuria's magical proficiencies added to her existing training, all her skills ending in "Magic" advanced to their ascended forms, which ended in "Sorcery." Her skill levels were still low, but they were powerful nonetheless.

But none of that would help her against me.

"I suppose that's why you didn't go after the other two, am I right?" I teased.
"You need every advantage you can get right now."

"...You talk too much. Now you will die alone at my hand."

"Will I? So how come after I made short work of that bloodthirsty assassin, Gordo, you only ever attacked me with at least three people to back you up?"

When I'd first arrived here, this marvelous illusion of a world ruled by stats and skills gave me some fanciful notions about the sanctity of human life and reinforced my wishful thinking. Alicia destroyed all that.

Soon after, Eumis, realizing she was not strong enough to take me on by herself, had decided to team up with Gordo and come after me. That way, he could keep me busy with his flurry of attacks while she prepped a powerful spell to wipe me out. If I'd still been averse to murder back then, perhaps that's exactly how it would have played out. I had been weakened by the stat-

lowering curse embedded in Alicia's firebolts from when I escaped.

However, their plan didn't go so well. Even in my enfeebled state, I'd been strong enough to quickly dispatch Gordo.

Though I had the upper hand in terms of pure speed, his crafty feints and underhanded techniques placed him on about equal footing with me. But still, he could never hope to defeat me. All his clumsy swings and obvious tricks gave so many opportunities. I could read his intentions clearly, not just in the line of his sight and his breathing, but even in the twitches of his muscles and the way he applied his strength. And so I reduced his tricky swordplay to the mere fumbling of a drunken idiot.

Though I certainly didn't come out uninjured, it had been akin to a cat toying with a mouse. Even if the mouse got off a few good scratches in return, the cat would be in no risk of dying from them.

If I had been at full strength back then, perhaps I could have killed Eumis, too, but once she saw things weren't going her way, she used the mana she had built up to cast a powerful teleportation spell and disappeared. I could have taken a few more of them with me the first time if I hadn't let her escape.

Of course, then I wouldn't have been able to torture her as freely as I could now.

"If you're not the same Eumis I know, then I'll just have to teach it to you all over again. Impress upon you that you can never defeat me without hiding behind someone else."

I gripped the Challenger's Blade of Adversity in both hands.

"Grr! Such impudence!" Eumis seethed. "If you think you can kill me, then I welcome you to try!"

"Ha! Now you're starting to show your true self, Eumiiiiis!" I cried, lunging into battle.

While issuing orders to the two Tenebris-Ignis Giants, Eumis began casting her own spell. One of the golems took a few tentative steps before it broke into a run, then it swung a sword wrapped in deep-purple flames and composed of human bone like the rest of its body.

“Ughaaaaah!”

“Tsk!” I sucked my teeth as I caught the blade on mine. “They’re as solid as they look!”

If I was to assign them a rank, they’d be in C tier easily. Their sturdy exteriors were about as resistant as the Blackhide of a Black Orc. In terms of pure strength, too, I was at a disadvantage, even with the Challenger’s Blade in my hands. But the most threatening aspect of the golems were the flames that covered their bodies. They would drain my MP if I so much as touched them.

You’d think I would switch out my soul blade if it was dragging down my performance that significantly, but right now, it was exactly what I was going for.

“Tri-Lightning!”

“I don’t think so!” I shouted, sneering as three separate bolts flew at me from different angles. Meanwhile, the other golem came at me from behind. This one wielded not a sword, but a weapon closer to a hammer. Relaxing my grip, I allowed my foe to launch me up into the air with its attack before using Air Step to create a thin rod in midair that I grasped onto. Then I swung myself around like I was using a gymnastics bar to evade the bolts. With all my momentum intact, I flew toward the golem’s hammer, which was not yet in full swing. For an instant, I erected a free-moving Air Step platform between my feet and the oncoming weapon and perched on it like an acrobat.

“Gwuuuaaaagh!”

The blow knocked me back into the air; I did a single somersault and landed neatly some distance away.

“Ha,” spat Eumis with contempt. “How unsightly of me. Usually, a single attack of this magnitude would be enough to defeat you.”

“You say that, but that’s not what you’ve been doing, is it? You’ve been hiding behind your golems because you know you aren’t strong enough to command your old spells yet.”

“Such impudence... I despise you. Golems!”

Realizing she could win if she kept this up, Eumis ordered the sword golem to remain nearby to guard her as the hammer golem lumbered toward me. Meanwhile, she began casting her next spell. I kept my distance from my slow-moving opponent without taking my eyes off it.

“...”

“O whimsical wind spirits, O Lord of Light, that which traces its bizarre locus...”

She was casting Multiple Lightning. Honestly, she was so predictable sometimes. I couldn’t help but chuckle at her simplicity.

“I guess I’d better get serious, too...”

I began channeling mana into the Nephrite Blade of Verdure in order to use my secret technique. The one I’d honed against the goblin horde. The one that would allow me to go one step beyond and, in doing so, earn its name.

Eumis’s chant continued. “...In a trice, deliver oblivion upon my foes. Unleash an inescapable tempest! *Multiple Lightning!*”

“...*Over Limit*,” I muttered to myself, more out of conviction than necessity, and a pale-greenish light enveloped my entire body. As the world around me slowed down, growing dull and faded, I saw Eumis’s incantation take shape.

Magic lightning differed from its naturally formed counterpart. While this was what allowed it to follow such contrived paths, it also meant that artificial lightning wasn’t quite as fast as the real thing, despite it being swifter than other forms of magic.

I broke into a sprint, dodging past the bolts heading straight for me, then turned to face the hammer golem that Eumis had sent forward to attack.

The technique I’d just used allowed me to go a step beyond even my already perfect Finesse score while ignoring the toll it took on my body. I was not brushing up against my limits; for one small moment, I was surpassing them while continuously using the Nephrite Blade of Verdure to heal any injuries I took as a result. During that brief period, I was truly unlocking my full potential.

“What?!” came Eumis’s cry of disbelief.

“Nugruuuagh?!”

“Try to keep up, you boneheaded dunce!”

One, two, three, four, five. I delivered slash after slash to the golem in its neck, upper arm, hip, thigh, and calf, all while it was still slowly dropping its hammer down on top of me. Though I was wielding my soul blade, it was really the blunt impact of my blows that was doing the damage, and they tore huge chunks out of its body.

“Raaaaargh!” I roared.

For a moment, Eumis hesitated. “Hrk! Go...! No, wait! Haah!” It seemed she had decided against sending the other golem after me and opted to launch a Fireball instead. It was the correct decision. Not only would the alternative have left her completely defenseless, but the other golem also wouldn’t have been able to reach me in time anyway. Once I shattered the core that gave the one with the hammer life, it would stop moving and return to dust.

“You insignificant worm! Why won’t you die already?!” shouted Eumis. As I dodged her attacks, I delivered one last strike to the teetering golem’s leg, sending it completely off balance. As it fell to the ground, the deep-purple blaze that surrounded its body suddenly began to spurt forth more vigorously. It was going to self-destruct. Those flames were the golem’s life force itself, and the brighter they burned, the shorter it lived.

“Pretty stubborn for a golem,” I remarked, and with the flames licking away at my MP, I shattered its core.

Suddenly, Eumis spoke up. “You shouldn’t have given me my memories back,” she said. “Now I know Over Limit’s weakness.”

“...”

Indeed, my secret technique had a single drawback. It required a lot of MP to heal continuously like this, and the healing capacity of the Nephrite Blade of Verdure wasn’t particularly high in the first place. What it couldn’t take from my mana, it had to take from the rest of my energy reserves. That was why I felt so hungry after using it.

With a few more levels under my belt, I could increase my stamina and invest

in the “Overeating” skill, which would allow me to load up on food beforehand. If I tried that now, though, I’d just get fat.

All this was to say that I couldn’t use Over Limit for long. When I tried it out against the goblins, I hadn’t even been using my full power, and I could only keep it up for about seven minutes. At full strength, it would be closer to three.

On top of that, the Tenebris-Ignis Giant had sapped a lot of my MP. I was sitting at around 30 percent right now, already feeling the effects of MP drunkenness. I wouldn’t be able to call upon Over Limit a second time.

“Ha, but you’re not holding up too well, either, are you, Eumis?” I shot back. For as fearsome an incantation it was, Demon’s Fire didn’t use a lot of mana. If the golems’ cores were destroyed, however, the caster suffered severe pain and MP loss. Add to that the poison I’d stabbed her with, which was sapping her MP without her knowledge even now, plus the powerful spells she’d used earlier, and she would be feeling the heat. She wasn’t holding up as well as she tried to project.

“Regardless,” she said, “I still have about forty percent of my mana left, and there is one Tenebris-Ignis Giant remaining.”

“...”

“You are as foolish as ever, hero. Had you not returned my memories to me, perhaps I would still exercise caution toward that power of yours.”

She smiled, assured of her victory as she saw the pale-green light of my healing power fade.

“Now, my golem. Shift to maximum output.”

“Rrroooaaagh!”

Just as the other one had, the sword golem roared anew with intense flames. If I tried to fight it head-on with my soul blades now, my MP would be completely gone in a matter of seconds.

Eumis began prepping another spell while I stood in place. There was no chant this time, but I could see the Water and Wind mana swirling around her. I knew her well enough to predict what that meant.

"You really haven't changed a bit," I muttered, though the lumbering footsteps of the giant drowned out my voice as it ran toward me. "I may have been a fool once, but no longer. Unfortunately, I can't say the same for you!"

Thus far, everything had been going exactly as I envisioned, so my *facedown card* was exactly what I needed to counter her.

"*Suction Blade.*"

I conjured in my hand a soul blade I had relocked in case the plan to restore Eumis's memories succeeded. Though it took the form of an ordinary longsword, it was split down the middle into a red half and a blue half. It had the power to pull objects toward a particular location.

Noticing the weapon in my hands, Eumis stared at me quizzically. She recognized it, so she must have been wondering what I was planning to do with it. By now, however, it was too late. I had already won.

As the golem headed toward me, I stuck the tip of the blade into the ground at my feet.

"Wh-what?!" cried Eumis.

"*Brrraaaagh!*"

The golem gave an idiotic wail as the ground beneath its feet gave way. The giant tumbled into a pit about seven meters deep and landed with a splash in the water below.

"A pit?! Filled with water...?"

As Eumis spluttered in disbelief, I pulled out the Suction Blade and hurtled forth to deliver the finishing blow on the submerged golem.

"Huh?! You really *are* a fool!" she shouted. "Do you think that mere water is enough to extinguish those unholy flames?"

"You're the moron here, Eumis," I retorted. "Already forgotten what I said earlier?"

As the liquid settled, it was clear that the flames across the golem's body had gone out.

“I knew you’d use Demon’s Fire against me from the start!”

“Y-you don’t mean... No! Holy water?!”

Ordinary water was of no use against cursed fire. But water that had been blessed by the Church did the trick just fine. Unlike the golem, the flames that spurted from it were of an undead nature, which meant that the holy water was particularly effective against them.

I leaped into the pit and crushed the core of the struggling, frigid construct.

“Graaargh! Guh... Agh... Not yet!”

Eumis continued to weave her spell, even as the destruction of the core deducted all the more MP from her. As the golem crumbled into dust, she commanded it to stall me, just for a second.

“Now die, hero!”

Squeezing out the last of her power, Eumis unleashed her incantation.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” I retorted. Everything I had planned had been leading to this moment. I activated the Suction Blade with my mana and flung it across the pit, where it embedded itself in the far wall. At the same time, Eumis sealed the mouth of the hole with a film of solid air, trapping me inside.

“I anticipated your every move. Just like how I knew you’d use Demon’s Fire...,” I said, chuckling before taking a deep breath and holding it. The water started to bubble almost immediately, breaking apart into hydrogen and oxygen. I was stuck inside an enormous hydrogen bomb; if it went off, I’d meet my end for sure.

Still, the smile on my face was genuine. “...And I also predicted you’d want to use the cheapest, most efficient spell you had access to right now...”

“...Hydrogen, be my sword! *Phlogiston Blast!*”

There was a spark of electricity, which gave birth to a flame. But that was all it was. A flame, not a blast, and after a moment, it fizzled out.

Eumis was aghast. “Wh-what? But I saw the flame! Wh-why...?!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That’s what you get, Eumis! You’re working off

borrowed knowledge! Power you stole from others! That's why you'll never be anything more than a worthless bitch!"

Breaking apart water molecules and setting alight a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen would result in an explosion. Eumis was aware this. But what she didn't understand was *why* it worked. All she knew was that running a current through water created two highly explosive products known as hydrogen and oxygen.

She didn't comprehend that an "explosion" was really a shock wave produced from rapid combustion, and she certainly didn't know what would happen if I separated the two gases using the Suction Blade. In that state, the only part that could burn was the place where they met in the middle, and that thin layer was not enough to cause the chain reaction that would lead to an eruption.

Soul Blade of Beginnings in hand, I leaped out of the pit and sprinted toward Eumis.

"Grr!" she grunted in frustration. "It's not over yet!"

"I'm afraid it is, Eumis. This is checkmate!"

I took out a pair of fetters, like what you would use to bind a slave, and slapped them on her while she was unguarded. Then with a low, sweeping kick, I tripped her over and plunged the tip of my soul blade through the back of her hand.

"Grargh! Gh... Aaaagh!"

She wailed in agony as I twisted the blade.

"Ha! What's the matter? Does it hurt? I'm so glad I can finally see that tortured expression of yours, Eumis. And I really must thank you for putting on such a show. Do you know how hard I've worked to reach this point? Do you?"

"Grh! Ugh... Aaagh!"

I impaled her again, and again, through the hands, the feet, the elbows, the knees, taking care to limit her bleeding as best I could.

"That was such a fun fight, too. Do you know how hard it was to hold back my laughter as you did everything I expected you to do, down to every last detail? I knew you'd resort to that spell once your little private army was of no more use

to you! So how are you feeling now? I know MP drunkenness causes you nausea, and I bet me destroying those golem cores didn't help, either. I can see it on your face, even if you try to hide it."

"Grr! Uuuugh... Haah...haah..."

"Whoopsie-daisy. I'd better not start the meal before the others get back. Try to stay awake, would you?"

"Grah! Gh...ug...aaagh..."

With all her joints impaled, Eumis could only crawl along the ground. I stomped on her hard. That probably cracked a few bones, but I could be forgiven for that, couldn't I? It was okay if I just had a little taste of what was to come, right? Oh, and that thing where I twisted the blade? That was an accident. My hand slipped. Honest.

So don't go breaking on me yet.

"Now then, I'm all done over here. This is where the real fun begins, Eumis, so please try to last as long as you can."

"Ugh."

I gripped her jaw tightly in my hand.

"I've stripped you of your pride. Next comes your dreams, your ambitions, and everything you hold dear."

I could no longer control the glee on my face. The corners of my lips curled up into a twisted smile. She glared at me from her position facedown on the floor, but she couldn't run. I had already completely shattered her ankles.

"Gh...agh... You really are a rotten man, hero, to torture a helpless woman like this. I suppose that's why you hooked up with the demon lord, that bitch—*Hrk!*"

"Oh, is that right? Leticia was a fine woman. That's why you're not worthy to have her name cross your lips."

As I restored my MP using a potion, I thrust my blade into her wounds. Then I healed her and did it all over again. When my MP got too low, I downed another potion and continued. I had expected that Eumis, an important

dignitary of the kingdom, would have undergone pain-resistance training for national security, but by this point, it wouldn't matter anymore. In fact, it was a good thing she had some experience under her belt, or she would have either passed out long ago or be begging for death by now. As it was, I could enjoy toying with her while making sure not to cross the line into sneaking a bite ahead of time.

I decided to give the others a call. Minnalis still had some preparation to do, but Shuria might be taking a well-deserved break by now.

"Minnalis, Shuria. I'm done getting ready on my end. How are things going with you two?"

I was using a skill called "Soulspeak." This means of instant communication traveled via our link with the Holy Sword of Retribution. I'd used it previously to relay Mouse #1's findings to Minnalis. It only worked over a limited range, but unlike conventional magical communicators, our conversations through this avenue were impossible to intercept or listen in on.

"This is Minnalis. I'm sorry, Master, but there's about half of half of them left."

"That's fine. I was just curious. I'd be more worried if you *were* finished because I'd be wondering what pains you put yourself through to wrap things up so quickly. I know you're not the type to cut corners, after all."

Also, "*half of half?*" I suppose Minnalis isn't that great at math, being a village girl and all. It's easy to forget since she's whip-smart otherwise. I'll have to make some time to teach her fractions later.

"What about you, Shuria?"

"I have done everything you requested. I was just playing with them a little since there was nothing else to do."

"I see. In that case, come over here when you're done. I've got a way better toy for you to play with."

I heard a small gasp over the connection. "Okay!"

No sooner had our conversation ended than a circle of pale light spread over the whole of the field where I had just fought Eumis.

“A teleportation circle?” she grunted. “Is that ours?”

“Yup. I mean, we’ve got to use everything at our disposal, right?”

As its name suggested, a teleportation stone was a rock that allowed you to warp somewhere. Compared with my soul blade, however, they came with a few drawbacks. They didn’t use up MP, but you couldn’t teleport very many people at once or travel long distances with them. On top of that, they took some time to activate and were quite rare and expensive. Still, noble families tended to keep them on hand in case of emergencies.

The blinding light of the teleportation magic gave way to reveal Shuria, grinning from ear to ear, accompanied by a couple dozen men and women of all ages. Apart from my accomplice, they were all servants who worked at Eumis’s mansion. In other words, they were people she trusted, confided in, and perhaps even cared about? Every single one of them was writhing in terror and agony.

I sighed. “Come on, now. *A little*, you said. Is that what you call this?”

“Aww, I don’t think I did anything wrong,” whined Shuria in response. “I just ripped off a few of their fingers, tore off their eyelids, bit off their ears, and pulled out their hair. Nothing that would *kill* them. I think I did quite a good job.”

At what? I wanted to ask, but she had a point. They didn’t look like they were about to shuffle off this mortal coil, so as long as they weren’t broken yet, I supposed there wasn’t a problem.

“Besides,” she continued, “I see you’ve already had a go at my sister before I got a chance to.”

“Well, I finished way earlier than I expected. What else was I supposed to do?”

Ah, the Japanese person’s signature move. Hypocrisy.

Shuria instead turned to Eumis. “Oh, my dear sister, you do look wonderful no matter what it is you are doing, even when it’s crawling facedown in the mud.”

“Shuria...! You would bring my servants into this?”

Eumis glared up at her younger sister in disgust, but Shuria simply responded with a bewitching grin.

"Now then, Eumis," I told her, "it's time to begin. First up is *The First Annual Eumis-Pummeling Contest (There Won't Be a Second!)* Clap, clap, clap, clap!"

"Clap, clap, clap, indeed!" added Shuria.

The clearing was filled with nothing but the sounds of our fake clapping.

"Come on, you worms. The show's underway!"

"""Eep!"""

Shuria's faithful teddy bear chuckled, and the pussycat clashed his knife and fork together.

"No, no! Please don't bite off my ears!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! You can shave me bald if you want! Just stop pulling out my scalp!"

The servants' voices filled with dread as Shuria turned her ice-cold gaze upon a man whose hair had been half torn out. He seemed to have taken the most punishment of all of them; the blood from his scalp had begun dripping down his face, lending him a rather dismal air, and one of his hands, which he clutched in the other, was also missing three fingers.

"Come along, now. You're the head butler," Shuria urged. "You should set a good example for everybody else."

"Eek! Forgive me ... Forgive me... I'm just a lowly, rotten, worthless insect... Forgive me!" The man repeated his apology over and over again as he stood up, quaking and sobbing.

"As for all you other maggots," Shuria continued, "you know what will happen if you don't do what you're supposed to!"

"""Gasp!"""

The rest of the servants all stood up when Shuria trained her scarlet eyes on them.

"Come on, Eumis," I said. "You stand right over here."

“Grh... Agh!”

I snatched her arm and dragged her before her faithful servant.

“I am so sorry, my lady...”

“What are you...?” she began. “Gah?!”

The head butler stomped on Eumis’s back. His expression betrayed he was ruled by fear and confusion. At this, the other employees all followed suit.

“I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry,” shouted one of them, “but I don’t want to die! I have a sick little sister to take care of!”

“I have to protect my family!” wailed another. “Oh, god... Please forgive me, Lady Eumis. Please forgive me!”

“Gah... Urgh... Gh!”

The servants literally ground Eumis into the dirt as they voiced a chorus of regret.

“Ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! How does it feel to be trampled on by those you trusted, Eumis? How ugly you look now! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Like maggots swarming a piece of rotten fruit. Aww, I suppose this is all they’re good for. What failures.”

Eumis was in another league compared with her employees, both in terms of level and everything else. Coupled with her pain resistance, it was likely their blows weren’t hurting her at all right now. Nevertheless, she had trusted these people enough to let them work in the mansion alongside her and Soriy, so the humiliation factor could not be discounted.

“Grr! You cowards...!”

The face Eumis made was exquisite. I didn’t know how long I gazed at it before I received a transmission from Minnalis.

“Master, everything’s set up on my end.”

“I see. Then I suppose we can bring the first act to a close.” I switched off the connection and turned to the others. “All right, you can stop that now.”

The servants slowly ceased what they were doing and looked at me. Eumis,

too, glared up from her spot on the ground, her eyes filled with hate.

“Er...um...does that mean we can...?” the head butler ventured.

“I have no further use for you, so die.”

“...Huh?”

Then with the Soul Blade of Beginnings, I lopped off his head. It fell to the earth with a soft *thud* and rolled along the ground.

“Wh-why?” asked a maid, terrified. “We did everything you— *Hrk!*” She was unable to finish her sentence before the pussycat doll impaled her in the neck with its fork.

“What do you mean?” asked Shuria, cocking her head quizzically. “Of course the actors must leave the stage once their part is played. That should be obvious.”

“H-help—! *Guh!*”

“Stop, please! I’ll do anything you want, just don’t kill— Oh god, it hurts, it hurts, it *huuurts!*”

My aura was so threatening that the servants were too scared to flee. Shuria and I quickly and neatly disposed of them, and with that, the first act was over.

“You...fiends...!” Eumis growled at us through gritted teeth.

“Oh, my dear sister. Kind as ever. Even after the way they treated you just now.”

“That’s because you forced them to go along with your sick games!”

“Heh-heh,” I chuckled. “Don’t be so angry. We’ve still got a lot more to go. Act one was a trampling from those you trusted. Act two is to erase your past.”

Saying this, I activated a magic item I had procured in town. It was a telescope-like object I had modified with the Tailor’s Hook of Mending. It allowed me to peer in on things happening elsewhere, much like the alchemical life-form I had commissioned from Jufain. We had used one in my first life, so Eumis knew what it was.

“Is this...the city?”

As she cautiously peered into the spyglass, the stone spires of Elmia appeared before her. It was night, and the city slept.

“Now, it’s time to begin the second act. *Whenever you’re ready, Minnalis.*”

“Yes, *Master,*” she replied over our link.

Then an enormous explosion rocked the tranquil town.

“What?! What happened?!?” cried Eumis. Through the device, she glimpsed a white-hot burst of flames, a raging inferno that lit up the night sky.

“Wh-what have you done...?”

“Ah, such beautiful fireworks,” I mused. “What lovely flames your life’s work ignites.”

I had tasked Minnalis with blowing up Eumis’s research facilities. All her notes, all the progress she had strived for, up in smoke. Across the city, people were coming out of their homes to watch, astonished, as the burning buildings crumbled, the books and ingredients inside reduced to ash.

It was the most beautiful blaze I’d ever seen.

The townspeople began trying to put out the fire with water buckets, but it wouldn’t work. The inferno was augmented with a special poison Minnalis had created that burned at high temperatures, plus a healthy dose of oil for good measure.

Those unnatural white flames were like the fires of hell. By the time the city’s spellcasters showed up to douse the conflagration with magic, all the fruits of Eumis’s labor, the work she had poured her heart into, would be little more than ash, indistinguishable from dust.

Before long, only quietly rasping flames danced orange in the silent moonlight.

“Ah...ahhh...my workshops...the cornerstones of my research...”

“And that concludes the second act,” I announced. “Next comes act three, where we erase your future.”

The image changed. Now it showed the stone monument at the center of the

city.

“Y-you can’t mean...? No... Please, no...!”

Boooom!

As a devious smirk spread across my face, I brought my hands slowly together as if I was crushing something between them. At the same moment, the stone monument in the image crumbled into rubble.

“Im...impossible... The statue...,” whimpered Eumis, her voice trembling.

“Ahhh, now that’s a lovely face. However, this is still only the third act. We’ve seen your faithful servants, your accumulated history, and your long-awaited future all destroyed. Next comes act four: *what you have right now.*”

“Wha—?! Wait...what? What more do you plan on taking from me?!”

Eumis’s face fell as Shuria leaned in and stroked her cheek. “Oh, dear sister,” she said consolingly, with a smile just like the one Eumis had last shown her. “There’s no need to be afraid. It’s time to reap the fruits of your harvest. All you need to do is sit back and watch. This is our gift to you! ♪”

The image changed once more. Now it showed the ruins of Eumis’s laboratories again. Amid the rubble, something stirred. An arm poked through as *something* tried to pull itself to the surface, and before long, dozens of undead goblins and orcs were crawling up out of the debris.

“Groooargh...”

“Broooagh...”

“Eeeek! Zombies! Zombies in the city!” someone screamed. The curious onlookers were soon running about making noise, like a disturbed wasp’s nest.

“Wh-what have you done?” shouted Eumis. “From where did you procure such a large number of undead?”

“What do you mean?” I replied. “They’re from Shuria’s village. Don’t you remember? You’re the one who killed them.”

In preparation for this day, I had paid a visit to that village myself. What I found there was an unimaginably large horde of undead, which was growing

larger by the day. An entire village's worth of negative emotions of the people whose lives Eumis had unreasonably stripped from them, made only more powerful by the demon's residual mana.

"These poor friends were born of the suffering you caused, dear sister. What did I say? *It's time to reap the fruits of your harvest.*"

Afterward, I had spent a few days setting up a teleportation circle there that lead into Eumis's laboratories. This was also a way of helping those lost souls deal with their lingering regrets. Though I couldn't cast magic, I was able to channel mana into a magic circle just fine, as long as I had enough MP potions to keep myself going. After I made Minnalis mark the locations of Eumis's laboratories, the undead were now pouring through those portals to rise out of the rubble and attack the people of the city.

The color drained from Eumis's face once more. "No... What have you done?! The townsfolk are going to get slaughtered!"

"Yeah, I suppose a few of them will," I replied, returning her a joyous smile.

In reality, the explosions had immediately drawn the citizenry's attention to the undead horde. There were also holy men and women on hand, so rather than drawing innocents into my quest for revenge, the number of casualties resulting from my scheme might actually be lower than if I had done nothing. I didn't have to let Eumis in on that, though.

Still, a couple hundred people could very well lose their lives tonight, but that was how the cookie crumbled. I'd needed to do this to exact my vengeance.

"They'll die in the hundreds. This must go down as one of the most tragic events in the city's history. Do you think me evil for that, Eumis? It's all for the sake of my dream, though. I think you of all people would understand."

"Grr... You...," Eumis growled. I snickered at her with contempt before continuing.

"And might I add, you have some nerve for trying to pretend you care a single bit about the people of Elmia. Or do you just not want to admit it? You know what we're taking from you here, don't you?"

"Wh-what do you...?"

Suddenly, Shuria interjected. “Oh, dear sister? There’s something I don’t understand. Could you explain it to me? Who will the city blame when they see the undead rising up out of the ruins of your damaged laboratories? Whose fault will they think it is?” She punctuated her obvious question with a gleeful chuckle.

“D-don’t be absurd! You would try to pin the blame for this attack on me?!”

“Ding, ding, ding! We’ve got a winner!” I smiled. “Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re absolutely correct, Eumis. That’s what you lot did to me the first time, after all. Just as I, the hero who saved the world, became the new demon lord and bore the weight of the world’s sins, so too have you gone from the kind and gracious steward of House Elmia to a mad scientist who conducted illegal experiments on the undead. Only in your case, it’s all true! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

How ironic that the undead we had worked together to defeat the first time around would now be the weapon by which I brought her low.

“However, it won’t be you they’ll condemn. I mean, think about it. You’re going to die here, and there’s no way I’m going to let any of them know about that. So with you out of the picture, who do you think the blame will fall on?”

“Y-you mean...”

If the city of Elmia couldn’t locate Eumis after all this happened? Why, her failures would fall on her house. Eumis’s execution might have been enough to make up for that. The life of the lord’s only daughter could outweigh a great deal of damage to the city. If she went missing, however, it would be her parents who would end up taking the fall. Everyone related to her house would be put to death. I didn’t know *how* related that meant, but at the very least, it would include her parents, with whom Eumis had tried so hard to maintain an amicable relationship.

“You fiend!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is just what you did to me! You have your memories back, don’t you? Then you know that every one of my family and friends were sacrificed to bring me here! After that princess bitch told me, you couldn’t resist rubbing it in my face all the time! How does it feel to have that same thing happen to you? To have your family and friends, past and future, ripped away

from you?! Ah-ha! ♪ Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

On and on and on and on. I was having so much fun, I just couldn't stop laughing.

The anger and humiliation I felt when I recalled my miserable life as a fugitive. The righteous indignation that even now caused my hands to tremble. I had bottled it all up inside me. All in anticipation of this day.

"You...devil! You'll never get away with this! I'll see you rot in hell!" Eumis screamed in anger and humiliation, in fury that caused her hands to tremble. "Die! Die! You too, Shuria! Why are you still alive?! Go back to hell, where you belong, you...you specters!"

Her eyes flooded with hatred. In a way, it was proof of her suffering.

Shuria burst out laughing. "Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, dear sister. You *do* say some strange things sometimes. Go back to hell? Why, haven't you realized? We're already there. And we're here to drag you down there with us."

"Ah-ha, nice one, Shuria!" I added. "Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

Indeed, we called the depths of hell home. We had chosen to stay there. Chosen not to climb our way out, bloodied and beaten, but to bring our enemies down kicking and screaming to our level. It was just as Eumis said. The moment we erased our path from the pit, we'd died and become ghosts.

"Wh-what is your problem...? You're insane!"

Shuria and I both burst into mad cackles at the same time. I would never get sick of seeing Eumis trying to put on a brave face.

"All right! All right, all right, all right! Now things are starting to get exciting! Pay attention. Next up is our final act. We're serving up your *dream*! Shuria, is everything ready?"

"Of course! ♪ Oh, dear sister. Wait until you see the final actress we've prepared for you!" She turned and called to her *third* pet. "Oh, Miss Metal! Bring her here, please!"

Miss Metal stirred into action, and soon, Soriy emerged from the forest once more—the real one this time. She was dressed in the same long-sleeved maid

outfit she wore at the mansion, but what Eumis couldn't tell just by looking at her was that I had used the flamevenom emitted by the Pyrachnid's Claw of Kindling to melt away the marrow of her bones and fill them with a mithril alloy. This third servant, "Miss Metal," was none other than Soriy's skeletal structure itself.

"Another fake...? No! Soriy! It's really you!"

"My...lady..."

Her face was ghastly pale. Seeing her, Eumis went completely white with dread. The paint was beginning to peel on her brave facade. Her armor was beginning to crack, and Eumis herself knew it, too. This woman, Soriy, was her dream made manifest.

"Please... Please don't... Anyone but her... Please don't hurt her...!"

Eumis began shaking uncontrollably.

"The final act is called 'Dream Balloon.' We have filled your precious Soriy with one of Shuria's servants, just as you have seen these past nights."

"S-so that dream was...?"

"Teddy came into your room to show it to you while you were sleeping. Did you enjoy it?" asked Shuria with a sneer. Looking on Eumis's visage, pale as a corpse, she continued, "Aaah, torturing this bug of a woman was all worth it to see that look on your face!"

Shuria forced the maid onto her hands and knees, then stomped on her back.

"Eek! Gargh!"

"Soriy!"

"Now then, the rules are simple," I began. "When Shuria gives the signal, Miss Metal will expand. If she does that while inside your favorite plaything, then, well..."

I left the rest to her imagination and sneered at her.

"No... Please... I don't want to die..." Soriy pleaded, with tears in her eyes.

"..."

Eumis looked like she was about to cry, too. I suppose she could easily envision what I was going to say.

“But I’m nice,” I added, “so I’ll tell you how you can save her. That maid is infused with mana, and Shuria’s servant is a magical life-form as well. If you channel your own mana into her, more than Miss Metal can tolerate, then she’ll shut down, and you’ll have your beloved back.”

For a second, Eumis’s eyes filled with the light of hope, before they returned to crushing despair. Obviously. She’d already expended all the MP she would need to free Soriy in her duel with me.

I released her fetters, and Shuria pushed Soriy to the ground with her foot.

“Your time starts now. Make sure you don’t fill your dream balloon up so much that it bursts!”

“W-wait! Wait a minute...!”

“Nope! ♪ Go!” Shuria gave a sprightly cry, and the final act was underway.

“Aah... Aaaaaagh! Make it stop! It hurts! It hurts! It hurts!”

“Soriy!”

Miss Metal started to grow inside Soriy, who began screaming as the metallic rods pushed apart her bones from within. Eumis stumbled over, desperately channeling what little mana she had remaining into her lover.

“Krrrgh! Rrrrrgh!”

“Grrrgh! Help me, Miss Eumis! It hurts so much!”

“Try to bear with it, Soriy! I’ll save you!”

Eumis scrambled to infuse as much mana as she could, but Shuria’s creation was sturdy. It would have been a tall order if Eumis was at full health, never mind now. She simply didn’t have enough MP.

“Gaaagh! Urgh! Aaagh!”

She hit zero. But Eumis kept going, just as I had. Lacerations began appearing all over her body.

However, it still wouldn’t be enough.

“Grh! Gah! Ah! Aaahhh!”

Soriy started twitching violently, her tears mingling with the blood dripping from Eumis. Though Eumis tried to push on, she was beyond her limits now, so she could only manage a small trickle of mana.

“No! No, no, no, no, no! Please! Hero, Shuria, I was wrong! I was a fool! Please forgive me, I’m begging you! Don’t let Soriy die!”

Finally, she turned to us, with tears in her eyes. Eumis, the woman who had looked down on me, used me, betrayed me. Now I’d seen her at her lowest. An unsightly blemish on the world.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Me, forgive you? You must be joking! You said it yourself, Eumis—we’re specters. And specters can’t hear the words of the living!”

“Are you trying to mock me, dear sister?” added Shuria. “I chose to walk this wicked path so that I could get my revenge on you... That means you have to suffer! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“You...demons! Both of you!”

I heard the creaking sound of her dream approaching its breaking point.

“Argh! Gah! Ugh...!”

“Soriy! Soriy! Soriy! Soriy!”

“Miss...Eumis... Ah...”

And then it was like a water balloon falling on the ground. A grisly reminder that the human body was mostly liquid. Just a wet-sounding splash as Soriy’s body was reduced to moist chunks.

“...Huh? Uh? Huh?”

Eumis looked on in stupefied silence, her face stained with her lover’s blood, either unwilling or unable to process the truth.

She simply sat there. I knew now that her heart had at last turned to sand. The slightest touch would cause it to all come crashing down.

And so I leaned over to her and whispered into her ear the words I longed to say.

"Now you're just like me, Eumis. A broken shell with broken dreams. Tell me, one last time. How does it feel?"

"AAAAAAAUAUGH! NOOOOOOO! NO! NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NOOOOOOOOO!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's right, that's right, Eumis! Let it all out! Let me hear it!"

"Ah-ha! ♪ Let us hear your cries, your shouts, your screams! Let Mother and Shelmie hear it up in heaven! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

One person's screams of dread, and two people's jubilant laughter.

This was it. Finally.

This was what I'd been waiting for!

This was what my second life had been leading up to! Seeing this!

"Now, that concludes tonight's program. I see you've enjoyed yourself quite a bit, Eumis," I announced.

"And so," Shuria chimed in, "the curtain is drawn on the play she began."

It was time to end this drama of fools.

Shuria and I reached into the Squirrel's Blade of Holding and pulled out a sword each.



“No. No! Nooo! This isn’t happening! Tell me it’s all a lie, please!”

Eumis scratched madly at her scalp, tearing at her hair and shaking her head, sobbing like a child, trying to deny it all.

“Ah-ha-ha. See you on the other side, Eumis.”

“Good-bye, Eumis, my dear sister.”

We raised the instruments of our vengeance high above our heads.

“Nooooo! G...blh...”

Our swords pierced her heart simultaneously, just as we had agreed on.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hee-hee-hee! Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

Again, and again, and again, and again and again...

A strange warmth swept through the freezing night air. Our shrieking cackles sounded to me like an exquisite piano symphony I had heard somewhere before.

How long did we continue to stab our blades through that witch’s heart?

Before long, all I saw on the ground before me was a misshapen mound of flesh. Tiny chunks of meat coated the sword in my hand, as though blood alone had not been enough for it.

The state of that place told all. In its center sat an otherwise unremarkable young man with jet-black hair and eyes, bathed in blood. A dark-skinned elven girl sat at his back.

Scattered all around them was flesh, blood, and shattered bone. A mountain of corpses so badly mutilated, they were an insult to even the word *waste*—it was impossible to discern any hint of their former lives.

“Shuria,” the boy asked. “What will you do now that you’ve had your revenge? Will you stay here?”

“What a cruel thing to say,” replied the girl, pulling a sulky face. “You know

full well my vengeance is nowhere near complete. What about the hatred you and Minnalis have given me? It's mine now, too. All that's gone is what I had originally. What you gave me is still here. There's a long way to go, and I can't have you leaving me out of it!"

"I see. Yeah, I should have known. I guess that was a dumb question."

The anger lurking within the boy's heart had reached the girl and ignited a new flame. Even if that flame had been his to begin with, it was now hers as well.

"Perhaps I'm just getting a little sentimental now that we've taken our first step together," the boy muttered as he looked up at the sky. "Ahhh, that was fun. I can't wait for the next one."

The girl stayed silent but leaned against her partner just a little more.

The two were dreaming. Dreaming of the day when all those they hated would be swimming in the lake of fire alongside them, and they could finally rest in peace.

The moon shone down on them but said nothing. Then, as if it had seen all it had wanted to see, it slowly faded away as the sky brightened.

...Their vengeance was not yet complete.

For those dark flames still laughed with such intensity that they threatened to swallow up the sun itself.



The sun rose that day on a city in chaos. No sooner had worried citizens rushed to put out the fires from the smoking laboratories than hordes of undead had risen from their ashes. While monster attacks were not unprecedented, many of the townsfolk had never even *seen* undead creatures before, so their appearance sent the community into total panic.

Still, the explosions had roused the citizens from their slumber, and adventurers, soldiers, and holy men armed with powerful Light magics quickly put the creatures to rest, resulting in surprisingly few casualties.

It could have been far worse. If the number of deaths had been much higher,

the city would never have been able to recover, assuming it even survived.

After the dust settled, the authorities stormed the Elmia mansion seeking an explanation as to why the house had been inactive during all this, only to find that the lord and his wife had been away visiting the capital on business for some time. When they instead came to the doors of his daughter's private mansion, they found the place completely deserted, and neither the young lady nor her servants were anywhere to be found.

While the townsfolk began the task of treating the wounded and cleaning up the ruined workshops, the authorities sent a message to Lord Elmia demanding he take action.

A few days later, three facts gave rise to a new rumor in town. One, the fact that all the laboratories that had burned down had been under Eumis's direct control. Two, the fact that the undead had emerged from those very same laboratories. Three, the fact that Eumis and her retainers had disappeared.

The rumor went like this: Eumis, the lord's daughter, was so obsessed with her magical research that she'd turned to the dark arts and began experimenting on humans. These experiments angered God and thus brought down divine punishment in the form of destruction upon her laboratories, freeing the undead specimens. Eumis's servants disappeared because they, too, had been used as guinea pigs in her vile experiments, while the mastermind herself was killed in the explosions.

Other far-fetched modifications to the tale began to emerge, too, such as the notion that Eumis was brainwashed, that she was really a demon in disguise, or that Eumis had caused the explosion when she lost control of a magic item. Such tales circulated in town for quite some time after the event.

And what interesting tales they were. Truly a testament to the extent of human imagination. Personally, my favorite was the idea that a demon had killed the real Eumis long ago to impersonate her.

Eventually, satisfied with our handiwork, we put the city behind us. Four days later, we arrived at Shuria's old village. The magic circle we had been using to teleport the undead into the city had long since exhausted its mana, so there were still some zombies that remained here.

It was no skin off our noses if they were left to their own devices and attacked the city of Elmia once more, but we simply couldn't bear to see Shuria's dear home left in such a state. We'd slain all the undead we could find and were now standing in what was once the village square.

"What a curious feeling," remarked Shuria. "It has only been three years, and yet I feel as though I do not know this place at all."

The village had been laid waste to twice over. Once by Eumis's mercenaries, and again by the hordes of inhuman creatures that followed. Taking it in now, it was hard to believe that all this had once been a happy, peaceful hamlet. It looked exactly the same now as it would several years later, or at least it had when I'd visited it the first time around. In fact, it looked even worse now. The mana in this place was still rich with malice because there hadn't been enough time for it to fully disperse yet.

"That's because the negative energy created by undead causes things to deteriorate faster," I said.

"Then will this gravestone we have placed soon crumble into dust as well?"

We had placed a stone marker at what we had tentatively deemed the center of the village, though no one was buried beneath it. Around it, purple flowers had begun to bloom. Shuria had planted these when she'd lived here.

Stooped down by the gravestone, Shuria looked up at me inquisitively.

"No," I replied. "We've killed all the undead around here, so the mana should begin to fade."

"I see. That's good."

Shuria was wearing something I would have called a short kimono with long sleeves. It was covered in a subtle pattern of deep violet with crimson accents. The garment lent her a mysterious and bewitching air that very much suited her now. She had tied her hair up to one side with a flowery clip.

I had plundered the kimono from Eumis's mansion on the spur of the moment, and it could be infused with mana to raise the defensive capabilities of the wearer. Additionally, it came with several enchantments: Auto Don/Doff, Auto Fit, Regulate Temperature, and Disguise Race (Human). The last of these,

as the name implied, made her appear to onlookers as though she was a regular human. It effectively worked the same way as Minnalis's illusions. I bet House Elmia had developed it so that the lord could keep his beastfolk and demihuman mistresses on full display.

The Japanese stylings of the outfit would raise a few eyebrows, but a dark-skinned elf would absolutely stand out in most circumstances, so it was still the superior choice. Shuria would rarely have to fight up close and personally regardless, but even if she did, the enchantments would fare better for her than most metal armors on the market.

Minnalis and I had also acquired new equipment. Trust a lord to have such nice stuff gathering dust in his storerooms. The armor we bought at the old man's weapon shop had been decent enough, but these were on a whole other level.

...Or so I'd thought, but for some reason, the item Minnalis had picked out of that trove of wonders was a frilly *maid uniform*. Her rabbit ears popped up out of the headdress, and she tied her long dark hair back in a high ponytail. The entire dress was covered in frills, and the blouse almost seemed designed to show off her sizable cleavage.

Somehow, it managed to expertly straddle the line between propriety and sexuality. My hat goes off to whoever designed it. Of course, it was no regular article of clothing, however. Turning my "Appraise" skill upon it revealed several enchantments, namely Defense Up, Agility Up, Augment Mana, Stealth Assist, Detection Assist, Resizable, Reformable, and Regulate Temperature. As much as I wanted to have her pick a different outfit, the enchantments were simply too good to pass up. I really didn't understand why it looked like a maid uniform, though. Nonetheless, its raw defensive power far outstripped any regular piece of armor, and so I had to admit it was a rare and valuable find.

Minnalis's and Shuria's new equipment were oddities on par with the legendary bikini armor, a staple of the fantasy genre, but I could hardly debate their existence given the reality before my eyes. Still, while I had grown accustomed to seeing such things my first time around, I never had figured out how they managed to offer better protection than real armor.

As for me, I'd picked out a decent set of regular leather armor. There were other good choices, but I had something else in mind for my gear, so I only needed protection that would tide me over until then. Besides, the other options for men had been ostentatious plate armor with all the trimmings. Weight aside, the stiffness of it would have obstructed my movements, and I didn't care much for the glitz anyway.

"Shall we get moving?" asked Minnalis.

"Yes," Shuria replied. "I am done here. There is nothing more to do." She slowly rose to her feet and gave Minnalis a nod.

"..."

"What is it?" Shuria asked at Minnalis's silence.

"Oh... I'm sorry, your village just reminded me of my own... I started thinking about what I wanted to do to them. How I'd like my hamlet to end up far worse than this... To morph it into a hellscape from which no one can avert their eyes. I just...got lost in a fantasy for a moment. I'm sorry."

Minnalis looked a little awkward bringing it up, but there was also a faint spark of joy in her eyes, and a trace of lust in her fleeting smile.

"Oh, do not worry about it," Shuria replied. "The only thing that matters to me is this place. The people who lived here. I do not wish to conflate them with the trash who live in yours. And so..." she continued, "...I am sure your revenge will be a great success. I will help you make it one, of course."

Her grin was a little different than Minnalis's. It was the seductive smile of a temptress reeling in her lover.

Ahhh, how beautiful and trustworthy my partners in crime are.

"...I have to make sure I'm good enough to keep up with them."

Eumis was dead. Yet the sweet, sweet nectar of revenge was only just beginning to tantalize the tip of my tongue. There was still much more to do. So many more enemies I had sworn to kill. Much more despair. Much more brutality. Many more fiendish acts.

"Master? Are you okay?"

“What’s the matter, Kaito? You’re smiling.”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing. Come on, let’s get a move on.”

I had involuntarily curled my lips into a grin.

What would my next act of vengeance be like? The starved flame within me now burned with renewed passion. Most of my enemies were still going about freely, laughing and smiling without a care in the world, ignorant of what we had in store for them.

“Hmm, another beautiful day... Oh, I know! How about we put them in a hot, dry room until they’re all shriveled up?” I suggested. “Then once they’re about to croak, give them an empty jug.”

“Master,” responded Minnalis, “if you’re going to do that, then why not really test their patience by making them think there’s poison in it?”

Shuria butted in with her own ideas. “Oh, what if instead of that, we feed them animal dung until they get so used to it that they’re actually grateful to be eating it...?”

Brilliant golden light shone down on us from above. It was perfect weather for another wonderful, revenge-filled day.

...When suddenly, there came a thunderous roar, and a huge black shadow appeared in the sky.

“Grrroooooaaaaaarrr!”

“““Ah!””” we all gasped in unison as our eyes flew upward. Overhead soared a gargantuan creature of legendary proportions, with crimson scales and wrings. The regal apex predator of the fantasy-land ecosystem: a dragon.

“It’s him...”

“Master?”

“Kaito?”

I couldn’t even respond to their puzzled voices. As the beast approached, I could make out its features more clearly.

“It’s Guren.”

That was the name of the baby Fire Dragon that Leticia always kept by her side. Usually taking the form of a dragon pup, you would often find him happily riding on Leticia's head or shoulders.

“Hrh!”

Feeling obligated to do something, I took to the skies using Air Step.

“Groooagh?”

“Ah...”

Once I was face to face with the dragon, I finally returned to my senses.

What was I trying to do?

Guren judged me curiously. It wouldn't be until a little later that he and Leticia would meet for the first time. Besides, even if he could recognize me, I was sure he wouldn't want anything to do with me after the way I'd treated Leticia. I had always been indebted to her, but I wasn't able to return the favor when it mattered most.

“Grargh!”

“Ah!”

It seemed Guren had decided I was just something in his path, and sparks flew about his jaws as he prepared to breathe fire. I didn't want to harm him, so I adopted a defensive posture, when...

“Groah?”

“What?!”

...all of a sudden, a blinding white light emerged from my chest. As it engulfed me, I felt something leaving my body.

“Grah? Groah?!”

“What... What's happening...?”

Guren seemed even more confused than I was. Then with a growl, he whipped his formidable tail, coated in scales not even a mithril sword could pierce.

“Hng?!”

I blocked the attack with the Soul Blade of Beginnings, but the force of the blow knocked me clean off my Air Step platform. I managed to land safely before I smashed into the ground, but my mind was reeling. My hands were numb from guarding against that attack, and it would take several seconds to heal them.

But Guren didn’t capitalize on my moment of weakness. Instead, he gave a disgruntled snort and retreated into the skies.

“...”

“Master!” “Kaito!”

Soon, my two companions ran over to me. However, I just sat there gazing up at the skies in disbelief, watching as the dragon faded from view.

SIDE STORY

Minnalis's Plan: Operation Engulfment

It all started the day Master returned home with Shuria by his side. I was occupying myself with getting supper ready when the two of them arrived.

"Welcome home, Master. And you must be Shuria. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"A pleasure to meet you, too. I take it you're Minnalis?"

And thus went my first meeting with the girl, complete with smiles from both sides. It didn't seem like she'd totally missed what I was trying to get across to her, yet her eyes never strayed from mine. She was far more strong-willed than I had expected from what I'd heard about her. It seemed that betrayal had changed her, as it had changed me.

Still, I knew that she was of elven blood, but what was I to make of the dark tone of her skin? Her ears were certainly elven in appearance, but I'd been under the impression that all elves had fair skin, which was in fact a point of pride for them. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that she was a mere human with elven ancestry?

...No, that couldn't be it. The Shuria I recalled from Master's memories was fair-skinned as well. Something must have happened to her.

As I pondered this, sparks seemed to erupt between she and I, but Master did not appear to notice. "*I do hope you get along,*" he told us blithely. I was a little disappointed in him, but lately, I had begun seeing the charm in those scatterbrained moments of his. Scary.

"Now then, I've prepared supper, so how about we all sit down and eat?" I suggested.

And so our first meeting ended in a draw.

We were all quite hungry and tired after supper, so we withdrew to our

rooms, leaving the conversation for the following day. Master seemed to have grown quite fond of having a full and pleasant sleep, so we'd dipped into our savings to stay at the same hotel a little longer. Now that we had Shuria, we transferred into a larger four-person suite, with a bit of extra space. Besides, the next day, we would be leaving town, so we could afford to splurge a bit.

I had suggested to Master we share a bed instead, but he fiercely shot down my idea, saying, *"Then it'll be too cramped!"* From his blushing, I could tell it wasn't that he objected to the idea of sleeping with me, but simply that he wished to be able to stretch out and relax. Indeed, on a single-person mattress, we would lack even the space to turn over in our sleep.

Ugh... Still, it hurt for Master to tell me off, even though I knew he wasn't really angry. In the end, he told me, *"I'll never budge on matters of sleep! I don't care if it's a waste of money!"* It was my fault for not being more sensitive to his wishes. I shall have to repent.

Perhaps I had been laying on the womanly appeal a little too thick lately. *"Spoil men too much, and they'll run,"* a nice adventurer lady had once told me. Oh, if only she was here now to tell me what to do. The idea that Master hated me was too much to bear, even if I knew it wasn't true.

And so that was what led to Master snoozing peacefully and defenselessly in the room right now. That didn't mean it was safe for me to approach, though. If I harbored evil or even mischievous thoughts, he would sense them and wake up. It was agonizing, being so close and yet so far.

Normally, I would suppress my presence just enough to get up nice and close and watch him without leaving myself feeling tired the next day. Unfortunately, I had other things to do tonight.

"...Let's go," I said.

"...Yes," replied Shuria.

In the dead of night, as the city lay silent, the two of us nodded to each other and left the room.

Shuria had already heard about my past from Master, and I had already seen hers for myself when he'd recruited her. Now her dark hatred clawed away at

the inside of my heart. There was no doubt about it; the strength of her anger put mine to shame. That's why I hadn't objected to Shuria joining us as our partner in crime. The moment I'd seen the world through her eyes, however, I knew that we needed to talk.

It seemed she felt the same. I had thought it a little unfair to do this on a night where she had already been through so much, but one glance in her eyes told me that I needn't have harbored such worries. There was not a shred of weariness or exhaustion in them. Only a fiery glint of anticipation for what was to come. Still, the spirit could be willing while the flesh was weak. Fortunately, though, she didn't seem about to nod off on me, either.

We went outside under the waning half-moon into the prickling-cold night air.

"Now then," I began. "This is all new to me, so I'm not quite sure where to start..."

"The same goes for me," replied Shuria. "Though, having experience in this respect is nothing to be proud of."

"Well, actually, I suppose I *have* been in a love triangle of sorts. That was how I ended up with Master in the first place." The mere thought of him sent a grin across my face. "Though, I doubt that's enough to make you stand down."

"Of course not. Besides, that was not a love triangle. That was simply other people abusing your kindness. A *real* love triangle is a passionate clash of pure emotion! Like in *The Ballroom of Love*, or *The Baron's House and the Garden of Flowers...*!"

"O-okay, okay, I get it..."

Shuria swept toward me in righteous fury, though precisely at what her anger was directed, I could not say. The girl proved far more intense than Master had told me. Perhaps that was also a consequence of the transformation he'd mentioned?

"Besides, I am not quite sure this is a love triangle, either. I don't think our feelings will bring us into conflict like that," she continued.

"I suppose you have a point," I conceded. This was not going to be a romantic showdown, more a mere confirmation regarding the rules of play. For neither

of us could walk away, neither of us could harm the other, neither of us could ignore our feelings, and above all, neither of us could risk hurting one of the only true allies we had in this treacherous world.

Therefore, we had no choice but to join forces. And I had to put away any fanciful thoughts I had been harboring that not everyone who met Master would fall in love with him. Of course they would. He was the only one in this world who'd reached out to us. He'd granted us the power we so sorely needed, and it was with him we shared our dearest, burning desire. How could we *not* fall in love with him?

Well, even if she hadn't, I would need Shuria on my side anyway. I'll force her to help if necessary.

That was because I had an enemy whom I needed to be far more wary of than her.

“Our current rival is...,” I began.

Shuria finished my sentence. “...The demon lord. It’s not fair; she’s been with Kaito longer than either of us,” she whined, pouting.

“That’s okay. It’s like what the adventurer lady who came to my village said: ‘Men will always choose the woman at their side over one far away.’”

“Then we must use our wiles!” Shuria declared. “We must make him fall madly in love with us! My books say that men are only after women’s bodies!”

“But we must be discreet about it. If we’re too bold, it shall only serve to push him away. That lady also told me that once a man rejects you, there’s no coming back. So we must take care, play it cool, and gently lower the bar bit by bit.”

“Be discreet... Now that you mention it, women in novels who are overt in their seduction often lose out in the end...”

“Our goal for now should be to reach the point where he won’t shake us off if we hug him. Despite all we’ve said, Master is a boy at heart. He can’t ignore our physical affections. We can use MP drunkenness as a cover. And it’s not like he doesn’t enjoy it; we just have to convince him he can’t do anything about it.”

Now Shuria knew the rules as well as I. No matter how cruelly he rebuked us in the moment, Master couldn't completely blame us for what we did while drunk. It would be one thing if he truly disliked it, but I could see the way he blushed despite telling me to settle down. His inexperience was so cute sometimes; it just wasn't fair.

"S-specifically, what sort of things do you do...?" ventured Shuria.

"Oh, stuff like pretending to trip and pressing my breasts against him, or kissing him while pretending to be intoxicated..."

"W-w-w... Oh my... Breasts...? And...ki-ki-kissing...?"

Her brown cheeks went slightly aflush with color. My, Shuria was quite an adorable little thing, but as a partner in crime, she seemed a little lacking. I would need to correct—I mean, instruct her.

"You must not blush so easily," I told her. "When Master finally swears off Leticia, the time will come at last to do far more daring things than that."

Also, by being her teacher, I can indirectly get a leg up on her and...

"Y-you are right. For eventually, I will have him _____ my _____, and I will _____ his _____ with my _____..."

"What?!"

I choked at what I just heard.

"Ahhh, we shall need ropes, and candles, and whips as well..."

"Huh?!?!"

"To tell you the truth, I think something awakened inside me today when Master stepped on me... My heart races whenever I think back on it..."

"WUUUHHH?!?!"

As Shuria muttered bashfully, I called upon my trusty "Iron Mask" skill. *What am I to do now? The darkness in this girl's heart far exceeds my own! N-no, I must not be flustered. I am the one who loves Master the most, and if he wants to do those sorts of things to me, then I am fully prepared for it.*

Shuria continued, "Master has the makings of a great sadist. I'm sure that he

turns into a wild beast in bed.”

“Y-you think so...?”

Now that she mentioned it, I had spied the occasional piercing look of wild lust in his dark eyes.

“I know it! The moment I saw him act, I knew he was a natural! He was born for sadism, I am sure of it!”

“I—I suppose I can’t argue with that...”

I thought back on our relationship with Master. Though he was usually an upstanding gentleman, there were times when he laughed gleefully at my mistakes. And sometimes, he turned this mischievous smile on me—not the one he wore when taking revenge, but another thing entirely, and it excited me. But I couldn’t really be... Could I?

Oh dear, I have to retake the initiative!

“L-let’s leave it there for tonight. We have a very busy day tomorrow. We can continue this conversation afterward.”

“Huh? Oh, okay!”

I returned to the inn. This was not a loss, simply a strategic retreat.

And so unbeknownst to Kaito, the two began their nights of studying “research materials” taken from Eumis’s mansion, slowly raising their level.

SIDE CHAPTER

Longing for a Faraway Hero

Why? Why? Why?

Until the very end, that demon held your heart.

But I was the only one who truly loved you.

The only one devoted to you.

The only one worthy of you.

And yet it was not me by your side.

And by mine, there was nobody.

Why did you cry for that demon's sake?

Worry for her?

Wish for her?

I would have given you my everything if only you'd asked for it.

And you would have been able to see that if that demon hadn't blinded you.

It was your destiny to slay her, just as it was mine to spend eternity by your side.

I still remember the joy I'd felt when I first learned that, and the despair I'd felt when I learned destiny had been perverted.

Hence why I'd thought slaying the cause of that perversion could bring things back to normal.

It should have gone perfectly. You sliced through the chains of his curse with your own sword.

...And yet, somehow, it all went wrong.

It was too late. The fragments of those chains had buried themselves deeply

within your heart. Irreparably tainted your very soul.

After that, all I'd wanted was to liberate that soul. To set it free into the great arms of our Lady, that we might meet again in the life beyond.

Because I am a priestess, and you are a hero.

Then I learned that my wish had still come true. The world hadn't broken after all.

When I realized that, I was overcome with joy and relief.

I still had a chance to put things right. This time, there would be no mistakes.

This time, my soul would end up intertwined with yours. A perfect union.

Please wait for me.

My beloved hero.

After a long and bumpy stagecoach ride, I, Metelia Laurelia, was feeling the weariness of travel.

I must have grown too accustomed to the bump-free carriage that Kaito devised, I thought.

Kaito's previous world must have been a land of marvels. Unfortunately, I hadn't overheard precisely how it worked when he explained it to the merchant, Grond. How vexing.

Stuck in a plain old wooden carriage, my bottom felt every little dimple in the earth below, transmitted through the rigid wooden wheels. It was starting to sting.

I had been healing myself during our rest stops, of course, but it was crystal clear to me now that no matter how much I had improved on our journey, I was physically the same little girl trapped inside a birdcage, waiting for Kaito to come and set me free. All my skill levels in "Holy Sorcery" and "Water Sorcery" and the like had completely regressed, and the fruits of my training with Kaito had returned to zero.

But that was okay. There would be plenty of time to build everything back up again. With the information I possessed, the two of us alone would be enough

to banish that demon. It had been a mistake the whole time for anyone other than the two of us to come along on our journey.

All he needed was me, and all I needed was him.

As I pondered this, the walls of the city of Orol, capital of the Orollea Kingdom, came into view.

“...Phew, it’s been a while since I last came to this land,” I muttered, lost in reminiscence.

“Huh? Has it?” asked one of my attendants, giving me a quizzical look.

Whoops. They thought this was my first time here. I must be more careful.

“It is nothing. I simply misspoke,” I explained.

It was a little blunt, but I was simply asking them not to pry any further. The attendant, worried she had offended me, looked a little scared.

“Let us break for tea once we have concluded our salutations at the capital,” I said with a kindly smile to set her heart at ease. “You are welcome to join me, of course. It is terribly lonely having no one with whom to enjoy a pleasant chat.”

The attendant blushed and simply said, “Y-yes, ma’am,” in a quiet voice. I returned my attention to the window, gazing out at the city ahead.

According to my informant, Kaito should presently be honing his skills in battle in a new dungeon near the city called “The Goblin’s Nest.”

“Hurry... Hurry... Hurry...”

I clutched the hem of my dress in impatience, though I knew it would do nothing to hasten the horses.

This time, Kaito... This time, I will be by your side...

I couldn’t wait. I just couldn’t. I wanted to see him. I wanted to see my reflection in his eyes. I wanted to hear my name in his voice, see him smile at me.

This time, I wouldn’t allow that base and contemptible woman to corrupt his heart.

“Leticia Lu Harleston...”

Merely the name of that demon brought me to anger. She'd taken advantage of Kaito's kindness to ensnare his soul and usurped the seat that ought to have been for me.

This time, I wouldn't let him fall in love with her. In the previous world, I'd met him only after his heart had already fallen prey to her. Now, however, things were different. This time, I would save his soul and stand at his side. That was how things had to be.

“L-Lady Metelia, are you feeling unwell?”

It seemed I had accidentally let my emotions slip.

“Perhaps I am simply nervous now that we are nearing our destination,” I said. “I think the carriage ride has rendered me most poorly.”

“Oh, that will not do! We must stop at once and...!”

“Tee-hee! Do not fret. I will simply rest once we arrive in the city.”

I understood the attendant's worries. As a priestess of the Church, I received treatment on par with other countries' aristocrats and wielded not insignificant influence around the lands the Church controlled. Her response was clearly motivated by fear of offending me.

Still, I could not possibly reveal the truth to her, so I passed the time by retrieving my favorite doll from my magic bag. He was large enough to sit in both my palms, and with a robe pulled over his jet-black hair, he looked exactly like the real thing. I patted him as though I was really running my fingers through those dark, silken locks.

Wait for me, Kaito. I will be by your side soon.

This soothed my restless heart. A smile came to my lips, and for the rest of the journey, all I did was stroke that doll.

After enduring that bumpy carriage a little longer, I soon arrived at the capital. There were many people there, and the layout of the town was a little more haphazard compared with the holy city back home. Still, it was brimming with life, and there would be even more people coming here in a few months

when Kaito finished conquering the dungeon.

Actually, with me by his side, it shan't even take that long.

As the carriage drove through the streets, I gazed up at the castle ahead.

First, I must speak with Princess Alicia. If I can't secure her cooperation, I'll have to confront her with the fact that she summoned a hero in secret, and that I know the price she paid to do so.

I squeezed the cheeks of the figure in my hands as I pontificated.

I must play my cards carefully. The only people who know the secret of the summoning ritual are the members of the royal family and the knights who make up the royal guard, led by Commander Guidott. I don't know what became of those rotten royals, but I must take adequate precautions or else there's a chance that my travels with Kaito will be interrupted.

This time, I would unite with him no matter the costs. I had the advantage now. And I would confound anyone who threatened to get in his way, that princess especially, with my knowledge of the previous world.

In fact, if we did that together, then my bond with him would be all the deeper for it...

“Tee-hee-hee!”

“I am pleased to see you have cheered up a little, Lady Metelia,” said my attendant.

“Indeed. I am feeling much better now. Thank you for your concern.”

“That said, the exhaustion could catch up to you at any moment, so be sure to rest well after your introductions with the royal family are concluded. I would hate for anything to happen to you.”

After thanking the servant for her kind words, my heartbeat hastened. Kaito was so close to me now. It had been so very difficult for me to seek his death to attain his salvation. I knew it had been the only way to purify his soul, yet I will never forget the pain I felt as the blade pierced his chest.

It had broken my heart to see him look at me that way. My anger at the wretched demon who warped his heart grew stronger by the day.

But that world was behind me now.

Now, together, we could make the world what it was always meant to be.

“Hee-hee!”

I couldn’t help but giggle as I tried to imagine what it would be like.



“How are you feeling, Your Highness?” asked the man in his thirties, covered in scars. This was Guidott, said to be the strongest among my royal knights. His appearance and bearing alone showed his wealth of combat experience, and his low, rasping voice sounded quite out of place in my chamber, all made up to befit a person of my standing. But of course, that did not concern me in the slightest.

“I am well, Guidott,” I replied. “My injuries have healed, and there seems to have been no lingering effects after removing the necklace.”

To get around the curse that prevented me from taking it off, we’d ultimately needed to destroy it through channeling a large amount of mana into it.

“And how is the repair proceeding?” I asked.

“We have the city’s finest craftsman working on it. It should be fixed within a few days, but the enchantments...”

“That is unavoidable. Those enchantments were forged with ancient techniques, dating back to the early days of the kingdom. It would be impossible for us to replicate them now.”

Still, I clenched my fists in anger. That necklace was more to me than a mere ornament proving my right to succession, and Kaito had forced us to break it. Even if the craftsman could bring it back exactly as it had been before, that wouldn’t undo what that man had done.

“...Please tell him there is no rush. I want it back without a single blemish.”

I tried to keep my feelings hidden. One slip, and I felt like I would to explode. Even if Guidott was one of my family’s most loyal retainers, whom I had known since I childhood, it would not do to rely on him for emotional support. I was Princess Alicia Orollea, first in line to the throne of the Orollea Kingdom.

Besides, since Guidott was my elder sister's former knight, that necklace was no doubt significant to him as well. Surely, he felt the same way as I did right now.

He nodded. "Yes, Your Highness."

"Now, what is your business? You didn't come here just to check on me, did you?"

No matter how close we were, no one came to the princess's chamber for such a trifling reason alone. Guidott himself was surely busy with his other duties, and if nothing else, a bachelor visiting the princess for a chat would undoubtedly start rumors. He was not so foolhardy as to forget that.

"Indeed. I have a report to make. Unfortunately, we have lost track of the black-haired, black-eyed boy. You can rest assured we've turned this entire city upside down without discovering so much as a trace of him."

"What did you find out?"

"We had sightings of a boy matching the description you gave. Apparently, he's discarded his unique black garb, but we were able to track his movements for several days. He was spotted going in and out of the slums, before he disappeared at night from the inn where he was staying.

"And I suppose there are no records of him leaving the city?" I inquired.

"There are none. Presumably, he escaped through some other means. The knights in the chamber with you may have been ceremonial, but still, for a single boy to trounce them so thoroughly is quite unthinkable. He's no weakling, that's for sure."

"...The monster attack after the walls fell. That was the fault of a monster known as the Wall Eater, was it not? Maybe he took advantage of the confusion to escape during that time."

"The knights on the scene didn't report seeing him. But when you consider the fact that the wall collapsed at a dumping ground for scrap wood, and that the event occurred shortly after we lost track of the boy..."

"...Then perhaps even those Wall Eaters were part of his plan all along? He

purposefully picked a place where it would go unnoticed for a while."

But for a city's barricades to collapse so suddenly, to say nothing of those of the capital itself... That was simply unheard of. I was not convinced he had merely been lucky enough to have been in the right place at the right time. In fact, this revelation only made me more convinced he was somehow responsible.

I shook my head. *But...that makes even less sense, I thought. There is only one explanation. The sheer power of the hero caused him to go berserk. He is but a mere otherworlder. A ghoulish beast in human skin.*

"Ahhh, how vexing. From the legends, I'd thought the hero drew power only from his intrinsic ability. He wasn't supposed to be this powerful by himself..."

"They are just tales, after all. It would behoove us not to believe everything we hear."

"...Quite."

And there is still some time before I next hear the voice of the Great Spirits. Perhaps if I was as adept in spirit magic as my sister was, I would hear them more frequently.

It would not be exaggerating to call my sister blessed by heaven for her genius.

"...There is much that is unclear. Continue your investigation. But ensure you are discreet. We do not wish to draw attention."

"Yes, Your Highness. One more thing. An envoy has arrived from the Church of Lunaria. Please prepare to meet with her."

Oh yes, I had quite forgotten about that.

"The priestess from the Lunarian See? I never expected her to come to the kingdom directly..."

The Lunarian See was a country ruled by the Church of Lunaria. Their goddess was named Lunaris, and their primary tenets were the slaying of monsters, the establishment of a heaven on Earth, and the salvation of the weak. There were many other pagan faiths, but only the Church of Lunaria had become dominant

enough to establish a state for itself.

As a nation, however, it was inevitable that politics would follow, so no matter how pure the intentions of its faith, the people who made up the country could be as corrupt as any other.

“They say she maintains peaceful relations with the opposing factions of her nation,” I explained, “but I am not sure I believe that. Her reputation as a woman of faith may precede her, but I have never heard of her possessing any particular talent when it comes to politics.”

The priestess Metelia Laurelia was almost synonymous with the Church itself. She was upstanding and pure, beloved by the people of her country. However, not all her peers shared her virtues, and the See was rife with intrigue and struggle, which had only gotten worse after the archbishop collapsed. This wasn’t the time for her to go gallivanting off to other kingdoms when she should be strengthening her support at home.

“But according to the message we received,” Guidott replied, “the priestess herself is coming, and she has gone through the proper procedures to request a meeting. Though I am a little concerned she has not informed us what the discussion will entail, I think it’s fair to say she has a grasp on the situation at her end.”

“Indeed. Well, I suppose I can decide for myself what kind of person she is after meeting with her. Look into her for me if you get a chance between searching for that man.”

“As you wish, Your Highness. It’s almost time for your appointment, so please prepare to head to the audience chamber.”

“Yes, I will need the appropriate attire for a meeting with a priestess of the Church. Please call a maid to dress me.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Very well, then.”

Guidott bowed neatly and exited the room. Soon after, there was a knock on the door, and an older woman called out, “Excuse me, Your Highness, may I enter?”

“You may,” I replied. The maid came in and helped me change, my mind adrift

the whole while, wondering why on Earth that priestess would come all the way here to talk to me.

“Pleased to meet you, King Eudrace Orollea. And the queen and princess as well.”

We were in the audience chamber of Orollea Castle. Standing before us was an embodiment of purity, a gorgeous young woman with her long, silvery hair partially tied up in a braid slung over one shoulder. Her beauty far outstripped the rumors, and even her unflattering robe did nothing to diminish it. Her breasts were also oddly large despite being underneath her clothes, almost in defiance of her outfit.

However, while the soldiers could not help but stare, there was no lust in their eyes. She was an unattainable ideal, a single flower blooming at the peak of a tall mountain, a woman of such benevolence and love that it was impossible to harbor unwholesome thoughts toward her.

“My name is Metelia Laurelia. I humbly serve as our Lady’s most unworthy servant. I thank Lunaris for Her guidance and request Her blessings upon our meeting.”

As the priestess clasped her hands together in prayer, she practically shone with a heavenly light, though she was not casting a spell of any sort. I had heard that this girl was only two years my elder, and yet she appeared far more mature than that.

“Hmm.” The prime minister took a step forward and addressed her. “Lady Metelia, I believe you arranged this meeting to discuss ‘strengthening our bonds,’ but could we ask you to elaborate on that? It was only last year that a trade agreement was signed between our two nations. Have you identified any clauses that are in need of amendment?”

Both my father and the prime minister were under the impression that Metelia’s visit concerned the grain trade pact that we’d finalized a year ago.

“No. I am afraid I have not come for such a trifling matter,” she replied, shaking her head. The prime minister was disappointed, both that he’d guessed incorrectly and at hearing an international agreement be dismissed as “trifling,” but naturally, he prevented it from showing on his face. It was only because he

had looked after me since I was very little that I could perceive his true feelings on the matter. His expression just screamed, *I expected more from a priestess.*

Metelia seized that awkward silence and continued, “I’m afraid I did not come here as a representative of the See. I come as a member of the Church of Lunaria.”

Her words froze the room. Those who understood what she was implying fell silent, while those who did not pondered her mysterious choice of words. It was my father who spoke next.

“What might you mean by that?” he asked, beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

“Oh, are you sure you wish to discuss it out in the open?” she asked simply.

At that, we all realized the terrifying reason for her visit.

...She knew about the summoning.

Her earlier declaration, that she’d come as a member of the Church, could only suggest that she was visiting this country not for secular matters, but for spiritual ones, at least on the surface. But besides missionary work, the only religious reason I could think to journey here was if she knew the summoning ritual had been carried out. And if it was the former, she would hardly request to talk about it in private.

The hero occupied an important position in the Lunarian teachings. If word got out that we had conducted the ritual to use the hero for our own ends, the Church could construe that as an act of hostility.

And they would be right. We had performed the rite in absolute secrecy with the intent of raising the hero ourselves to manipulate him for our own ends. We had hoped that if anyone found out, we could simply claim that we’d kept things under wraps to protect him from the demon lord’s armies.

But things had gone disastrously. The hero had turned against us, and it was obvious he bore some sort of grudge against the kingdom. If word about our botched rite got out, it would be a stain on our reputation we might never remove. Other countries would interpret this as not only evidence of us attempting to hide the hero’s existence, but also that we were too weak to

contain him.

“...Prime Minister, Knight Commander. You two stay. The rest of you, leave.”

“Y-Your Majesty? Why...?”

“I said get out! I will not ask twice!”

At his bellowing voice, all those who were not in the know left the room. Metelia turned to her retainer and whispered, “You too. You’re excused.”

“B-but, Lady Metelia...”

“Do not worry about me, I shall be fine. We’re just going to talk, is all.”

“...If my lady says so, then so be it. I shall wait outside.”

The priestess’s retainer agreed to her request with frightening speed, then gave a quick bow before leaving the room as well. After the last person departed, the doors were bolted shut. The only people here now were Mother and Father, me, the prime minister Barath, the knight commander Guidott, and the priestess standing before us, Metelia.

However, my father seemed to have trouble choosing his next words. No doubt he was still trying to deduce precisely how much Metelia knew. Was she only aware that we had summoned the hero, or was she also informed about what had happened to him after that?

Her next statement confirmed our deepest fears.

“Now,” she addressed us, “I’m aware of everything you’ve done. Firstly, I know about the black-haired, black-eyed boy you summoned.”

“““Urk!!”””

Everyone in the room sucked in their breath. I thought back to the hero, growing livid at the very thought of him. On the other hand, my father relaxed. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say he gave up. If this woman knew that the hero had black hair and black eyes, then it was safe to say she was privy to everything. At the very least, she must have realized he’d turned against us. There was no point in trying to lie to her.

“...In that case, Lady Metelia, what are your demands?” my father asked.

I winced at his rashness. It was still too early to give up. I knew my father had no talent for lying, but at times like this, it was important to remain sure of yourself, even if all was lost. We might have yet salvaged something from this.

"I would like to court him unopposed. It is my duty as priestess to be by his side."

Metelia's face grew bright and cheerful, like a flower. As relieved as I was that she hadn't asked for anything unreasonable, I couldn't help but feel a little creeped out by her as well. How could she smile at the thought of that if she knew what the object of her infatuation had done?

In the Lunarian faith, the priestess was supposed to support the hero in bringing compassion to the world. Personally, I couldn't comprehend how someone could simply stand there and spout such sappy nonsense without a hint of irony.

From what she'd said, however, it seemed like she didn't know where the hero was, either.

"I apologize," said my father, "but he seems to have simply disappeared. We were tracing his movements within the city for some time, but then we suddenly lost him."

F-Father! You and your big mouth!

I bit my lip in frustration as he so casually handed over classified information to someone from a rival state. However, the most unexpected reaction came from the priestess herself.

"...What?"

She stared back in blank amazement, as if she hadn't been expecting to hear anything close to what he'd just said. Father, however, failed to notice and kept on talking. No doubt he was still feeling guilty for being found out and wished to smooth over any potential for poor relations with the See. Rebellious factions had been causing domestic troubles lately, after all. Though we had tried to summon the hero precisely to quell such discontent, our efforts had ended in failure.

"Immediately after the summoning, the hero attacked my daughter and many

of our knights. When I saw their wounds, I assumed he must be a wicked brute with no capacity for intelligent thought. However, his ability to outwit our spies disabused me of that notion. He left a note behind declaring his intent to strike again, so all we can do is wait for that to occur. We are, of course, continuing our search, but with nothing else to go on than his hair and eye color, progress is exceedingly slow."

"He left a note behind?" the priestess asked.

"I will not follow your orders." Father recited. *"Let the scum I send you be a warning. Your punishment will be many times more painful. Prepare to lose all you hold dear. The Revenant."*

Though they had completely healed by this point, I almost felt as though the scars on my back still burned. Fury boiled inside me, but I was not so foolish as to let it show.

"Perhaps you know more, but it seems clear to us he is not going to stop there. We may be able to capture him when he returns to enact this 'punishment.'"

My father heaved a sigh of relief, but for some reason, the priestess seemed even more disturbed than me by this. She muttered something just barely audible, not even responding when my father called out to her.

"...Revenant? ...N-not be... Could...? ...But..."

"Lady Metelia? Are you quite all right?"

Did the fact that we had lost track of the hero really come as that much of a shock to her?

"...If... Then maybe... Leticia Lu Harleston."

"Hmm?"

From where I was sitting, I saw the priestess grit her teeth in anger. Her single moment of weakness sent a strange chill up my spine.

"Lady Metelia? Lady Metelia? Are you feeling unwell?"

"...No, it is nothing," she replied, looking back up again with another big smile on her face. "I believe the long journey has simply left me wearier than I'd

expected. Perhaps we could continue this conversation some other day?"

It was plain to see that something had frightened the priestess, however, for her current grin was altogether different from the flowery smile we'd glimpsed earlier.

"I—I see. Well, we would hate for anything to happen to you while you are in our care, Lady Metelia. Maybe it is best you rest for now. We can speak again later."

The priestess placed her hands together in prayer once more and, with a bow, left the throne room.

Leticia Lu Harleston?

That single name was all I had been able to make out from Metelia's murmurings. It was an unfamiliar name, and yet it filled me with a very faint sense of dread.



"AAAAAAAHHH! Aaahhh... UUUUUUUGH! AAAAAAAH!"

Once she arrived at the castle bedroom, Lady Metelia seemed to lose her senses. She was currently taking out her anger on the bed that had been made for her.

"Why?! Why?! Why?! Why...do...you...keep...getting...in...my...waaay?! You demon! Demon! Deeemoooon!" she screamed, repeatedly beating her pillow against the bed in anger.

Before I'd become the priestess's retainer and accompanied her on this journey, I would have said I knew the lady better than anyone. But I had never seen her as incensed as this. She was downright furious.

"Why?! Why do you still hold sway over his soul?! There was supposed to be time! I was supposed to be able to save him!"

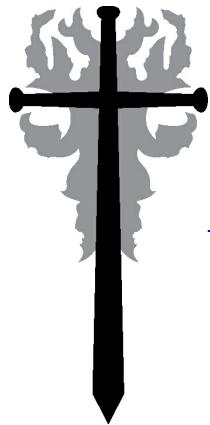
"L-Lady Metelia? What has brought this on...?" I asked, my heart trembling in fear. What could have infuriated my lady so? I knew I should never have left her side.

"Stay off him! You witch! He's mine! MIIIIIIINE! RRRGGGHHH!"

It was no use. She couldn't even hear me.

“Lady Metelia...”

I could only watch her tempestuous rampage, unable to do anything to soothe her troubled soul.



CHAPTER 4

Welcome to the Maze of Doom!

“...”

After putting both the city of Elmia and Shuria's village behind us, we set off toward our next destination. The sun was dipping in the sky, so we stopped to make camp. We had borrowed some things from Eumis's mansion beyond just equipment. One of those things had been a barrier that repelled monsters and detected living things passing through it. Now we no longer had to drink that disgusting fuzzyweed concoction just to make sure we didn't all die in our sleep.

“Er... Master?” asked Minnalis.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Er... Nothing. Never mind.”

“Okay.”

Minnalis had grown strangely reticent as of late. I could tell why. She wanted to talk to me about Guren...or to be more precise, about Leticia. They'd gathered a little about her from my memories, but what they had seen focused primarily on the motivations for my vengeance, so most of my memories with her had been pleasant ones. Apart from where *that one person* was concerned, my partners probably didn't know the full story.

They must have been aware that Leticia was special to me, as I made no pains to hide it. Though Minnalis and Shuria were my partners in crime, they were also young girls, no doubt eager to hear about other people's relationships. My

sister had been like that, too.

Besides, both were kind and considerate at heart. They probably didn't want to ask me about Leticia when it was very likely I'd never get back together with her. Still, they needed to be aware of her in case it was important for our future revenge, which was why Minnalis kept trying to broach the subject.

The only reason I hadn't brought it up myself was that I was too embarrassed. You can call me a coward if you like, but come on! There's no way I could look Minnalis in the eye and tell her the story about how I met the girl I loved... No, the girl I still love! Anyway, we were never really a proper couple or anything like that; we hadn't even gone further than kissing. And also, how would it sound if I just started talking about it out of the blue...?

And also also, it was just embarrassing!

As I laid down excuse after excuse to nobody in particular, Shuria spoke up as if to change the topic.

"I'd like nothing more than a nice hot stew tonight, with lots of meat if possible," she remarked.

It was about time anyway. "Yeah," I replied. "Let's use up that Grateful Boar we hunted earlier. I'll cook."

"Huh? Y-you will, Master?" asked Minnalis in surprise. "You need only say the word, and I will take care of it. Or are you trying to say...?"

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not trying to take anything away from you. It's just, I'd like to make this."

I patted her reassuringly on the head. Minnalis took pride in being the one to prepare supper every night, and that was fine. She was an excellent cook.

I took out the pot and stove and prepared the water along with a broad selection of vegetables. Then I retrieved the body of the Grateful Boar from my Squirrel's Blade of Holding and began using my soul blade to slice it up, bones and all.

Though it faced stiff competition from its boar comrades, the meat of the Grateful Boar was far and away the foulest of its species. Cooking it only caused

it to get stringier and tougher, on top of removing what little flavor it might have initially had.

Minnalis had to have been aware of this, for she'd suddenly gotten into a tizzy. But I knew something about an ingredient she didn't. Simmer the meat in the wine of unripe ricolle fruits, and it would transform into almost something else entirely. I didn't want to let the cat out of the bag just yet, though. I was kind of enjoying watching her squirm.

I added a fair bit of seasoning and the wine, then let it boil.

"Now, we wait," I declared. "I bet it won't be as good as Minnalis's cooking, but let's have a chat in the meantime. Do you want to hear about Leticia?"

"Er...er...yes," Minnalis ventured.

"I want to hear as well," added Shuria. The two of them still looked a little hesitant but nodded.

We couldn't go on like this forever. I had to bring it up sooner or later, no matter how much heartache the memory brought me. Otherwise, I could just imagine her calling me a "pathetic fool" or something again.

"There's not really that much to say, though," I admitted. "That Fire Dragon—Guren—he was sort of Leticia's pet. She picked him up shortly before we met, but given how he just acted, I don't think that's happened yet."

That was all I really had to say about the dragon. They would have already seen his abilities for themselves in the vision. What they needed to know was that the more new experiences I had, the more the few tender moments I'd shared with Leticia felt like an unnecessary hindrance. So if I was going to talk about her, then I would have to start there. Right from the beginning.

"It happened on a bright clear day, much like this one. It had been about a year since I'd arrived, and I was in a remote location in the northern regions of the empire, not far from the border with the beast lands. Back then, I was about equal in ability to an A-rank adventurer. I had a couple of tricks up my sleeve, but I wasn't so strong that I didn't have to be cautious, so I kept my power under wraps."

It was after we cleared out the dungeon near the capital and fought off the

undead horde at Elmia. We had secured the emperor's blessing to use one of their legendary artifacts, the Teleportation Gate. That had shaved weeks off our journey, so we were traveling around visiting a bunch of dungeons.

Back then, I had been struggling with feelings of homesickness, coupled with an anxiety over my future. I tried to bottle them up, but I could ignore them no longer, so I threw everything I had into leveling up as fast as I could to distract myself.

"I was tired of being in this world," I told them as I stirred the pot. "I was still excited about getting to be the hero, and I cared about the people I had met here, including those I still thought were my friends, but I couldn't go on denying how I felt any longer. My initial hope that this place would be just like a video game was turning to despair."

I had consumed tons of games and books about people getting sent to other worlds, so when I arrived here, all I could think was how much everything seemed like a game. In fact, perhaps I thought it *was* a game, and that I could finish it just by going down the preplanned railroad.

The whole time, I allowed the glamorous heroics to blind me to the fact that I didn't *know* when I'd be able to go back to my world. And yet if I'd just thought things through for a few seconds, it would have been obvious. The demon lord and her dark kingdom were a power on par with a state. Back home, could a ragtag band of misfits ever hope to bring down an entire nation? Obviously not. Even a child knew that.

I was like a solitary beetle stuffed inside a clear plastic box, and the more time passed, the more it felt like I was suffocating. I took to doing anything and everything I could to attain the power to free myself of that cage, all while I tried to avoid reflecting on the impossibility of that aspiration. Because I knew despair would claim me the moment I did.

Somewhere, deep down, I'd wanted it to be a game. That was all the agency I could exert. But after a year, the truth was finally starting to dawn on me. I was learning how to survive in a world where murder was as natural as drawing breath. The scales couldn't stay over my eyes forever.

"I snuck away from my party at night just so I could slay more monsters. The

only thing I cared about was getting stronger, by any means necessary, so I could get everything over with and go back to my world.”

While we were in town, I trained. When we were on the road, I prayed for monsters to ambush us. When we came across dungeons, I devoted myself to slaying everything that moved, continuing even after the rest of my party had gone to bed for the night. I relaxed less. I ate less. I slept less. Day after day, I stripped away everything that made me human, convincing myself I was making good progress the whole while.

And yet I could never sit idly by when I saw someone in trouble. I would always step in, leaving less and less time for myself. My life became a contradictory mess of wanting to help people while simultaneously getting rid of anything that made me a good person, all for the sake of nurturing my power.

“Then one day, a hole opened up beneath my feet that sent me falling headfirst into the bowels of the earth. I was in a new dungeon, a really obnoxious one, too. It was there that I first met Leticia.”

The way I saw it, that had been where my life in this world truly began. That was the moment I stopped worrying about how I could die here and instead started thinking about how I could live here.

“In my world, we refer to the garment Shuria is wearing as a kimono. They’re the national outfit of my country.”

“These clothes?” asked Shuria, wiggling her sleeves.

“Yeah, and Leticia was wearing something similar when I first saw her. I was shocked. I had never expected to see a kimono here.”

I tried as best I could to calmly relate the story, but the warmth in my heart was sullied with envy as I recalled my first encounter with Leticia.



Kill. Kill. Kill.

“Gugyaaa?!”

“Boguh?!”

“Gweeeh?!”

I tore through the pack of monsters, healing my wounds with the Nephrite Blade of Verdure.

“Gh... Sheltering light: *Verdant Healing*.”

Still too slow. I need to be faster. Faster...

“Haah...haah...haah...”

I sliced, skewered, severed. Over and over and over again. Kill enemies, farm experience. No different from the RPGs I’d played after school with my friends. The more I trained, the more powerful I grew, seemingly without limit. And so I kept going.

My reactions? Always too late. My strikes? Always too weak. My movements? Always too slow. I needed more. More, if I was ever to return...

“Groooargh!”

“Grh?! Grraaargh!”

...I had been lost in thought and didn’t see the bite coming until it was too late. The pain spread through my shoulder, and I devoted all my mental faculties to battle once more. I wheeled around, slicing apart the Beogarm. Once its jaws relaxed, I kicked its lifeless body away.

“Groooooargh!”

“Gyaragh!”

“Garh! Garh!”

“Phew... This still isn’t enough. I’m still too weak. I’ll never go home at this rate. O sheltering light, guardian of the forest: *Verdant Healing*.”

I used a longer chant to cut down on the mana consumption, healing my bite wound as the pack of monsters eyed me with hungry looks.

“Mom, Dad, Mai—I’ll be back. Just you wait.”

I downed an MP potion from my bag and sprinkled an HP salve over my light wounds. Tossing the pair of empty vials aside, I charged once more into the horde.

After dispatching the Beogarm pack, I rid myself of the bloodstains using the Clean enchantment on my robe, then checked my status screen.

“Still only level 125...”

At this level, some attacks didn’t even damage me anymore. My maximum HP and Recovery Rate had both increased, so it was well within my ability to hunt monsters night after night like this. The actual value for HP was more involved than I had originally anticipated; it not only tracked wounds, but also seemed to decrease when you got tired or fell ill.

“I restore more HP per rest now, so I think I can keep going a bit longer...,” I muttered, sipping on a cup of fuzzyweed decoction.

Potions were not perfect. The amount of HP or MP they restored was underwhelming, and drinking more only gave you diminishing returns. That was why it was important to take a break every now and then to give your body a chance to recover naturally. That being said, I could get better results by taking fewer breaks if I resorted to repeatedly healing myself with potions instead.

I’m getting a bit tired.

My level was one of the highest in the world, but there were still other people who were just as strong. That level wasn’t enough to defeat the demon lord; if it was, they wouldn’t have needed me.

How long was this going to go on for? I stood up and sighed, shaking my head as if to exorcise that haunting thought from my mind. Mulling it over was just a waste of time. The only thing I needed to concern myself with was how I was going to improve.

“I need to hurry up and find more monst— What?!”

That instant, the earth opened up, like a great, gaping maw beneath my feet. I reached for solid ground, but it was already far beyond my grasp.

“Wh-whooooaaaaaaa!”

There was a moment where time seemed to slow down, almost to a halt, before I felt the sensation of free fall lifting my stomach and plummeted down into the depths below.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!

The wind howled in my ears. The first thing I remember thinking was that I had to make sure to land on my feet, so I adjusted myself midfall. Unfortunately, my panicking mind was unable to come up with any other ideas, so I collided feetfirst with the fast-approaching ground in an impact so shattering, it ought to have had *Ker-ash!* written above it in block letters.

“Graaaaaaargh!”

I opened my eyes and saw the opening of the pit high above me. It brought to mind looking up at the skyscrapers of Tokyo. There was no way I could climb back out. As if to confirm that thought, I watched as the hole slowly contracted shut as though alive, before it finally disappeared without a trace.

“Uuuurgh, what? What now?”

I was so shocked that I could barely even move. When I calmed down enough to scan my surroundings for a way out, I discovered I was now in a white rectangular room. It was clearly unnatural and had three exits—one in front, and two to the left and right. The area was illuminated despite the lack of any obvious light source, and the whole setup chilled me to my very bones.

“What is this, a dungeon?” I muttered to myself. Certainly, the mana that hung in the air *felt* like the kind you’d find in dungeon, but there wasn’t supposed to be one here. It must have been a new one. Just my luck.

“Still, just how powerful can I get? Am I even human anymore?”

As I walked, I carefully looked myself over, finding no injuries from the fall of any kind. I had effectively just bungee jumped without a cord, and by any reasonable metric, my guts should have been decorating the place right now. But I hadn’t so much as sprained my ankle.

“Am I going to get even stronger when I go back to my world? ...I’d better watch out for that.”

If people back home learned I was some sort of super-soldier now, I’d never hear the end of it. I couldn’t be having that.

“Wh-whoa!”

Suddenly, the floor gave out beneath me like a giant trapdoor. Luckily, I was on guard this time and managed to leap aside at the last moment.

“Not this way, then, I guess.”

I watched as the hole immediately resealed itself, then retraced my steps back to the first room. However, the next path I chose also ended in a similar trap. Once more, I leaped back just in time, and once more, the pit closed back up like it had never been there.

“Tsk, not this way, either,” I grumbled, returning to my starting point again and picking the final path. As I walked carefully down that final passage, a worrying thought occurred to me, and my hunch proved to be correct when the floor dropped out from under me for a third time.

“You have got to be kidding me...”

Suddenly dumping you in a random dungeon that punished you no matter what you did. This was like one of those obnoxious trap-filled browser games.

“Okay, I suppose I can still leap over it if I get a running start.”

It was about a ten-meter gap. Even a world-record long jumper wouldn’t be able to close that, but it was no problem with my current abilities.

“Who the hell’s gonna fall for a trap hole these days? Here we go!”

I built up speed and hurled myself through the air, but just as I felt like I was going to make it, I collided with something.

The far wall?! Wait...was this just a painting?!

Once again, I had simply no words for what I was seeing.

I’ve gotta wall jump and save myself!

“Nrgh?!”

But as if the dungeon itself was reading my mind, an enormous flyswatter-like thing appeared above my head and swatted me down into the hole.

I could only scream, “What sadist designed this game?!” as I fell down into the perfectly engineered trap. The emotion I felt at that moment brought me back to late nights sitting at my computer, slamming my keyboard against the

desk in frustration.

“God...damn it!” Cursing my big mouth that so magnificently sealed my fate, I conjured up a soul blade and jammed it into the wall to slow my fall.

“Come on, stop!” I yelled as the blade carved through the stone of the pit, slowing me down bit by bit. Letting out a tremendous scream, I stabbed the sword in even deeper. I learned from the first pit that as long as I didn’t fall too far, I wouldn’t take fall damage, so I didn’t really need to go to such lengths. But at this point, it was more of a battle against this dungeon’s designer than anything else.

“Phew. Just about managed to stop,” I said as I came to a complete halt, hanging from my sword by one hand.

“Hmm? And who might you be?” came a voice.

“...”

I couldn’t respond. Standing there below me was a petite young lady with skin as fair as snow, dark eyes that glimmered like pearls, and hair colored a deep crimson. She looked innocent and beautiful in equal measure, more than a girl, but not quite a woman.

I’ll admit it, at that moment, I thought she was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. Had this been a more peaceful world, I might have fallen in love with her right then and there. Alicia and Eumis were beautiful in their own right, but this girl was just my type.

But as she sat stirring the cauldron before her, it was not her beauty that captivated me. What she was wearing was something I had never seen in this world before. Something I thought I’d never lay eyes on again. A *kimono*.

Or rather, something that very much resembled one. It was too short to conceal the legs, and only came down to above the knee. It was more like a dress in a kimono style. Still, it was the first thing I’d seen here that made me think of my home country. I felt as if my world was calling me back, and I wanted nothing more than to answer.



“Huh? I don’t know who you are, but if you have come to deprive me of my precious pot, you can move along and find your own! This one is mine!”

After giving me a suspicious look, the girl raised her hand and cast a spell, launching a Fireball toward me. Her casting was so utterly flawless that I only managed to react to it by the skin of my teeth.

“Wh-whoa?!”

The Fireball whizzed past my head, just singing my ear, then hit the wall of the pit, where it exploded. It had only been a warning shot, and so it wasn’t enough to hurt me, but the blast dislodged my blade from the wall and sent me plummeting down.

“Uh-oh.”

“Wha—?! You idiot, fall someplace else!” the girl shrieked up at me, raising her hand once more.

“More, huh?” I braced myself, preparing for whatever spell she would fling next. Another Fireball perhaps? Or would it be Water this time? Wind? Earth? It didn’t matter what; I would slice my way through it!

“Wha—?!”

But the spell she cast wasn’t any of those things. It was something I didn’t expect at all. A clear protective dome appeared above the young girl, perhaps some kind of Wind magic. It didn’t feel like an attack. It was likelier that she was just trying to defend herself, which made it all the more unfortunate that sadly, I had already begun my swing, and there was no stopping it now.

“What?! He’s atta—?!”

Oh no. I’m really sorry about this.

I saw terror flash across the girl’s face as I swung my soul blade, slicing her barrier apart. Gravity took over, delivering me right into her boiling cauldron.

“Aaaaaagh!”

The metal pot tipped over, sending scalding hot soup over my arm. I quickly took out a canteen of water from my pouch and doused the wound before

sprinkling an HP potion over it to heal the burns.

“Aaahhh! I spent ages making that!” she screeched. “I was finally about to have some decent grub, too!”

“Ah, uh... I didn’t...”

The tragic scene left me without a rebuttal. I simply kneeled down and hung my head like a scolded puppy.

The room around me looked quite similar to the one I had just fallen from. The only differences were the small spring at one end, and the large pile of strange-smelling mystery meats rotting in a corner.

From the state of this chamber, I could more or less tell how the girl had been living and what she had been eating. For the sake of her honor, I decided not to comment on her idea of “decent” food. Besides, I needed to offer her an apology first.

“I’m so sorry—”

“Look at what you’ve done, you absolute fool!”

“Gabluh!”

Her iron fist came down on my head, and it was clear that the word *mercy* was some sort of foreign concept to her.

“You don’t like to go easy, do you? But well, I guess we’re even now—*Gugh?!*”

Just as I thought I could let down my guard, the girl swung again, screaming, “Like hell we’re even! Take this, you flatfish-face!”

“Grrr... I’m *trying* to be apologetic... Listen!”

“Shut up, baldy!”

The girl hurled another baseless insult, along with an uppercut this time. Somewhere inside my head, the rope holding me back snapped. After everything I’d been through, all the traps, the reminder of my home, getting attacked...but not only that. My duty. Whether I would ever return. My own weakness. All of it was simply too much to handle, and that punch finally

opened the floodgates.

“I’m not even bald, you stupid girl!”

The only rational part of my mind left was the one saying *Never punch a woman*, so I conjured up the Slapstick’s Blade of Many Folds and struck her over the head with it.

When activated, the Slapstick’s Blade could harm and banish nonliving entities made of mana. Otherwise, though, it was just a normal pleated paper fan. While it made an *extremely* satisfying noise, its damage output was near zero, so it wouldn’t hurt her at all. That meant I could hit her as hard as I liked without feeling guilty about it.

“It’s just food, tomato-top! Besides, what’re you calling ‘decent’? I bet the slop in that pot’s no better than the biohazard you’ve got lying in the corner over there!”

“O-ow! How...how dare you insult my meal! And this beautiful hair my mother gave me!”

“I just call ‘em how I see ‘em, pip-squeak! How did you even make that crap? It’s all sticky and bubbly, and I don’t know *what’s* going on with the colors! No human’s gonna eat that! And where’s the lie about your hair? It’s red, isn’t it?”

“You said it in a mean way before! And I am not a pip-squeak! I am compact and cute! You must be blind if you cannot see how perfectly my size complements my beauty!”

“*Pfft!* My sides! You think you’re cute? Get over yourself!”

“Say! That! Again! Now you’ve done it! You think you can get away with such mockery?!”

“Huh?!”

I stepped back to prepare myself as I detected her warming up a spell. Based on the Fireball earlier, I could expect the attack to come immediately. However, this time, it was taking longer. Only two seconds longer, but still.

Then I was flabbergasted for the umpteenth time this night, because the incantation she cast was not an offensive spell at all. Before my very eyes,

Tomato-Top disappeared...and reappeared a short distance away.

“A short-range teleport!”

She raised her hands above her head, and five different orbs of magic appeared around her. I had never seen such control over one’s mana before.

Water, Earth, that one’s Dark, and the one that looks like a coconut—must be plant! But what’s that last one that’s all red and gray?

“W-wait a second!” I cried.

“Never! You shall pay for your slander!” the girl screamed back, thrusting her hands downward. The five orbs shot away in all different directions at unimaginable velocities and spiraled toward me.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The speed of her casting was simply unparalleled, especially considering she was juggling multiple attributes at once, including some strange mixture or anomaly I had never even witnessed before. Eumis was the best spellcaster I knew, and even she wasn’t capable of this.

“Tsk!”

I already knew I couldn’t dodge them all. I would have to tank one of them before making my counterattack. Through the barrage of spells, I spotted Shortstack Tomato-Top grinning back at me.

That coconut one looks like the weakest. I’ll dodge the Water, Earth, and Dark balls, and as for that last one...

“I’ll swat it back! Rrrraaaargh!”

I channeled mana into the paper fan in my hands, turning it a deep metallic color, and swung it at the fifth mysterious spell, flipping its trajectory backward.

“H-hwaaah? You can reflect it?! Th-that’s nonsense! Mweaaahhh!” the girl screamed.

I watched as my return shot flew toward her and exploded into a cloud of smoke. However, I didn’t have time to see any more than that, as the one that looked like a coconut struck me and cracked open on impact, splattering me with a strange liquid.

“Gah?! Blegh, what the hell is this? ...Oh god, it’s so itchy! Itchyyyyy!”

It was like I had mosquito bites all over. Meanwhile, the girl’s eyes had gone bloodshot red.

“It buuuurns! My eeeeeyes! My noose!”

“Aaaaargh! What the hell did you do?” I screamed at her.

“H-heh! You’re in for it now! The sap of the uyl tree makes your skin itch for up to an hour!” she explained, trying to put on a brave face before collapsing in pain. “It buuurns! Oh, it stings all over!” Tears streamed from her eyes, and her nose had gone red as a clown’s.

“Th-this lasts a whole hour?!” I cried in disbelief. I almost hoped the shock would cause me to faint, so I could spend this whole time unconscious and unfeeling, but the itchiness prevented me from doing even that.

“So itchyyyyyyy!”

“It buuuuuurns!”

And so the next hour consisted entirely of the two of us rolling around on the floor in discomfort.

“Hurgh...hurgh... I can still feel the itchiness...”

“Haah...haah... Uuugh...my eyes and nose still sting... I cannot stop crying...”

A little while later, the two of us had plunged into the spring in the corner of the room in desperation. After thoroughly scrubbing ourselves all over, we both dragged ourselves back out onto dry land, dripping and miserable.

“I can’t believe you did that, Tomato-Top.”

“Heh. Serves you ri— *liiiie!*”

“Don’t talk like that with tears in your eyes. You sound like your nose is clogged. Damn, it still itches.”

There wasn’t a rash or anything, but the feeling of irritation nevertheless persisted.

The effects of magic decreased with the defender’s Resistance attribute. That meant that she had to be on the same monstrous level of strength as me, at

least. Furthermore, it was already vanishingly rare for a spellcaster to command *any* attributes other than the basic ones, and yet this girl had been using Fire, Wind, Water, Dark, plant, and smoke attributes—seven of them. Eight, if you included teleportation, which wasn’t an element, strictly speaking.

I looked over at the girl to see her blinking repeatedly, her eyes as red as her hair. She had already dried her sopping wet clothes with magic. As for me, I sat cross-legged, flapping my shirt to get it to dry out quicker. It had the Quickdry enchantment, so it shouldn’t take too much time. It would be uncomfortable until then, but I’d live.

Now, how long are we going to keep up this childish feud, I wonder?

Somewhere inside, I knew I was only doing this to vent, and I already felt a lot better. I was starting to see just how much of my frustration I’d been bottling inside all along, without even having time to complain. I felt like I finally had room to breathe.

Her whining shattered my meditative silence. “What are you staring at, you creep?!”

“Don’t call me that, you snake!”

“Snake?!”

“Yeah, you’re a snake! If I hadn’t reflected that one shot, I’d be rolling around in itchiness *and* stinging! You’re pure evil!”

“Shut up, baldy! Baldy, baldy!”

“I keep telling you, I’m not bald! Can’t you see my luscious locks?!”

“I hope it falls out!”

“What a terrible thing to say! You really are a snake!”

She was still pissing me off, so I was under no obligation to apologize at this time. However, there was something I wanted to know.

“...Hey, can I ask you something?”

“No,” she said flatly and turned away.

“Ugh! How old are you?!”

“Shut up!” she screamed, launching a Fireball.

“Whoa! Stop flinging spells! Somebody could get hurt!” I shouted as I leaned aside to dodge the attack. While the casting speed was short as ever, the Fireball itself didn’t seem quick or strong enough to do any serious damage to me, so it fizzled out as soon as it hit the far wall.

“Ugh...fine,” I relented. I had ways of getting children to talk. If words weren’t getting through to her, then perhaps I could appeal to her stomach instead. I was getting hungry, too, and surely anything I made would be better than that slop of hers.

“Hmm? What’s that?” she asked as she spotted me setting up my portable stove. I lit the fire and placed a small pot atop it, before slicing up some vegetables and stewing them in water.

“Now, what to do for the meat...?” I pondered aloud. “Oh, I know.”

I still had some Grateful Boar meat left over. It tasted awful cooked on its own, but by boiling it whole in overripe ricolle wine, you could get the flavor to come out of the bones, turning it juicy and tender. A dwarven weapon-shop owner in the capital had taught me that trick.

I skinned the beast and channeled mana into my knife, slicing through the bones so that I could add it to the stew in large chunks. Then once all the ingredients were in the pot, I put it to a boil.

The girl looked over curiously, both at the ingredients I’d chosen and the soul blade I used to cut them up before making it vanish. I could tell she wanted to say something but found it too humiliating to speak up after all she’d done.

I found her amusing, like a small animal, and so I watched her as I stirred the pot. This continued for about twenty minutes, until the whole room filled with the scrumptious smell of the stew. Tomato-Top was casting glances in my direction with a higher frequency than ever before, and she was sitting a lot closer, too. Her greedy eyes were plain to see, yet whether because of stubbornness or pride, she still sat on the floor, hugging her knees and facing away.

That is, until a soft rumble echoed throughout the chamber.

“N-no!” she floundered. “You did not hear that! Nothing happened!”

“*Pfft!* Ha-ha-ha!”

It appeared her stomach had usurped her pride and thrown up the white flag in her place. Red-faced and teary-eyed, she made her excuses while clutching her belly. It was hilarious.

“Whatever do you find so funny?! I’m not hungry, you know! Don’t go thinking I am!”

“Sure.”

I poured out some of the soup into a wooden bowl and placed it before her.

“Wh-what? You think you can win me over with this?”

“I didn’t say anything like that.”

“B-but if you insist...I suppose I wouldn’t mind eating a bit...if that is what you really want...,” she murmured, hands slowly reaching for the bowl. I swiped it away and held it high out of her reach.

“Hey, are you deaf as well as blind? Say *please* when you’re asking for something.”

“Hwah? Grrr... You’re the snake here, not me!”

“Then here’s my proposal. You can have it if you answer me one question,” I said, grinning.

“M-mrrr...”

If only I could see the majestic battle between hunger and pride currently taking place within her. Soon enough, however, her stomach rang out in resounding defeat. She was so easy to understand. It was as easy as dangling candy before my younger cousins.

“Fine,” she said at last. “Ask your questions. In return, you shall serve as my cook while we are in this dungeon. I’ll hear no objections.”

“...Fair enough. It’d be animal cruelty to let you live off that stuff anyway,” I remarked, eyeing the toxic waste in the corner. How long had she been subsisting off that junk? Surely, that wasn’t what she normally ate, right?

Surely, that was just because she was stuck here, right?

"I-it's not cruelty, and I'm not an animal! I was doing my best, you know! I was trying!"

"Okay, calm down, don't cry. Here, eat up. I'll have some, too."

At least the fact that she was eating my cooking showed she was willing to work together. I'd seen from our fight earlier that she was plenty capable, too. She'd probably survive on her own, but as a Japanese person, the thought of leaving someone younger than me in trouble was bad for my mental health.

We hadn't exactly made the best first impressions, either, so I wanted to avoid revealing that I was the hero if at all possible. This whole situation was shaping up to be another massive pain, like what always seemed to happen when I tried to help. Another problem was that I wanted to keep my abilities secret while I was in the dark about what she was capable of. So far, she'd only seen me use the Slapstick's Blade of Many Folds, so I would have to keep it that way for now. Well, that wasn't too much of a problem. I had never used it that much because its strange appearance drew people's attention in battle, but it was pretty versatile, so I should be able to make do.

"Grr, how come this loser-face can whip up such good food, while a super-ultra-mega cutie such as myself can toil and toil and it still comes out bad?!"

"What did you just call me? Would it kill you to show a little respect?!"

I was also planning to add, *So you do know how awful your cooking tastes*, but after seeing the tears in her eyes, I refrained out of respect for what must have been an arduous test of her stomach's fortitude.

"More!"

"Already?!"

Tomato-Top polished off her plate in an instant and began serving up a second helping from the pot without even asking. At this rate, I wasn't going to get another serving!

"Don't you know how to slow down?!"

"Don't be silly! This all belongs to me now, as we agreed!"

“I don’t remember saying you could have all of it!”

“Well, I let you have—*om!*—one bowl, didn’t I? Mmm! This stuff is so good!”

“How arrogant can you get?! And don’t talk with your mouth full!”

As I sat dumbfounded by her brazenness, the girl just laughed at me.

“What are you—*om!*—babbling about? Food is the foundation of life! *Glug!* *Paaah!* To put it above all else is a primal instinct! It’s the law of the jungle! Let down your guard, and soon enough, you’ll have nothing left to eat!”

“What war do you think you’re in...?”

“The war of the dining table! It’s first come, first served out here, and while you’ve been listening to me, I’ve been pouring myself a third helping!”

“What? Hey! That’s mine!”

“Hwa? Hold it! You can’t just take it out of my hands! That’s not fair!”

“All’s fair in love and war! And this is the war of the dining table, you said!”

I had wanted to ask her about her kimono, but now it was starting to look like I wouldn’t get the chance. I quickly wolfed down my second helping before she could steal it back.

Meanwhile, the girl patted her stomach, full. I’d made quite a lot of soup, but now the pot was completely empty. “Ahhh, it’s been a long time since I’ve felt this good,” she said. “You’re not a bad cook. The meat was quite exceptional; I’ve never eaten such soft and tender flesh before. I’m guessing it’s from a monster?”

“Yeah, from a Grateful Boar.”

“Hmm? Do you take me for a fool? I have tasted Grateful Boar meat, and it’s the most stringy and flavorless in all the land. You think me unversed in the ways of meat, and you say such things to taunt me, is that it?!”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. Well done.”

The girl looked at me dubiously as I gave a noncommittal shrug. I didn’t feel like telling her the secret if she was going to be like that. I didn’t really have a good reason to hide the recipe, particularly since it hadn’t cost me anything, but

since I'd begged and begged the old dwarf to teach it to me, I felt a little reluctant to give it up so readily.

"Look, can I ask my question yet?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I'd forgotten about that. What did you wish to ask?"

"I wanted to inquire about those clothes of yours," I said, pointing. The girl lifted her sleeves and wiggled them side to side.

"You mean these? I thought for sure you would ask, *What can you tell me about this dungeon?* or *Whoever might be this super-ultra-mega cutie standing before me?*"

"I'll get to those. Also, stop calling yourself a super-ultra-mega cutie; it's kinda cringe."

This girl ought to come with a warning label. What a waste of good looks.

"You sure are petty, aren't you? Fine, I'll tell you about my clothes. Cute, aren't they? They come with Auto Don/Doff, Auto Fit, Regulate Temperature..."

"Er, no, I don't really care about the effects. I was more wondering where they came from, who made them..."

If someone in this world was making kimono, it was possible they also hailed from Earth, just like me. Perhaps they'd even come through some other mechanism—fiction was filled with examples of people stumbling across portals or dying and getting reincarnated into different worlds.

However, Tomato-Top lacked that context for my question, so she interpreted it quite differently.

"You *do* understand these are women's clothes, do you not? Is that the sort of thing you're into?! Not only bald, but a sexual deviant to boot! What an unfortunate soul you are...," she said, watching me with reproach.

"What's with you and the bald thing anyway? And I'm not a cross-dresser! I just want to know who made them! I'm not gonna steal 'em off you, so don't give me that look!"

"I—I don't think it's anything to be ashamed of. Be true to yourself, okay?"

"I appreciate the support, but I'm telling you, you've got the wrong idea. If you don't cut it out, I'm not cooking for you again."

The vein on my forehead twitched. The girl simply shrugged and sighed. "Seriously," she said, "do you not know how to take a joke?" Oh boy. Hold me back.

Just as I was contemplating bringing out the Slapstick's Blade again, Shortstack continued talking as if nothing had happened.

"Anyway, regarding the origins of these clothes. Unfortunately, I do not know who made them. I just found them in the storeroom at home and put them on."

"...I see."

"However, I have seen similar garments for sale. I believe it was in a village somewhere in the beast lands. Now, what kind of beastfolk were they again...?"

Beastfolk? No chance of them being from Japan, then. Hmm, though saying that, if the last hero was summoned here two hundred years ago, I suppose the kimono design could be something he left behind. I did remember them saying that he had black hair and black eyes like I do. Oh, but then in that case, wouldn't it have gotten popular in the capital instead?

As I thought about it, I realized I didn't really know what was normal for this world. Ever since arriving here, all I'd focused on was getting stronger and helping people. I'd never had time to explore. Though I'd been here a whole year already, the only thing I'd really learned about was how to fight monsters. It was a little surprising.

Oh well. I figured I could ask Eumis about it once I got out of here. Or perhaps Guidott would be more familiar with faraway lands—he'd been to many kinds of places, after all.

"Even that's a great help," I reassured her. "I see. The beast lands, huh..."

The beast lands of Gilmus were the opposite of the kingdom in that beastfolk supremacy was the prevailing ideology. As such, Orollea and Gilmus shared a rocky relationship, and Alicia had even said there had been endless wars fought on the border before the empire was established between the two realms.

So even if I was the legendary hero, it was not hard to imagine what problems might arise if I just casually sauntered into hostile territory. I wished Alicia could exercise her royal authority to help in some way, but she had rebellions to deal with at home, too. It was complicated.

Even just the fact that we were dungeon-crawling near the Gilmusian border had apparently sparked off furious debate. After all, Alicia was supposed to stay in the castle. The only reason she was with us was to avoid the troubles brewing among the anti-royalists back home. It was decided she'd be safer traveling in a party alongside the legendary hero and the peerless knight commander. The life of a princess sounded rough.

Fortunately, she was well trained as a healer, and her father, the king, hoped she could practice these skills so she would be more likely to avoid injury during her travels. As long as we stayed out of enemy territory, of course.

"Whatever. Let's just get out of this dungeon first," I said.

I had fallen down a hole to get here, so logically, I should be able to escape by going up. What worried me was that there was no information regarding this dungeon, which meant that nobody had ever successfully beaten it before.

"My, you're feeling confident. *'Let's just get out of this dungeon,'*" she repeated in a singsong voice.

"It's not about confidence. I just don't have time to be dallying here."

Every minute away from my party was another I was falling behind. Another minute away from going back home. I stood up and took a look around the room again. To use a familiar point of reference, it was about two classrooms in width. If I stood facing the wall with the spring, then there was a doorway to my right, and a staircase behind me.

For now, it would be best to head up the staircase and leave the dungeon. I could always come back with the rest of my party if I wanted to complete it.

"Hmm. Very well. Down that hallway is a room where edible monsters appear. When the time comes, I shall expect you to feed me again. I'm retiring for now, as eating makes me sleepy. I warn you, though: Time starts to feel odd down here. Do remember to pace yourself."

With a yawn, the shortstack tomato-top produced a pillow and blanket from her bag and laid herself down on the floor. I stared at her in bewilderment.

"Wait, what? You're going to sleep? I'm going to be out of here in no time, and I ain't coming back to wake you up. If you think I'm gonna keep watch for you while you doze off..."

I had assumed with her calling me her cook that she planned on us working together, but I saw now that I was mistaken. She had no intention of doing any work whatsoever, and I sure as hell wasn't giving her a piggyback.

"You shan't need to keep watch. This place is safe. Even if something does approach in the night, then my sharpened senses will warn me of the danger."

She extended a hand out from under the blanket and made a shooing gesture, as if to say, *Get on with it already*.

I looked around, and sure enough, the room was furnished with what were called "safety torches," mysterious items unique to dungeons that marked rooms where monsters could neither spawn nor enter. The watering hole, too, meant this room must have been a "Safety Zone."

"Besides," the girl continued, "I am certain you'll only end up back here anyway. The corridor is a dead end, so that stairway is the only path out of this dungeon. Now do as you please."

"Hmph, what's wrong? Think I'm going to be so scared of a few monsters that I come running back?"

After a year of leveling, the creatures in this area were no threat to me. In fact, it was precisely *because* they were so weak that I had to spend all hours of the day farming them for experience. Ironically, though, that's exactly what had gotten me into this mess.

I was a little peeved at her slight against my year of hard work, but whether she realized that or not was unclear.

"There's no need to yell. You'll see what I mean."

"Fine, whatever. I'm going. See you never. Hope you enjoy making your own lunches."

"Yes, ta-ta. When you get back, I'm expecting another dinner, with a little more pizzazz this time!"

"I told you, I'm not coming back!"

I didn't ask about her level or stats, but from what I'd seen, she would be in no danger if I just left her here. Annoyed that she'd made fun of me, I set off up the stairs.

Soon, it curled in on itself and became a spiral staircase. I walked and walked; I must have ascended close to two hundred steps, two at a time, and there was still no end in sight. As I did, my head started to clear.

"...What the hell was that? Am I a kid?"

As I reflected on what had happened, it dawned on me that I'd been acting like a spoiled brat. What asshole leaves a young girl all by herself in a dungeon, simply because she was 'pissing me off'?

Just I was considering turning back, I took another step...

"Huh?! Wah!"

...and with a *click*, the entire staircase flattened beneath me into a steep slope. I stumbled to get a grip, but some sort of slick oil suddenly came out and coated the entire surface. I could do nothing but fall head over heels back down the way I came.

"Grh! Naaaaaaargh!"

There was nothing to grab onto, and even my knife found no purchase on the oily surface. Drenched in the mysterious fluid, I slid down to the bottom of the staircase, bounced off a bump that wasn't there before, and ended up deposited unceremoniously in the very doorway through which I had made my bold exit not five minutes earlier.

"Ow!"

As stars practically circled my head, a paper globe that *definitely* hadn't been there before came down from the ceiling and popped open, showering me in confetti. A banner reading WELCOME TO T.K.'s MAZE OF DOOM! in large, mocking letters also unfurled from the orb.

"Wh...wha...?"

"Hmm, it allowed you to climb higher than I thought it would," came the voice of the red-haired young girl, looking back over her shoulder as she lay. "Lucky you. So what happened? I thought you said you weren't coming back? Hmm?"

I just let out a grunt of frustration. "Grrrrrrgh!"

"*Pfft!* Imagine making all that fuss only to be so swiftly proven wrong! I couldn't have done it better myself!" The girl put her hand to her lips, pretending to stifle a laugh. How obnoxious. She was like a demon. No, given what I'd seen, she probably *was* a demon.

"You knew that would happen, didn't you?"

"I tried to warn you! Anyway, like I said, when next I wake, I'd like something to eat. And I want it made with a little more oomph next time, *cook*."

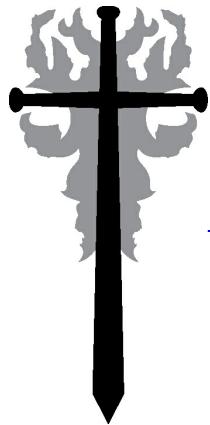
Then with one last shrug, Tomato-Top pulled the blanket over herself and turned away.

"You...little...! Grrrr!"

My face was red with anger, but I couldn't say anything back, and I wasn't going to throw a tantrum like a child. So with nowhere else to go, my rage settled down within my heart, and I swore:

One day...I'll get my revenge on you...

I withdrew my earlier reckoning of her being a child. There was no need to hold back on somebody so insufferable! Make fun of me, will she? Well, we'll see who gets the last laugh!



CHAPTER 5

How to Beat an Obnoxious Dungeon

Awhile later, when my clothes had finally dried, I set off exploring the other corridor Tomato-Top told me about.

“Oh, there they are.”

The room it led to was large enough to contain multiple school gymnasiums, and it was filled with creatures of various kinds. I wasn’t sure that *all* of them were edible, though. There were various bugs and lizards that I’d never even seen before.

They also didn’t seem able to leave the room, as they had noticed me standing in the corridor but weren’t attacking. That must have been thanks to the safety torches that lined the hallway. That in itself wasn’t strange, as many dungeons employed a similar setup, but it still felt very unnerving to have so many monsters staring at me. But even when I cautiously entered the room, they still kept their distance. Hopefully, they would stay like this so long as I didn’t make any sudden movements.

“That one’ll do,” I decided, spying a Grateful Boar positioned near the entrance. I took it out with a single swing, before bundling it into my bag and retreating back to the safety of the corridor out of fear that striking one might bring the wrath of the whole herd down upon me. Luckily, that didn’t appear to be the case.

At least one thing was certain: We weren’t going to starve. Far in the distance

I could see a Gigas Giant, Multihydra, Paralyze Moth Kingler, and Darkblood Tarantula, monsters that in any other dungeon might have served as the final boss. To fight even one of them meant embracing the fact that you might not come out of it alive, so taking on the whole pack would have been suicidal. Despite the great distance, when I slew the Grateful Boar, I felt a hint of their displeasure... Or perhaps to them, it was something more on the level of *What's that racket over there?*

As much as it pains me to say it, those monsters could skin me alive before I had time to lace up my boots. I was still too weak. If there'd been a room like this at the top of the staircase, I really *would* have had to run all the way back. How embarrassing.

In any case, so long as I still had the boar meat in my bag, I wouldn't need to come back here again. I turned and retraced my steps. As ridiculous as this dungeon was, it was beyond S-class in difficult. Clicking my tongue in frustration, I soon arrived back at the safe room.

"You fool! Where did you disappear to?!" yelled Tomato-Top, firing a Sandball as soon as I arrived.

"Stop casting random spells at me!" I shouted, knocking it away toward the ceiling with the Slapstick's Blade, where it broke apart and rained sand down on both of us.

"Pleh! What the hell did you do that for, oil-head?!"

"This is all *your* fault, Tomato-Top!"

"Whatever! Just make me something to eat!"

"Are you serious? You just ate! What kinda mileage are you getting outta that thing?!"

...I know she told me she wanted to eat when she woke up, but it hadn't even been three hours yet. Is she keeping a black hole inside her stomach?

"Nrgh? I never knew that pig could be so delicious! How could it taste so good compared with before?"

"Well, of course it would. I worked on it longer this time."

The only way I could make the exact same meal with more “pizzazz” was to take longer preparing the meat. All I’d ended up doing, though, was cutting out the sinewy bits more carefully and scooping the scum off the surface of the broth. I wasn’t trained in the culinary arts or anything, so I wasn’t sure what else I could do.

“That is not what I mean. The Grateful Boar meat I have eaten in the past tasted most foul indeed.”

“Did it, now?”

“What did you do? Is it because you boiled it? The way you lit the fire? Or perhaps the way you cut it? The spices? Hmm, I can taste something alcoholic in there as well... No! I am sure the answer must lie within these vegetables!”

Well, some of those guesses were right. The secret to making the meat tender was just to boil it on the bone in overripe ricolle wine. Tomato-Top eagerly spooned herself a second helping, casting furtive glances at me the whole while.

“H-hey. Just so you know, I am rather interested in your recipe. How did you make that awful meat taste so good?”

As if done with the buildup, she finally asked me outright. Considering how reluctant she’d been to give me the time of day, it must have been weighing heavily on her mind.

I looked over at her. She had just finished her second bowl and was perched forward, eagerly awaiting what I had to say. I, on the other hand, was still on my first. How fast did this girl eat?

Her eyes glimmered in anticipation. I put down my bowl and turned to face her.

“There’s a very special way you have to prepare this meat...,” I began.

“I—I knew it!”

“And that is...”

I paused, the crucial information on the tip of my tongue...

“...Psych! Not gonna tell ya! Ha-ha!”

“...”

Tomato-Top stared blankly as I roared with laughter. I never expected to get my revenge so swiftly. It felt sweet.

“You...! How dare a mere cook humiliate me in this way!”

“Huh?! What country are you from where chefs give out recipes to their customers?!”

Not to mention everything I’d gone through to learn it in the first place. Who would tell it to a girl like this after that whole ordeal?

“I’m gonna burn your hair off!” she screamed, flicking a Fireball in my direction.

“Whoa!” I cried, dodging the blast. “How about you? How on earth do you cast magic so fast?”

“All I do is channel the mana super quickly, construct the spell super quickly, and release it super quickly... If you teach me your recipe, I’ll tell you!”

“You just did, Tomato-Top! And it sounded like a scam! I want my money back!”

“Grrrrr! Stop calling me that!”

“What am I supposed to do?! You haven’t told me what your name is!”

When I said that, the girl looked taken aback.

“I—I don’t need to give my name to a rude man like you!”

“Huh? What the hell does that mean?”

She seemed to be losing steam and turned away from me in a huff.



“Don’t ask a girl about her secrets! Yaaah!”

“Whoa! Stop casting spells at me!”

In the end, she never did tell me her name. That was a shame because I was looking forward to calling her “Tomato-Top” regardless. Instead, she just returned to her meal, grumbling under her breath.

“Grr, you balding, loser-faced cook...”

“You wanna start a fight?”

“Hmph!”

“What’s that ‘hmph!’ for? God, you’re such a kid.”

Showing my own trademark hypocrisy, I returned to my own bowl as well.

“I see. They really are laughing at us.”

After our meal, I had asked Tomato-Top what she knew about the dungeon. Apparently, she had been trapped down here for three days now, and every time she tried to advance, more traps like those sliding stairs had forced her back to this starting room.

It appeared that this chamber was the true starting point of the dungeon; from here on out, it only got more difficult. Also, there wouldn’t be any monsters farther in.

If you’re wondering how I knew all this, it’s because we’d found a note explaining it all on the back of that ridiculous banner.

On it were nine points:

1. From here on out is a maze. No cheating.
2. There are no monsters in the maze.
3. If you shout *I give up!* then a hole will open up and take you back to this room.
4. You can return to the surface by clearing the maze.
5. If you spend six months here, then the dungeon will automatically spit you out.

6. The monsters at the back of the room beyond the hallway will not attack unless you approach them or stay there too long. That means it's safe to hunt there as long as you stick to the monsters near the door.

7. If you run out of creatures to hunt, then you can subsist on the water from the spring in this room indefinitely.

8. The water in the spring will change color every day.

9. If you clear the dungeon, you win a prize.

"So I guess this really is a dungeon," I remarked. "But it's like no dungeon I've ever seen."

Dungeons were naturally occurring phenomenon that followed a simple pattern: Fight your way through hordes of monsters, defeat the boss, and claim the treasure. This dungeon, however, had been very obviously *designed*. The explanation, the obnoxious traps—someone had put all this here. It was simply unheard of. At the very least, no dungeon I had ever encountered looked anything like this.

Well, I won't get anywhere just wondering about who made it and how. I'm no dungeonologist. All I can think about is how I'm going to beat it.

I could leave the academic side of things to the experts. Once I escaped, I'd report it to the empire and let them deal with it.

"The first thing we have to get past is that staircase," I stated. By now, the slope had reverted back into a staircase, and even the oil had disappeared somehow. As I stroked the first step with my fingers, I felt nothing beneath them but cold, hard stone.

Most likely, some of the steps had switches on them that activated the trap. The problem, then, was figuring out how to get to the top without pressing any of them.

"What do you think?" asked the girl. "I can take you to the top myself if you'd like."

"What does that mean?" I replied. "Do you know which steps trigger the trap?"

“It’s nothing like that. I’ll reveal all if you teach me that recipe...”

“No. Never. I’m not telling you a damn thing.”

You think I’d give up my one advantage that easily?

“Ugh! Grumpy, aren’t we?”

“I don’t need your help. I’ll think of something myself,” I swore to her. With that, I broke into a sprint toward the staircase and leaped into the air just before I reached it.

“Hiyah!”

I clung to the side wall and kicked off toward the opposite side.

“Hup! Hup! Hup!”

A wall jump. Leaping side-to-side between the walls, I began to ascend.

“Hah, hah, hah! I ain’t afraid of no slide!”

I couldn’t slip down the stairs if I wasn’t using them in the first place. When I was a kid, I’d told people I wanted to be a ninja when I grew up. Now I finally had the skills to make that dream come true.

“What a fool... An incorrigible fool...,” muttered the girl in disbelief. But I failed to hear her over the ninja-jump sound effects I was making to go with my awesome stunt.

“Mm... Mai...move over... You’re hogging the bed...”

“What are you mumbling in your sleep about, moron?!?”

“Guh! Ow! Don’t hit me like that!”

The sudden shock to my cranium brought me out of my slumber like an old TV switching off. As my mind settled, the dream I’d been having quickly faded into mist, before disappearing entirely. All I could remember was the feeling of safety and family.

“Well, you said to stop casting spells!”

“Stop hurting me at all, you freak! Just wake me up normally!”

“What did you call me?!?”

Any sentimental thoughts I might have had were purged from my mind as I settled back into the old abuse-flinging routine.

“Come on! It’s time to eat!” she demanded, dragging me out of bed and immediately sitting down expectantly at the table.

“All right, all right, keep your socks on.”

She had been conjuring the table and chairs out of thin air every time; she claimed it made the food taste better than sitting on the floor. Personally, I wouldn’t have wasted the MP like that, but she seemed to have plenty to spare.

“Let’s have that Grateful Boar meat again,” she demanded.

“Again? I mean, we still have some left, but aren’t you sick of it?”

She really did have a black hole for a stomach. She took five meals a day and ate more than I did each time. It violated the laws of thermodynamics.

“That Black Orc wasn’t bad, either,” she said, “but I can eat that any time. Let’s go back to basics.” She licked her lips and smiled.

“As for the soup, I’ll have tomato today, and make it snappy,” she demanded, smacking her palms on the table. So that gesture existed in this world, too.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Though, I can’t make it cook any faster.”

A while later, I placed the finished meal in front of her, which she polished off in an instant. She reminded me of my little sister somehow, even though her looks, personality, and everything else about her were completely different.

“Come to think of it,” I mused, “if you fell down into this dungeon through a hole in the forest like me, then you must have been traveling somewhere. How did you survive by yourself if you can’t even cook? Did you only eat rations?”

“Hmph. I don’t like the way you said that, but I was not traveling alone. My partner is most likely outside waiting for me. She’s really taken with how lovable I am, after all.”

“I see. Now that you mention it, I suppose that makes sense.”

I deftly ignored the part where she seemed to be bragging.

“Yes, I was traveling with my big sister,” she revealed.

Oh, so I guess technically she is a little sister. That explains a lot.

“Two sisters out on the road in times like these?”

“Well, there’s a reason for that. Hmm, I guess I don’t mind explaining...”

I thought for sure the girl would refuse to elaborate like she had with her name, but for once, she actually seemed to think before she spoke.

“What is it?” I asked. “Now you’re hyping it up. Were you on some epic quest or something? Off to defeat the demon lord?”

“Ha-ha! Defeat the demon lord? That’s your best joke yet! I didn’t realize you could be so amusing!”

I wasn’t sure why she found that so funny, but whatever.

“The reason for our journey is...a secret. A cute girl needs to keep an air of mysteriousness about her.”

“Huh? What’s the matter? Didn’t you say you wouldn’t mind talking about it?”

“I don’t, but it’s still classified,” she teased, holding out her finished plate. “More!”

“The only mysterious thing about you is where all that food goes. You’ll get fat, you know.”

“Drop dead.”

“Gyagh!” I shrieked, narrowly dodging her Windball. “Are you trying to kill me?”

Unlike the Fireball and Waterball spells she usually used, the Windball spell was especially hard to see coming. It was like she’d wanted it to hit me for once.

“Huh? Yes, obviously. The punishment for telling a cute girl she’ll get fat is death. Didn’t you know that, you nincompoop?”

“Oh, I didn’t. So where is this cute girl you speak of? I only see a pip-squeak who ought to come with a warning label.”

“What?! You must be blind as a bat if you can’t see me!”

Our noisy mealtime continued. How long had it been since I'd had such a lively bite to eat? When had fueling up started to feel like work?

...Oh yeah. It was after I came here.

The last time I'd enjoyed a meal like this had been back in my own world.

“F-finally... We’re nearly there...”

“What an obnoxious dungeon this has been...”

Through sheer trial and error, we had evaded hallways full of traps and gotten covered in mud, oil, and some strange white powder (flour?) along the way. But at long last, the end was in sight as we arrived at another one of the many Safety Zones we had encountered among the traps. Like the others, the floor was painted yellow, and from here, it was a straight path to another similar zone, complete with a hanging banner that read, CONGRATULATIONS! THE EXIT IS RIGHT HERE!

Still, the path there was a long one, and I had only been able to read the banner from here because of the mana I was channeling into my eyes. If I had to guess, I’d say we still had about eight hundred meters to go.

“After you,” I motioned. “Ladies first.”

“No, no. We are friends. There is no need to be polite. It is a woman’s duty to play a supporting role.”

At that moment, both of us were thinking the exact same thing:

““You’re just planning on using me as a stepping-stone!””

We both grabbed on to each other, trying to shove the other ahead of us. There was no way the homestretch wasn’t filled to the brim with dangerous traps.

“You would make a helpless little girl go ahead? You should be throwing yourself in the way to protect me!” she squealed.

“Sorry, but I’m all about that gender equality! Besides, what kind of ‘helpless little girl’ are you supposed to be?”

“Don’t you see how dainty and cute I am?”

“Ohhh myyy gaaawd! Shut up! Shut uuuup! Don’t give me the cutesy look! Is this some kind of new psychological attack? Because if it is, it’s working!”

“I really pity you for being blind to my charms! This always worked when I tried it on Father!”

“Father! Oh, Father! Your daughter’s being a little brat! How did you let her turn out like this?!”

Wait, what am I doing?!

I was acting like a complete buffoon. I felt like I’d been regressing back to childhood ever since I got here.

No, wait. I *was* a kid. This is how I’d acted back at school with my friends. Messing around, telling jokes... Now I was in another world as a hero who needed to defeat evil and fend off attacks from monsters and bandits... I’d had to learn to kill. I couldn’t act so immature any more.

“Hey...,” the girl started. “All this fighting is just a waste of energy. Why don’t we take a break for now?”

“Y-yeah... That’s a good idea. Okay. I’ll count to three, and then we both let go of each other.”

“O-okay. On three, right?”

“Yeah. Okay. One, two...”

“Wait! Is it on three or after three?”

“Huh? Oh, er... Let’s do on three.”

“I prefer after three.”

“Then you should have said so earlier! Does it even matter?!”

Ahhh, what a pointless argument. You know when you’re messing around with your friends, and everything that pops into your head feels like the greatest idea ever? Until the dust settles, and it’s just like, *Was I drunk then, or plain stupid?* I felt like that right now. Just empty-headed.

“Whatever. I don’t care,” I snapped. “We’ll do it after three, then. One, two, thr—”

Right then, the ground shook.

“What?!”

“Hyah?!”

It wasn’t an earthquake. The floor beneath our feet sank, as though it had been waiting for that exact moment.

It was then that I realized something very important.

The note never specified there weren’t any traps in the yellow zones!

The floor dipped down and sprung back like a springboard, catapulting the two of us down the (obviously trap-filled) far corridor.

“Not again, dammiiiiit!” I screamed, my mind racing in confusion. There was nothing we could do now. We couldn’t take back what we’d done. The die had been cast for us.

“Aaargh! There’s only one thing for it now!” cried the girl.

We booked it as soon as we hit the floor. It was a reflex at this point. If you stopped moving, the traps would get you. Perhaps once, we’d been foolish enough to believe that nothing would happen if we just stayed still, but those days were now just a distant memory. As we ran, great stone stairways rose up out of the ground to block our path, but we were used to this by now.

“Hng! Hup! Rah!”

“Hup! Hah!”

We grunted as we hopped across the stairs. All we did was run. Barrel straight forward with our superhuman speed.

“Hup!”

We ducked to avoid pillars flying out from the floor, walls, and ceiling. Seven hundred meters.

Suddenly, a host of cannons popped out of the ground and fired a volley of glue balls at us. “Out of the way!” yelled Tomato-Top as she cast a Water spell to wash them away. Six hundred meters.

Then a strong headwind began to blow. Anticipating that more traps would

come once the gale knocked us over, I rolled forward like I'd learned in gym class to reduce my air resistance. Five hundred meters.

Just then, the ceiling, which had been stuck on with glue, began to collapse on us. From either side, a series of glue-tipped spears came at me. I heard Tomato-Top shout, "You owe me one!" beside me, before a vast wall of water rose up to protect us. The traps in this dungeon were well-made, so even the most ridiculously powerful spells we had access to would only stop them for a few seconds. Still, that was enough for us to escape the danger zone. Four hundred meters.

"Urk! Not this one again!" she groaned when she saw what was up next.

"The invisible block!" I cried. This was one of the most devious traps we'd encountered yet.

Despite the fact that invisible blocks of solid mana were easy to detect with magical senses, this trap mixed in several blocks where the flow of mana was interrupted, which rendered them imperceptible. For Tomato-Top, this meant her excellent magical senses were actually a drawback here. Because she would get so focused on figuring out the locations of the normal invisible blocks, she was much likelier to gloss over the nonmagical ones. Since we couldn't rely on our magical senses, the only way of spotting them was to pay attention to slight diffractions in the air.

"Time for me to pay back my debt!" I yelled. I took out the Slapstick's Blade and channeled mana into it, causing it to shine with a metallic glint. At my command, it spread out into its fan form.

"Scatter on the wind: *Unraveling Gale!*"

I swung the fan with all my might, sending out a mana-infused gust that dispelled the illusions on the blocks.

"I don't need your help!" yelled Tomato-Top. "I was fine on my own!"

"Yeah? Well, so am I! You don't need to help me, either!"

Three hundred meters.

"Nrgh! Whoa!"

Suddenly, it felt like my stomach was yanked upward; gravity had reversed. Suspended below...no, *above* us was another flyswatter, ready to activate once we fell into the patch of glue on the ceiling. We could already see the grisly remains of some now-unidentifiable insect that had fallen into the trap before. Obviously, we simply leaped off the flyswatter to avoid it and were on our way. Two hundred meters.

As if to punish us for how easily we had cleared the last one, there came an unimaginable barrage of traps. Pillars of water shot out of the walls, gusts of wind blasted in all directions, the ground beneath our feet turned to quicksand, and floating stone blocks sought to impede our progress.

“Hrh! Hrh! Hrh!”

Drenched in water, deafened by gales, slowed by sand, and grazed by the blocks as we ducked past them, it took all our powers of concentration to make it through.

Then we were in the final stretch. Just ten meters left.

As soon as we neared safety, the floor and ceiling started to close in on us. By some miracle, both Tomato-Top and I were still neck and neck, so we sprinted side by side toward the safe haven beyond. Desperate to make it to the far platform before the trap crushed us, we jumped.

“Come...” “Ooooon!” we both screamed.

Just a little farther, and we would be free.

Come on, come on, come on!

At that moment, however, my frenzied mind spat out a short calculation. At this speed, I wasn’t going to make it. One of my legs was going to get caught. It had happened before and sent me right back to the start.

“Dammit...! ...Whoa?!”

Just as it all seemed all hope was lost, a powerful gust suddenly kicked up from behind, pushing me on. As it lifted me through the air, I heard the girl’s prideful voice. “Heh-heh, now you owe me one again!”

“Tsk. How come you got to do the best one?” I grinned. At least we’d finally

cleared the dungeon.

Or so I thought.

We'd forgotten the simplest of things, even though it had been impressed upon us mere moments ago: The yellow-marked zone between us and the far door was not necessarily free of traps. We had only assumed that. In fact, this area was the perfect place to spring a trap on us, just as we'd let down our guard.

““Hrh?!””

As we fell toward the ground, gravity normalizing again, the yellow-marked floor beneath us suddenly vanished before blistering hot air rushed out to scald our skin. It was a trap the likes of which we had never seen. The floor had opened up to reveal a roaring pit of flame.

Damn! That'll kill us!

Up until now, the traps we'd come across had never caused us any serious injury. Even if they completely caught us off guard, the worst we'd get was covered in bruises and glue. But this one was different. Even with our superhuman abilities, it was obvious these magical flames would roast us alive. The only reason the traps hadn't killed us already was because they hadn't been trying to. But they *had* been strong enough that we couldn't simply destroy them all. And now it seemed they were finally showing the true depths of their fearsome might. The flames licked at us, ready to devour us whole.

There's gotta be a way...!

Contrary to how it had appeared when we were farther away, the exit was too far for us to reach, even with the tailwind at our backs. It was too late to turn around, too, as the hallway had already clamped shut behind us. As impending death loomed, the whole world turned black-and-white. Time slowed to a crawl, like we were swimming through tar.

Suddenly, a burst of inspiration cut through my muddled thoughts.

Wait! If I can just do that again...!

I couldn't cast spells, but I was able to manipulate my mana.

Before I stopped to second-guess myself, I put my plan into action. The name of the skill flowed freely from my lips, as if on instinct.

“Air Step!”

“Mrh? That fire— Gyagh?!”

Tomato-Top didn’t have time to finish her thought behind me before I wrapped her beneath my arm and leaped off the floating platform of mana I’d created. How ironic that a cruder version of the invisible blocks that had tormented me so many times before had saved me.

As I propelled myself forward, the blue-hot flames leaped up to give chase, like a dragon opening its jaws.

“Come ooooon!”

We tumbled into the doorway without letting up. However, I had given little thought to how we would stop, so we carried on rolling straight through the open door. Fortunately, there was a wall beyond to stop us, but unfortunately, such a service came at great cost.

“Nraaaaargh!”

There was a dull *thud* as Tomato-Top’s head collided with the stone wall before she screamed out in pain. At least we were still breathing, though.

“Now we’re even again!” I told her.

“Like hell we are! Thanks to you, I bumped my noggin!” she yelled, leaping to her feet in rage. “And wipe that stupid smirk off your face! You fool! You incorrigible fool!”

“Well, I couldn’t help it!” I shot back. “You should be glad we’re not both piles of ash!”

“What?! Are you seriously telling me you didn’t realize?” asked the girl, rubbing her bruised head and glaring at me.

“Realize what?”

“This!”

Tomato-Top walked over to the door we had just come through and stuck her

hand into the roaring inferno.

“Whoa, what the hell are you doing?!” I cried out in surprise and leaped to my feet. Flames that rich in mana would vaporize her flesh in an instant. The girl, however, just gave me a mocking laugh.

“*Pfft!* Calm down, you bumbling oaf! Look, nothing is happening to me.”

“Uh... Wha?”

She withdrew her hand from the flames. Sure enough, it was completely unscathed. The blaze hadn’t even singed her kimono.

“Errr...what? What’s going on?”

“These flames are nothing more than an illusion done up with a tremendous amount of mana to make them look more fearsome. They’re completely harmless,” she explained, a gleeful smile on her lips. “Well, I suppose they could hurt a complete nincompoop who tripped over running for his life.”

“Ah... Grr... Er...”

“*Now we’re even again!*” she mimicked. “*Schwing!*” She struck a cool-guy pose to mock me.

“Y-you little...!”

“I do declare, never have I seen a face so undeservedly smug as yours was then. It’s going straight into my top five. Have you ever considered giving up the adventurer life and settling down as a comedian?”

“Rrrrrrrgh!”

She’s a demon! A true demon! It took the full potential of my rational mind to stop myself losing it right then and there. I had to be the better man. Unfortunately, as she continued to laugh at me, I could find no other reasonable outlet for my wrath. More for the pile, I guess. What difference did a little more pent-up anger make at this point?

“Heh-heh-heh. Well, I suppose we can move on for now,” she announced at last, just as I was about to give in to the voice telling me to snap. “At least we are finally done with that insufferable passage.”

I wanted to beat her silly with my fan so bad.

When I finally calmed down, I looked around. The room we were in looked worryingly similar to the starting chamber, but it was only about a quarter the size. In one corner was another spring of water, and even the walls and floors gave off the same unnatural warmth despite being carved out of stone.

The only other difference to speak of was that the hallway leading to the monster room was gone. Instead, there was a huge set of metal doors. Presumably, they led outside.

“You’ll regret laughing at me like that... Anyway, it said this door was the exit, so I guess that means we made it through the maze. Finally. At long last, I don’t have to look at your stupid face anymore.”

“What? Are you going to be lonely? Huh? Huh? I suppose I could always hire you as my cook full-time if you really insist...”

“Gee, self-centered much?” I chuckled. Unlike usual, though, she wasn’t responding to my taunts. I guess she was happy to be getting out of here as well.

“Ten days we’ve been down here.” I sighed. “I don’t even know what time it is up top, but I’ll just be happy to breathe clean air again.”

I stood up and approached the door. Tomato-Top walked up beside me.

“I believe it is just about suppertime,” she remarked.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I am expecting supper. Make something nice for me after we get outside,” she demanded, sticking her tongue out.

“...About half of what I’ve done in this dungeon is making meals for you,” I said. When I agreed to cook for her, I didn’t know what I was getting myself into. I didn’t think I’d be cooking five meals a day for a week and a half. Hell, I didn’t even think we’d be down here that long.

“Truly, the world is a mysterious place. How can a nobody like you know how to cook, while a cutie like myself possesses no talent whatsoever? It just does not make sense. You didn’t put anything strange into it, did you?”

"How many times are you going to ask me that? And of course I didn't. How rude."

The two of us stood before the double doors and grabbed a handle each.

"Whatever. I suppose this'll be the last time. I'll make you so much food, your belly'll fall out."

"Now I like the sound of that! I've been starving myself so far!"

"What?! How much do you normally eat?!"

"Food is the truth of this world! I can eat twice as much as that when I really want to! For the last one, I am seriously going to pull out all the stops, so think long and hard about what you are going to make me!"

"What's wrong with you? Is your stomach the size of your entire body? Or did you get your stomach acid from a monster?"

Well, I guess I'd better whip up something really special, then, I thought as I pushed open the large metal door...

Scuttle, scuttle, wriggle, wriggle, swish, swish, squeak, squeak, crawl, crawl.

““...””

Then without saying a single word, the two of us pulled the door shut.

““Hmm... No, that's not right,”” we both muttered to nobody in particular.

“Huh. I wonder what that was,” I said. “Guess I must be getting tired.”

“That cannot be, can it? I mean...surely not.”

I rubbed my eyes, hoping it would help me wake up. Then we looked at each other once more, nodded, and opened the doors again.

But no matter how much we denied it, the same scene awaited us. Beyond that door was not the smell of fresh air or the clear sky, but...

Slither, slither, scuttle, scuttle, scurry, scurry, chitter, chitter, squirm, squirm.

...cockroaches, centipedes, slugs, rats, mosquitoes, and moths. Each about the size of a small dog.

““No, no, no, no, no!””

Individually, they were disgusting, but a whole room full of the creepy-crawlies cut straight to our primal instincts. We couldn't even bring ourselves to look directly at the sight.

We closed the door again.

What. The hell. Was that? Had I finally lost it and started hallucinating?

I could barely even think. I just stood there in stunned silence, until Tomato-Top's voice brought me back to my senses.

"What in the blazes is going on?" asked the girl, crouching, head in her hands. "I thought it said there weren't any monsters in here!"

"...I'm not even sure if they *are* monsters or not," I remarked, checking the note again. "That being said, it only specifies there aren't monsters *in the maze*."

Technically, we had reached the exit, so we weren't in the maze anymore.

"But if we're out of the labyrinth," asked the girl, "how come we have not reached the surface yet? Didn't it say if we beat the dungeon, we get to go free?"

"Well, yes, but... I guess we've cleared the *maze* but not the *dungeon*?"

Now that I thought about it, these double doors looked awfully like the entrances to boss chambers in other dungeons.

"Ah."

"What is it now?"

"Look up there," I said, pointing above the door. "It's kinda hard to make out, but doesn't it say 'Guardian Room'?"

The text was almost the same color as the wall and located so far up that it was almost impossible to read, but sure enough, that was what it said.

"..."

Another awkward silence reigned.

"N-no! No! No! No! You mean we have to *fight* those things? I cannot! I simply cannot! This is too much!" she screamed, shaking her fists in denial.

“Hold on. Boys like bugs, do they not? And girls hate bugs, do they not? So...”

“Don’t give me those puppy-dog eyes! I don’t like vermin any more than you do! Besides, those aren’t bugs, they’re something else entirely! They’re not even remotely the same as the cicadas back home!”

“But I do not want to go up against something as loathsome as that! I know! You still owe me one, remember? I’m calling in the favor! Right now! Fight those creepy-crawlies for me!”

“No! I...I let you make fun of me without saying anything, so now we’re even!”

“Wha—? You would shirk your debt? Have you no shame? What kind of man refuses to pay back his favors owed when the time comes?”

“What are you talking about?!”

I didn’t want to do it. Absolutely not. I think my mind would be in more danger than my body if I did. I could handle monsters that were a little creepy, but insects freaked me out at the best of times, let alone at this size. I needed bug spray. Extra-large.

“Besides, it should be a crime to force a cutie like me to go against those monsters! You’re a scoundrel!”

“How dare you call me that when you’re way worse than I am! Why do I have to fight them when I’m close-range?! I shouldn’t have to get so near that I can smell what they had for breakfast when you can just blow them up from far away with your spells and not have to worry about it!”

“Just close your eyes!”

“Are you crazy?! How am I supposed to fight like that?! If I go in hacking and slashing, I’m gonna get drenched!”

“And what is the matter with that? You could do with a bath.”

“It ain’t gonna be water I’m drenched in!”

Honestly, the thought of getting covered in guts and fluids made me want to take a shower right away.

“I can’t do it! I just can’t!” she screamed. “They’re all scaly and slimy and

glisteny and squishy and creepy and crawly and wiggly and jiggly! It sends shivers down my spine!"

"Yeah, well, I don't want to do it, either! No one in their right mind does!"

We were like a pair of kids, squabbling over who had to do the housework. It went on like that for a while. Then finally...

"I told you, I don't wanna do it, either! Why can't you just use your magic to blast them or bury them from a distance?!"

"That's not the problem! And why can't you just dodge their guts?! If you're so unwilling to get close, then just throw monster bones at them!"

At each other's suggestion, we suddenly both fell silent.

"“Actually, that's not a bad idea...,”” we both said at once. Suddenly, I felt exhausted. Geez...why didn't we think of this earlier and avoid this entire argument?

"You're right. It's only because we're still thinking in terms of *fighting* them that we're getting so worked up."

"You are right. This will be no brawl. It will be an extermination."

Once again, we pushed open the doors.

What had I been so afraid of? Vermin were vermin, no matter how large they were, and arguing in front of the door wouldn't change anything.

"I ain't afraid of no bugs!" I yelled, kicking open the door.

"I shall exterminate the lot of you!" screamed Tomato-Top as we plunged into the boss fight.

"Cheeeee! Sksksksk! Blblblblbl!"

"“Nooooooooooooooooooooo!,””

For all our fearless talk, our courage quickly fell apart like damp paper when we entered. Thus, our despair-inducing battle began.

"Get crushed, bugs!"

"Kyukyuu..."

“Checheee...”

The scene was even more gruesome now than when we’d entered. I had been hurling horns, bones, and shells from my bag, so now the dry, scuttling creatures were coated in gelatinous goo and smushed insect bits. One look at the grisly arena was enough to tell you just how messed up whoever designed this dungeon was.

“Ha-ha-ha! You worthless insects! You’re like ants to me!”

I wasn’t even sure what I was saying. I was trying to avoid staying too sane because I thought I’d faint on the spot if I understood what I was looking at. Praise be to the Confusion status! Merciful and benevolent savior!

Yeah, I don’t really get what I’m thinking anymore.

“Aaaaaagh! Gross, gross! Stay back, foul creatures! Insects taste the worst!!”

Huh. So Tomato-Top’s actually eaten insects, has she? Sounds like she hates them even more than me.

“Checheee!”

“Bibiii!”

“They’re so creepy and crawlly! Make them stopppp!”

Tomato-Top was so scared that she wasn’t even aiming properly, just casting spells as fast as she could. It looked like she was also confused, just like me... Wait, if she was crying, then did that mean it wore off? Maybe her resistance to Confusion was so high, the status effect never stuck in the first place.

“Well, whatever. Who cares?! Just die already! Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

“Dammit! How come you get to go insane without me? Grr! I’ve never been so vexed at having good magic resistance!”

“Sorry, I can’t hear you! I’m craaaazy!”

“Shut up, baldie! Stop your eyes from spinning and come back to reality already!”

“Whoooaa?!”

Just then, a ball of water doused me. Now I was sopping wet and cured of my

Confusion.

“What are you doing?!”

“Making up for your subpar resistances! How long were you planning on staying loopy?”

“Forever! It was on purpose! If I wanted to heal it, I would have done it myself! How am I supposed to go up against these things without losing a few marbles?!”

Now that I was looking at the scene again, I found it was truly a horrifying spectacle. It would have been bad enough in a movie or TV show, but the sheer destructive power of being here in person was unequaled. Even the air itself seemed heavier than before. I didn’t know if the Confusion had stopped me from realizing this before, but now the mucus, the strange bewildering spores, and even the breath attack of a bizarre earthworm-like creature had all combined to give rise to a truly awful smell that made me want to literally lose my lunch. Fortunately, I was quite a high level by this point and had access to several status effect-preventing skills, but they couldn’t fix the stench.

“Damn, it’s getting so hot and humid in here... I thought bugs were supposed to be cold-blooded. What gives?”

Now that I was back to normal, my superhuman senses were flooded with information. My eyes took in every minute detail of the gory scene, a deeply unpleasant buzzing of wings filled my ears, and the visceral smell I just described filled my nostrils. On top of all that, it was sweltering, probably due to all the Fire spells Tomato-Top had been hurling around.

As for the girl, she had cloaked herself in a semispherical Wind barrier and was blissfully ignorant of the temperature outside.

“That’s not fair, Tomato-Top! Let me in, too!” I yelled, running toward her. As I did, I hurled two more projectiles, the first taking out a centipede-like creature crawling toward me, while the second knocked two flying ants out of the air.

“Nrgh? Stay back, you fool! You’re bringing the gross ones with you! Plus, you reek!”

“But I just had a shower, thanks to you!”

“Well, it smells like you need another one! Take this!”

“Whoa?!”

Another huge sphere of water appeared, but this one formed around me like a bubble and began to swirl.

Whoa... This must be how a car feels at the car wash...

While I watched Tomato-Top fire spears of rock that pierced the wings of several more flying ants and brought them down to the ground, the bubble scrubbed me clean from the neck down for about ten seconds before collapsing into a puddle with a splash.

“You just gonna leave me dripping wet?! You did that last time as well!”

“Deal with it! A little bit of water never hurt anyone!”

“Yeah, now all those weird fungal spores and moth scales are gonna stick to me! That’s a disaster!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. I’d never let those disgusting things anywhere near us.”

During my short soak, a few of the vermin had approached me, so I crushed several of them under the three-meter corpse of a Stone Golem. It had once served as the boss of a low-level dungeon that I’d defeated fairly easily. I was holding on to it because Eumis had mentioned wanting to study its corpse, as golems were relatively scarce in the Orollea Kingdom. We’d originally planned to send it back to Elmia once we reached the next town. I’m sorry, Eumis, but this is an emergency. It doesn’t matter if I give it back to you covered in bug guts, does it? ...Okay, if it does, I’ll hunt you a new one.

“Urgh, my clothes are sticking to me. This sucks!”

The textile quality in this world was worse than what I was used to, so my outfit caused me mild discomfort at the best of times. Now that my clothes were wet, this issue had gotten only more pronounced. At least it should dry out quickly in this heat, I suppose.

“*Shashashashaaa!*” came the shrill cry of a sluglike creature as it rushed toward me.

“Don’t give me that ‘Shashashashaaa’ crap, you stupid insect!” I shouted, continuing to throw things once more.

The fight dragged on. After a while, the immeasurable number of insects had somewhat abated. A little longer, and we would have exterminated the lot of them. Now the room was clearer. We could see another door directly across from the one we entered, this one colored bright green. That was the true exit, surely. However, there was something else weighing on both of our minds...

“Hey,” Tomato-Top asked amid the fighting. “What about that thing...?”

I had been trying not to think about it, and evidently, so had she, but we could ignore it no longer.

“Don’t say it,” I said. “I know.”

At one end of the room was a large, sticky, egg-like growth with veins across its surface that pulsed intermittently. Now that I had a clear shot, I took one of my few proper throwing knives from my bag and hurled it toward the mysterious object. However, before the knife could reach his target, a wall of insects lined up to receive the blow, as if protecting it.

“Tsk. Still nothing, huh?”

The egg was blocking the path to the exit, too. It was basically lodged right in the doorway. We’d known there was something foul about it, even before it grew darker in color and began to swell in size.

“I am getting a most unpleasant feeling about that thing, you know.”

“Oh, I’m glad it’s not just me, then. What a relief.”

“I fear that relief will do you little good before long.”

Tomato-Top continued flinging her Fireballs at our foes with little trouble. She seemed to be holding up much better now. Fire was usually a good bet against any kind of enemy, and against it, these bugs fell like...well, like flies, I suppose. In addition, the room was filling with smoke, and while it was still easy enough to see and breathe, it looked very much like some kind of apocalyptic landscape.

Should I just go up and try attacking it directly? I don’t really want to leave this

shield...

Tomato-Top's Wind barrier was keeping it at bay, but if I left, I'd have to smell that awful stench again. In fact, it was probably even less pleasant by now because of the heat from all the Fire spells. I was impressed at Tomato-Top's casting speed and MP reserves, but the power she was putting into each individual incantation was relatively low. That wouldn't be enough to get through that wall of meat...and whatever else bugs are made of.

"Nrgh... These creatures are quite resilient against my magic," she snarled, grinding her teeth. Meanwhile, the egg continued to grow. It seemed defeating the enemies only caused it to become larger and darker. Although there were very few insects left in the room now, they all crowded around the egg, seeking to protect it from damage at any cost.

Then at last, my fears were realized as the egg's transformation suddenly sped up. The veins on the egg pulsed faster and faster.

"Grr!"

We were so close to defeating the whole lot, too. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. In desperation, I flung my last five throwing knives at it, hoping for a hit. All but one of them were intercepted by the bugs, while that last dagger somehow evaded them and hurtled on toward the egg.

Bull's-eye! ...Oh crap, I tempted fate...

The second the knife was about to make contact, the soft, flabby shell of the egg burst open in an explosion of yellowy goo that struck it midflight and sent it to the floor.

"Goddammit! I knew I shouldn't have said anything! ...And that's hella gross!"

"Eeeeeek! Th-th-that's disgustiiing!"

What emerged from the egg was an enormous insect that resembled a creature called a giant isopod, which I'd seen in a documentary. Its body glistened with slime as it curled and uncurled its dozens of crab-like legs, and it identified its prey with a twitch of its centipede-like head. It was an alien. Unmistakably an alien. It made my stomach lurch. The masses of insects we just slaughtered were like cute puppies by comparison. You could even glimpse its

organs through its semitransparent body.

“Khakhaaaaaa!”

Its...roar (?) was like a low rumble and a high-pitched screech combined. That alone was enough to disorient me. Then as if to signal that the true fight was only just beginning, the boss began crunching up the corpses of its underlings—shells, wings, and all—and scooped them into what could only have been its mouth. It bit into the slug one, sucked out its juices, and then gobbled up the desiccated remains. Soon, the few living bugs that remained had become food for the boss monster’s belly.

So this was the real last trial of the dungeon. Even the psychic damage from its appearance alone was leagues beyond anything I’d ever faced.

“Curses! Who created this dungeon?! Nature could not possibly come up with something this cruel...!”

“Aaah... Aaahhh... Aaaaaahhh...”

Before I could even work up the courage to speak, I heard something to my side snap.

“Oh, for crying out loud! I can’t take it anymore! Just DIIIIIIIE!”

“Whoa?!”

Giving up on keeping herself together, Tomato-Top began weaving a spell quicker than any I had ever seen before. In just a few seconds, about a dozen balls of flame floated in the air around her. I dived to avoid being caught in their trajectory.

“Watch it! You can’t use explosive magic on an enemy that big! *Guh!*”

I choked back my words as the heat emanating from the girl became too much to bear. It was clear she was only thinking about ending this fight as quickly as possible. The protective Wind barrier was gone now; whether that was due to the explosion or simply because she no longer cared enough to maintain it, I didn’t know. In any case, a mixture of burned proteins and boiled bug juices rushed up my nostrils and made me gag. She wasn’t going to listen to anything I said now. The die was already cast.

“DROP DEAAAAAD!”

“STOPPPP!” I screamed in vain as what must have been close to a hundred Fireballs all descended on the foe.

“Khakhaaaa?!”

Individually, they were no stronger than the ones she’d been casting previously, and of course, the enemy was bigger this time. However, the sheer number of flaming orbs and the precise control with which the girl targeted her spells made the outcome orders of magnitude more destructive. In the end, the poor Giant Isopod was blasted to smithereens without even getting a chance to attack.

And then the downpour began. A literal shower of surprisingly gelatinous body parts about the size of a man’s fist mixed with mucus that made me want to spit up my stomach. The force and speed of the explosion, coupled with the extraordinary size of our foe, meant that it was only possible to do one thing as the hail of soggy bug bits splattered us from head to toe...

““AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!””

“Huh... How mortifying...,” grumbled Tomato-Top, drying herself off with a blast of Wind magic that fluttered her shimmering crimson hair. We had returned to the previous room to wash ourselves off in the spring. However, her exasperated attitude was really starting to tick me off, so I charged up to her.

“Listen, you. That was *your* fault, and you know it! Don’t you think you should show a little remorse toward me?”

“Very well, very well. I am sorry. I do apologize. Is that better?”

“Oh? Is that weak-sauce apology really the best you can muster after this disaster?”

Disaster was the only word for it. It wasn’t like we hadn’t been coated in all manner of strange substances by the previous traps, but even the oil was surprisingly smooth and rather pleasant-smelling, like camellia oil. It had made my hair nice and silky, and I think Tomato-Top over there had actually set off a few of those traps on purpose. However, this substance was far less pleasant. It had the consistency of vomit. Puke with little bits of shit mixed in. It was like the

contents of a college bathroom. And the *smell*. It had the harsh stench of stomach acid, only ten times more pungent, as if it had been left to ferment for a month. You could feel the bits of undigested insect flesh mixed in, like pebbles in corn syrup. Their color was a mix of shocking pink, purple, and baby-poo yellow, and they still twitched as if in rigor mortis. Even a certain spiky-haired lawyer would have no objections if I passed down the death sentence right here and now.

“I can’t believe you’d make a drenched little girl get down on her hands and knees and apologize! You’re on the fast track to a life of crime!”

“You already *are* a criminal with what you’ve done!” I shot back. “You’re going away for a long time!”

Besides, *I* was the only one standing “drenched” now. The nerve of that girl!

“Anyway, I did apologize. You sure are petty. Look, I’ll dry you off. Will that make things better?”

Suddenly I was blasted by a rush of warm air as if from a giant invisible blow-dryer.

“There you go. Happy now?”

Not really, but I didn’t want to stand here quibbling any longer, so sure. We were almost out of here anyway. Now that the Guardian was defeated, we only needed to pass through those doors and we’d be free... We *would* be free, right? Surely...

It wouldn’t be, like, the real Guardian was actually in the room beyond, right?

As we picked ourselves up and approached the boss room doors again, the very same worrying thought popped into both of our heads. But surely, we were just overthinking it, weren’t we? They wouldn’t do that to us. Not after all this.

“C-come on. Let’s just get out of here.”

“M-mm. Very well. Let us be off.”

We had just grown too weary. The dungeon wanted that. It had trained us to mistrust everything. We couldn’t let it win...and yet it had managed to subvert

our expectations every single time.

And this moment was no different. For when we pushed open those steel double doors...

“Cheeeee! Sksksksk! Blblblblbl!”

...without a word, we smoothly pulled them close once more.

““WHYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY?”” we both screamed.

Sure, we knew that a Guardian would regenerate if the Core was left alone for long enough, but a few minutes?! In fact, now that I thought about it, we hadn't even seen the Core yet. What was going on? Unfortunately, thinking about it wasn't going to help. There were no two ways about it; we would have to fight those insects again.

““DIIIIIIIEEE, YOU LOUSY BUGS!””

For what it was worth, we exterminated the boss twice as quickly as before.

““COME ON, WHAT'S NEXT?!””

Save for our screams, the room was silent once more. We had exterminated the vermin with all the swiftness of an overpowered Chinese warlord, mowing down the legions of buzzing flies and chopping the egg in half before it even hatched. Then we marched to the double doors, ready for anything the dungeon could throw at us.

Beyond it was another square chamber, like the many we had seen before.

“It's not the exit!” I cried, my fears confirmed.

“What's next? A pitfall? Falling ceiling?”

“Where's the trap?! Where is it?”

We searched the area with bloodshot eyes. By now, no trap was safe from our keenly honed senses.

Just as the door quietly swung shut behind us, a glowing magic circle appeared on the floor. Particles of green light filled and brightened the room.

“Huh?!”

“Ngh?!”

We could only glimpse what was happening for a second before a sea of white washed the whole world away.

“I can sense teleportation magic!” yelled the girl. “What is going on?”

“Is this another trap?” I asked.

There were no markings or anything. Just endless white that played games with my vision.

“*This is not a trap,*” came a voice.

“Wh-who’s there?!” I asked.

The girl looked at me. “You heard that, too, right?”

“*Hello! Well done, guys! You’ve beaten the shortest time!*”

““...””

“*You did a really good job. I’ve never laughed so hard in my life!*”

““...””

“*Especially that fight you two had at the start. I didn’t even plan for that! I thought for sure I was going to die chuckling! Ha-ha! Even just remembering it now is giving me the giggles!*”

As we simply stared in shock, a woman in her early to midtwenties materialized before us, wearing a broad grin on her face. Her shoulder-length hair was tightly curled at the ends, as though it had been permed. She had on a habit like those worn by Lunarian nuns, but her mischievous smile was that of the devil himself.

However, there were three even stranger things about her.

The first was that she seemed to be levitating. Her feet were off the ground, yet I could detect no magic about her. It wasn’t exactly easy to determine where the ground was, though.

The second was that although she appeared to be standing right in front of me, I couldn’t sense her presence at all. I could hear her voice, see her face, but it was like there was nobody there. Not even investing many levels into Stealth

could make you undetectable in plain sight; for that, you would need a powerful intrinsic ability.

And then the final point. I could see right through her. No, I don't mean she was a poor liar; I mean she was literally transparent. Although, there was only white behind her.

Right now, though, I didn't care about any of that.

"Might you be thinking what I am thinking, oil-head?"

"I believe I am, Tomato-Top."

We shared a glance and nodded.

"“DIE, YOU EVIL BITCH!””

I grabbed whatever I could from my bag, hurling item after item as fast as possible. Meanwhile, the red-haired girl conjured balls of Fire, Water, Wind, Earth, smoke, plant, and lightning, as though it didn't even matter what element they were. And yet even in the face of our barrage, which was far more frenzied than when we'd faced the Giant Isopod, the lady flitted from side to side like a leaf on the breeze, deftly avoiding every last blow.

"Pfft! *Not likely! Hardy-har-har!*"

"Goddammit, stay still!" I shouted as I emptied the contents of my bag at her.

"*Hup! Hah! Whee! Oop! You're going to have to do better than that!*"

"Y-you dare make fun of me?!" shouted the girl. "Just die already!"

"*No, thanks! Har-har!*"

The woman chortled as she twirled and spun, eyeing the two of us with glee.

"*Now, it's about time to reward you for completing my dungeon! I wonder what to give you...?*"

Tomato-Top and I had some ideas.

"How about letting me punch you in the face?!"

"How about letting me burn you to a crisp?!"

"Hmm... Nope! ♪"

And with that, she disappeared.

“Wha—?!”

We next heard her voice from right behind us.

“How about this? Here you go!”

“Rrgh?!”

“Waaah?!”

We had no time to react before the woman plunged her hands into each of our torsos. Then came a tingly sensation; it felt like she was caressing something very precious within us and smearing something over its surface.

System Message: “Mystic Blade of Soulfire” unlocked.

“Huh?”

“Nrh? I see, so that’s how it works...”

In a flood of logical connections that seemed to come out of nowhere, we were made to understand that our attacks had little effect on beings without a body.

“And also, I think you ought to lay off the fuzzyweed,” the woman added to me. “Work yourself too hard, and it’ll come back to haunt you. Take it from me, okay? Well then, see you! This was fun!”

Then the woman took a step back from us.

““Wait right there, you...!””

We turned to see the world changing color once more. Even though I knew it wouldn’t affect her, I couldn’t live with myself without at least trying to land one good hit. Given where we were standing and the time we had left, I was the only one close enough to try.

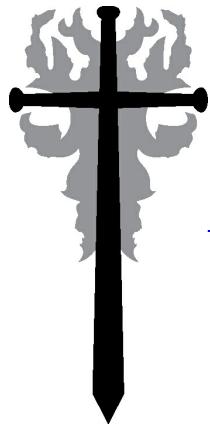
“Hrah!”

However, at the last moment, something in her face stayed my hand. She looked lonely. Then...

“Bleh,” she taunted, sticking out her tongue.

"N-not again!"

I cursed myself as the dungeon spat us out to the surface. She had been toying with us to the very end.



CHAPTER 6

Their Thoughts

When I came to, I was sitting beneath the stars and the moon in a small clearing nestled among thick vegetation.

“That bitch!” I yelled. “I’ll tear her head off next time!”

“You idiot! You should have punched her when you had the chance!”

“Shut up! Don’t you think I know that?!” I retorted, cradling my head in my hand, distraught.

Then as if to change the subject, both of our stomachs rang out in unison.

“Oh, food first! Let’s have something to eat!” said the girl.

“Yeah. Me too, I’m starving.”

My willpower was running at an all-time low, so I simply filled the pot with salt and water, then added in the overripe ricolle wine and slabs of Grateful Boar meat I had sliced up previously.

“Is it done yet? It has been stewing for quite a while...”

“Not yet. Just wait. I’m hungry, too.”

“Urgh... I don’t wanna...”

Tomato-Top fiddled impatiently with the bowl in her hand, looking up at me like a waiting puppy while I stirred the pot. After a little more simmering, the meal was done.

“Okay, it’s re—”

“Gimme!”

“Whoa, calm down!”

“Never!”

The girl snatched the ladle out of my hands and poured herself a bowl before wolfing it down greedily.

“Cripes. Don’t come crying to me if you...”

“Ng?! Cough! Hurk!”

“...choke. See? What did I tell you?”

“More!” she exclaimed, steam still coming from her mouth.

“Okay, okay.” I sighed, doling out a second helping. “Here, eat up.” Then I downed the contents of my bowl, keeping an eye on the rapidly lowering level of the pot.

“Aaaah! That was mighty tasty!” said the girl, after we (mostly she) had polished off two pots’ worth. Then she laid down, rubbing her belly contently.

“Seriously, how do you pack so much in?” I asked her. “If you fall asleep now, you’ll turn into a cow, you know.”

“What? I’ve never heard that before!”

I was sitting against a tree, turning the stove into a bonfire.

“...I don’t know where we’ve ended up,” I said, “but we can figure that out tomorrow. I’m tired.”

As far as I could tell from the vegetation, we were still in the northern part of the empire, near the border with the beast lands. Once the sun came up, I could at least get my bearings. I don’t know if it was due to that soul-smearing devilry, but my senses seemed a lot sharper than usual, and I could even sense a highly populated area off in one direction. Perhaps there was a city or a road that way.

“Hey, seriously, how do you get Grateful Boar meat to taste so good?” asked Tomato-Top.

“Why—?!”

Just as I was about to ask, *Why would I ever tell you that?!* I paused.

“...You boil it on the bone in overripe ricolle wine.”

“Hmm? What?!”

“That’s the secret to getting Grateful Boar meat so tender. That’s what you wanted to know, right?”

“Ahhh, so that alcoholic taste was ricolle wine! Very good. I shall have my sister make it when we meet back up with her! Listen well, oil-head. The food my sister prepares is the tastiest in all the lands. It was she who taught me everything I know about magic, and there is no fairer beauty than she. I may be a super-ultra-mega cutie, but she is something more... A super-duper-ultra-mega cutie!”

“Yeah, yeah, she’s pretty, great at cooking, talented at magic. I’ve heard it all before.” I shrugged. Whenever Tomato-Top wasn’t arguing with me, she’d barely stopped talking up her big sister.

“Anyway, I told you, so now you have to tell me.”

“Hmm? Tell you what? You want to know my body measurements? What a creep.”

“I don’t need those to know you’ve got less curves than a trigonometry textbook.”

“Drop dead!”

I leaned aside to dodge the Rockball that came flying toward my head. It lodged itself in the tree behind me, scattering splinters everywhere. I was so used to it by now that I could dodge her attacks in my sleep.

“The reason you’re traveling. We made a bet to see who could get out first, remember? Though in the end, we both left at the same time.”

“Hmm... I suppose we did agree to something like that...,” she said, as though she had completely forgotten about it until now. “Now, what to do? Like I told you, I don’t mind explaining, but...”

“What’s this about? ...Is it because you need my help with something? I guess I can lend you a hand... You’ll owe me big time, though.”

Come morning, both of us would return to our own lives. In some ways, I would be sad to see it end. Being with her had been like reliving my previous life, laughing and joking with my friends. Perhaps if I knew what she was questing for, I could accompany her. For just a little while longer...

“Oh my, feeling lonely are we?” said Tomato-Top, grinning at me. “Poor thing, you’re like a lost little kitten...”

“Would you quit it for once? I’m trying to do you a favor,” I shot back, but her assessment wasn’t entirely off the mark. I felt the heat rise to my face.

Goddammit. Calm down, blood vessels!

I hoped she wouldn’t notice, but she was not one to let a person’s weakness go unseen.

“Heh-heh-heh. My, your cheeks are so flushed. Did I get it right?”

“Raaaaargh! Stop trying to change the subject! Come on, answer the question!” I yelled. But as the girl slowly rose to her feet and looked up at the sky, a piercing chill ran from my toes to the top of my head.

“...!”

“Come to think of it,” she said, “I never did catch your name. Isn’t that strange? After we’ve spent so long together, I still do not know what I should call you.”

“...It’s Kaito. My name’s Kaito,” I said, pinned to the spot in terror. It wasn’t as though she was behaving strangely. She didn’t seem poised to attack or cast a spell. And yet I was terrified of her. Or to be more precise, I felt a sense of unease, as though I shouldn’t have been there.

“I see. It’s a nice name, Kaito.”

There was nothing different about her, yet it felt like I was looking at someone new. I didn’t believe my eyes. It was like the past ten days had been nothing but a dream.

Somewhere inside her was a deep, dark void. Not the kind formed of an

absence of light, but the kind that swallowed up everything that dared draw near.

“Kaito. I am afraid you cannot accompany me on my travels.”

“...Wh-why not? I’m not that useless, you know.”

“It isn’t about skill, Kaito. You simply haven’t ever stood where I have. You would never have so lightly offered to assist if you had.”

When she turned to me, she was smiling, but it was hollow. Somehow, I knew from just one look that I could never reach her, no matter how hard I tried. There was an inalienable gulf of loneliness that I just could not cross.

“There’s a fire in the pit of my stomach. A sore throughout my entire body. A grief inside my heart that I can never scream away. You don’t know that pain, do you, Kaito?”

“...”

Her smile looked like it might give way to tears at any moment. There was sorrow in her eyes, there was pain... But above all else, there was a burning hate that would strip off my flesh if I dared approach.

“Listen well, Kaito. It is for vengeance that I journey. I cannot forgive. Nor can I forget. I must tear my enemy apart with my own hands.”

“Vengeance...?” I muttered, as the meaning of the word slowly sunk in.

“Indeed. The urge not just to kill, but to utterly destroy. For my own sake, and no one else’s. I must drag them down to the very pits of hell. I must pluck out their eyeballs and flay their skin while they still draw breath. I must grind down their arms from the fingertips in, mince their legs from the toes up. I must sear the flesh of their back on iron rods, make them know pain, suffering, and total humiliation... All I long to hear is their tortured wails as I hold their heart in my hand, and to crush it between my fingers. For that moment, Kaito, I would give anything... Heh-heh-heh... Ah-ha! Ah-ha-ha!”

It was like being hit in the face by a blunt object or being dragged to the bottom of the cold, dark ocean. She laughed. A maddening, intoxicating cackle —her soul set free. And then she refashioned her mask and turned to me with a

grin once more.

“Sto—,” I began, when I felt the touch of her finger on my lips.

Stop this. Revenge will never bring you happiness. That was what I felt I should say. But those weren’t my words, and in this moment, they felt trite and cheap.

But the touch of her finger, cold as it was, felt realer than anything else.

“You know what, Kaito?” she said. “I have enjoyed myself these past ten days. I really have.”

As she stood before me, a horrifying crescent spread across her lips. Through the cracks in her mask, I caught glimpses of a dreadful black flame. Something terribly bewitching.

“So do not touch me. Do not even come near. Stay right where you are, for only there will you be able to live out your days with a restful heart.”

The girl slowly shook her head. Faced with such direct rebuke, I couldn’t even open my mouth to speak. I stood rooted to the spot, frozen in a waking nightmare.

After that, the girl went to sleep, while I simply laid there with my eyes shut. For the entire night until the first light of dawn, I drifted in and out of shallow slumber.

“Phew! I suppose that shall be all for breakfast.”

“That’s all?” You emptied the entire pot.”

Tomato-Top was acting as though the previous night had never happened, so I decided to act in kind. Soon, the time would come when we would part, perhaps never to see each other again.

All of a sudden, an awesome presence flooded the area, and a tremendous cry rang out over the forest.

“Rooooaaaarr!”

I looked up to see a dragon with crimson scales, and a blond young woman sitting atop its back.

“There you are! Where have you been?!” she shouted down at us. But I was

too shocked by what I was seeing to respond.

“A...a Fire Dragon?!”

Dragons. Terrifying creatures that stood atop the monster ecosystem. But while every possible alarm system in my body was on high alert, Tomato-Top stepped forward with a big smile on her face.

“It’s okay,” she said to me. “Guren! Sister! How great it is to see you again!”

As the creature swooped overhead, the lady riding it dropped down to meet us.

“Don’t give me that!” she said, marching toward Tomato-Top in a fit of anger. “Don’t you know how much you’ve made me worry?!”

Her blond hair was tied up, lending her a mature air. But I was more engrossed in what happened next, for in a *poof*, the enormous Fire Dragon changed its form into that of a juvenile dragon pup and rushed over, nearly tackling its master to the floor.

“Rowr!”

“Wh-whoa?!”

I was flabbergasted. How could a dragon, that majestic solitary hunter, ever be so friendly with humans?

“Who’s a good boy? You are! Yes, you are!”

“Rowr! ♪”

The dragon pup licked Tomato-Top’s cheek, and she gave a ticklish laugh.

“I don’t know what you’re looking so pleased about,” her sister interjected with all the tone of a scolding parent. “You’re going to get a good talking-to later, do you understand?”

“SSister! Wait! Allow me to explain! It wasn’t completely my fault this time!”

“I’ve had enough of your excuses. No dinner for you until you’ve learned your lesson.”

“Noooooooo!” Tomato-Top screamed. Then with a deep sigh, she patted the dragon pup on the head. “Well, I suppose it is time for us to go. Come on,

Guren."

"Rowr!"

The pup gave a yelp as if in reply, before taking the form of an enormous Fire Dragon once more. The blond girl hoisted herself up into the saddle and called down to her sister.

"Come along, let's go."

Tomato-Top turned to me. "Very well. I suppose I shall see you again, if the fates are kind enough to allow it."

"Hrk!"

My voice caught in my throat. I always knew this time would come, and yet something in my heart was burning. I didn't understand why, but I was still not ready to say good-bye.

"W-wait!"

Before I knew it, I was shouting after her.

"Mm? What is it?" she asked, turning back to me, but there was no reason for me to speak. My mind raced as I tried to figure out how to continue.

"Y-your name! Tell me your name! Are you really going to leave after asking me mine?"

The image popped into my head of her saying "*I—I don't need to give my name to a rude man like you!*" and pouting. This time, however, she reacted differently. After a pause, she addressed me.

"Mrh... I suppose I can tell you that much."

"W-wait!" said her sister. "You can't! That's dangerous!"

"It is fine, Sister. I am never one to leave a debt unpaid. Besides, what harm can a name do?"

After reassuring her sister, she turned to face me, a dignified expression on her face.

"Leticia. My name is Leticia. A super-ultra-mega-pretty name, is it not?" She chuckled. Her smile was the same mischievous smile I had grown accustomed to

over the past ten days.

"Well then, Kaito. Be sure to not lose all your hair before our next meeting."

"I keep telling you, I'm not going bald!"

"Heh. Then farewell, you ignorant buffoon."

"Get lost already, you braindead moron!"

After returning to our usual banter, Leticia smiled and mounted the dragon behind her sister. Then it took to the skies in a single wingbeat.

"...Leticia, huh?"

Alone in the forest, I reflected on the past week and a half.

"I-it's not cruelty, and I'm not an animal! I was doing my best, you know! I was trying!"

"Pfft! Imagine making all that fuss only to be so swiftly proven wrong! I couldn't have done it better myself!"

"I do declare, never have I seen a face so undeservedly smug as yours was then. It's going straight into my top five. Have you ever considered giving up the adventurer life and settling down as a comedian?"

Goddammit, fine. I admit it. It had been fun.

It had been fun shouting at her and arguing with her. It was fun complaining about the obnoxious dungeon together. All the surprise, all the relief, all the pranks, all the abuse, all the laughter. I had forgotten that mealtimes could be a source of joy. I had forgotten that talking to people wasn't supposed to be a chore. And so when she hungrily wolfed down the meals I spent ages making, I'd been happy... Really, truly happy.



“Why...? Why choose vengeance over me? You were plenty happy without it.”

I spilled those words into the air, where they faded away to nothing like sea-foam.



“...And that’s basically it. That’s the story of how I met Leticia.”

After that, I’d met back up with the shitheads in my old party and brought them back to where I’d been swallowed up, but the dungeon was nowhere to be found. The entrance was a pitfall, and the exit was a portal. With the hole closed, the dungeon was impossible to find, so we’d had no choice but to throw up our hands in defeat. To be fair, I still wasn’t sure if it was even a dungeon at all. There were just too many things about it that weren’t quite right.

I proceeded to talk about the other times I’d bumped into Leticia in my travels. The time I found her in some nobleman’s house dressed as a maid. The time we teamed up to defeat a horde of monsters. The time we both had to enter an eating competition. And many more stories besides.

“Right, that’s all for tonight. It’s getting late, and I think I’ve basically covered everything you didn’t see in your visions.”

The large quantity of Grateful Boar soup I had made was finally reaching the dregs at the bottom of the pot. I had gone on for longer than I meant to, but once I started talking, the emotions all came flooding back, and I found it difficult to stop.

““...””

“Come on. Are you going to keep staring at me like that? Say something. You’re making me feel awkward.”

They had listened to me speak from start to finish without saying a word, but even now, Minnalis and Shuria remained silent. I didn’t mean to be like *So what do you think?* but it would’ve been nice for them to *react* at least. In fact, it was starting to get embarrassing. If after all that, they just said something like *Hey, last night was fun, wasn’t it?* I think I’d drop dead on the spot.

“Well, the thing is...,” Minnalis began.

Shuria shared an awkward glance with her. "...What do you wish us to say? *Thanks for boasting?*"

"B-boasting? I didn't think I was boasting..." I said. I mean, I guess I was a little proud, but they didn't have to put it like that...

"But there is something I wanted to ask," ventured Minnalis.

"Me too," added Shuria. "It's probably nothing, but I may as well."

Two pairs of eyes, yellow and crimson, turned to face me.

"You've told us everything. We know now that you loved Leticia more than anything else..." Shuria began.

"...So then answer us. Are you sure you don't want to meet up with her again this time?" asked Minnalis.

Their eyes shot right through me, preemptively destroying any lies, bluster, or misdirection I might come up with. I gave a small chuckle.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not going to lose my mind when I see her. I still love her, it's true, and I treasure her, just as I treasure you two. I wouldn't be able to kill her, even if my life depended on it."

I still wanted to be with her, even now. The ache in my heart attested to that.

"...But I'm determined to not make the same mistake. I've given up clinging to whatever wishful thinking suits me."

The world was not so kind as to grant me whatever I yearned for. I had learned that a long, long time ago. How could I choose the wrong option and pursue a life of happiness now, after I'd confronted these two with that very same choice?

"I will not waver in my vengeance for a second. I would love for nothing more than to have my revenge *and* save her, but I can't. And if Leticia hates me for that, if she tries to kill me for that, then what else can I do? I have to go on living."

If Leticia truly loathed me, if killing me would make her feel better, I would accept death after my vengeance was complete. But I couldn't let that happen just yet... I couldn't allow the demon lord to defeat the hero. And even after I

broke free of these hateful days, I could never betray my partners. I had Minnalis and Shuria. I couldn't kick the bucket just because I felt like it.

"So here's my answer. I know I can never be by her side. I always have."

My heart twinged even as I said it. I knew it to be true, but convincing myself to accept it was another thing entirely. Heck, it might not have even been possible. As miserable as it was, I might well be carrying those feelings with me until the day I died.

"I...see," responded Minnalis. "If that's the case, then there's nothing more for me to say. I will continue to assist you to the best of my capacity."

"I think so, too," added Shuria. "You won't be lonely anymore with both of us."

I hadn't meant to let my feelings show, but it seemed they sensed them nonetheless. The two of them leaned in close as if to comfort me, a gentle look on each of their faces. I was only too grateful to have their purehearted goodness at my side.

"I see. Minnalis, Shuria, thank you."

I didn't need friends. I would tread the path of vengeance alone if I must. But solitude brought pain, so I treasured our relationship. Ties without trust. Without mutual interest. So tightly bound that it left no room for suspicion, for betrayal. A bond so deep that everything started to blend together.

It's just... I'm happy you care about me, but...watch your girly bits! I've got the melons on one side and the lemons on the other! Please, ladies, I don't know if you don't care or just plain don't know, but...!

I mean, I'm a boy, sure. Part of me enjoys this (and I think you know which part). But that doesn't mean I don't feel ashamed at turning this into a grope-fest in my mind when they're trying to be nice to me. Am I supposed to say something? Should I keep my mouth shut? I know how it's going to go if I point it out. *Get your mind out of the gutter, pervert!* But if I don't say anything when they're trying to cheer me up, they're going to think I'm a silent loner, and that's just as bad!

At this point, I noticed both their faces had gone a little red... Wait, had it

been part of their plan to console me all along? But when it came time to do it, they got flustered? Is that it?

Uh-oh... Urge to tease...rising...

I wanted to see how they would panic if I went, *Oh, the two of you look flushed. What's the matter?*

No. I can't. I mustn't. Only utter trash would say something like that at a time like this.

Wait, no, I'm already garbage. I would only be increasing my level of trash.

"Uhhh... Ahem. Sorry for talking so long. Let's hit the hay for tonight. We've almost reached our next destination."

With that, I stood up and retrieved the expensive sleeping bag I'd acquired in Elmia.

In other words, I backed out of the choice-select screen.

"May I go hunting for a while, Master? I'd like to work off some of that food."

"Ah, I will come with you, too, Minnalis. I am not feeling sleepy yet."

"Um, I guess that's okay, but don't go too far, will you?"

"Understood, Master!"

"Yes, Kaito!"

Minnalis bowed, holding the ends of her skirt, while Shuria gave a flourish of her hand, like a salute.

"Then off we go."

"Lead the way, Minnalis!"

And the two disappeared into the forest.

"...Minnalis is really starting to look like a maid now. Is it just because of the costume...?"

Ever since she changed outfits, Minnalis's maidliness had been growing. Part of that was her appearance, but lately, even her attitude and mannerisms, the way she spoke and her choice of words, were becoming more and more

refined. I knew it was because of me somehow, but why did she have to pick that direction to go in...?

I let out a sigh and began talking to distract myself from my guilt.

"I'm sorry, Minnalis, but I can't even think about it until after I've settled things with Leticia."

I'd been around her long enough to know the way she felt about me, but it would be disrespectful of me to answer her while my heart was still split. It was better to go on pretending I didn't notice for now.

"...If Leticia could see me now...I wonder what she'd call me."

I burrowed deep into my sleeping bag, as if attempting to escape my uninvited thoughts. Right now, all I cared about was what came next. Our next destination was a town called Dartras, in the north of the kingdom near the border of the empire. There, I sought the president of the Grond Company, Grond Gordott. He was one of the fiends who'd taken everything away from me. One of the people I longed to kill.

"Just you wait... I'll drag you down to the bowels of the Earth, to where not even a single ray of moonlight can touch."

I'd kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

Torture him, play with him. Crush his confidence, his determination, his dignity. Grind it all to dust. Take away everything he took from me. Have him sink into the fires of hell.

The whirling blackness in the pit of my heart worked its way up through my body and past my lips. "Oh, I just can't wait. Smile while you still can, you smug son of a bitch."

Then I closed my eyes and went to sleep.



"....."

"..."

We had left Master at the campsite and ventured into the forest.

“I believe this is far enough.”

“Indeed. Kaito won’t be able to hear us here.”

Shuria and I turned to face each other and latched onto each other’s hands, all the pent-up emotion we’d been hiding bursting out of us at once.

“Ha! Ha-ha-ha! We did it! We wheedled it out of him!”

“Hooray! Hooray! Now we’re one step closer!”

“We finally got him to say that he’ll break up with his girlfriend! At last!”

“How great it is to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth! That’s how we know his will is truly broken!”

Shuria was clearly excited from the frenzied manner in which she spoke. Well, she wasn’t alone, and I didn’t care who knew it.

“Yes! Like in *Lilies on a Midsummer Night*. Princess Pyral is so headstrong at the beginning, but then she falls apart so easily once she puts her doubts into words!”

That was fiction, of course. I knew reality didn’t work like that, but still. It was another step toward our goal.

“And! And! Did you see how he reacted when we pressed ourselves against him?!”

“I did. He was trying so hard to distract himself at first, but then I could see him getting turned on. His heart rate was higher than usual, too.”

“That was his sadistic streak, no doubt about it! My radar was going beep, beep, beep!”

“I’m not sure I have something like that, but I noticed it, too. He looked like he wanted to tease us so badly.”

It was the same look he got whenever he poked fun at us for slipping up. I’d read a book that said this was called “verbal abuse,” but part of me was starting to enjoy it lately. I asked Shuria about it, and she said she’d been enjoying it the whole time. In fact, it was one of the things she wanted to explore further when her relationship with Master reached that stage.

“I love getting a taste of what’s to come! ♪” she had said.

As it happened, I had come to learn many new things while comparing my tastes with Shuria’s. Her idea of lovemaking included Master punishing and humiliating her, and while I wasn’t sure I felt quite the same way, I could agree on the point of wanting Master to exploit me for his own pleasure rather than the other way around. It seemed Shuria understood this to some extent, for she had said, *“Ahhh, you are a soft sub, then. But I also feel the dom influence in your desire to lure him in and trap him with no way out. Perhaps you’re a soft switch?”* I didn’t really follow.

Meanwhile, my estimation of Shuria, of course, was that she was a “loving but dark sub who wanted awful things done to her.”

In any case, we had won one battle, but we couldn’t rest on our laurels.

“We must not let this victory distract us from the larger issue,” I said.

“Indeed,” concurred Shuria. “I could almost feel the love radiating off him as he spoke of her. It was sweet, sickeningly so.”

Just thinking back to it put a damper on our celebratory mood. We were tied to Master by a bond of vengeance thicker than blood, and even though he’d told us we were just as important to him as Leticia, I couldn’t help but feel jealous. I don’t know if Master realized, but it was abundantly clear from the way he talked that he was still head over heels for her. It was like he was looking at something so precious, he couldn’t even touch it out of fear he would stain it forever.

“But that is exactly why we have to support him at this trying time. The stronger his love, the harder it will be for him to say his good-byes when the time comes.”

If Master was ever to reconcile his desires, then Leticia could not be a part of it. As long as that simple fact remained, he would not let her kill him. He would live with her ire to avoid making her cry. There would be no apology, no making up, no allowing himself to die as penance.

And so we had to take Master back from her. It was for his own good. With us reliably by his side, his poor wounded heart could heal ever so slightly. Our own

desires aside, this was all so that he wouldn't have to shoulder that painful burden any longer.

...Well, okay. Maybe not *all* because of that. Perhaps there was a teeny-tiny bit of my own longings in there as well. But that's not important.

"When the time comes for Master to say good-bye to her, that's when he will hurt the most. The wound may never heal. But that is when our battle truly begins," I stated.

"That's right. When he's hurt, we will wrap him up in our warmth and spoil him rotten. And then once he wants us so badly that he can no longer control himself... Ooh-hoo-hoo! Aaah-ha-ha!"

Ahhh, the very thought makes me feel all tingly! I think I'm getting wet...

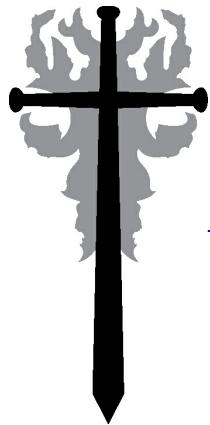
Master, we cannot sit idly by and watch you get hurt. Just you wait. It will be painful, but we will be there to nurse you back to health.

"Well then," said Shuria, "we must prepare for that day. Let us resume our training!"

"Indeed," I replied. "Master has become less guarded these days. We must keep at it."

"Yes! Let's go! The prize is debauchery!"

Thus began our fevered discussion of how best to please Master.



EPILOGUE

Prelude to a Beginning

Why...? How could you do this?!"

The woman before me pounded her hands on my chest.

It would have been so easy for me to answer her.

It wasn't me.

But what purpose would that serve now? I was tired. Sick of it all. This was just another consequence of my unmitigated foolishness.

"You killed him! And for what? To steal his sword?! Why?! You're the hero! And the children, too! You played with them! They loved you!"

It wasn't me.

"How could you do that to them?! Why?! Why you of all people?!"

All I could come up with were weak excuses.

It wasn't supposed to end like this.

"Give them back! Give them back! Give! Them! Back!"

That's all they were: excuses.

I never wanted this to happen.

But if only I had known what tragedy was about to unfold, I could have stopped it.

That was why...all this was my fault.



Those days had long since passed, yet still, they remained in my heart. They had made me realize this world was something I loved, something I wished to protect.

And now, after everything I've been through, they're all that's holding me back from destroying this world and everyone in it.



"U-urgh..."

Before my eyes was a challenge far greater than anything I could find in the A-rank section of the quest board.

"Come on, Mr. Hero, eat up!" said the boy. As he brought the wriggling *thing* in his hands closer, I recoiled in disgust.

"W-wait just a second! Just a second, Kelly! Come on, let's talk about this!"

From the pail in his hand, the boy took out one of many lime-green grubs around the size of a tangerine and shoved it toward me. I winced at the sight of it flailing its corpulent body between the boy's thumb and forefinger.

Compared with those I'd fought in the dungeon alongside Leticia, most bugs didn't seem so disgusting any more, but fighting them was one thing. *Eating* them was another.

Yes, I knew it was edible. It might have even tasted nice, but as a Japanese person, I simply could not rewire my brain to recognize insects as food. It just wasn't in the cards.

"You were the one who said it's not good to be picky, Mr. Hero!" chided a girl.

"Ugh. Shenfa. That...that's still true... But look, I'm a big, strong hero now, so I'm allowed to be picky, you see?"

"Aww, that's no fair!"

"You're a big meanie, Mr. Hero!"

"I don't care! Adults are allowed to be unfair, and heroes are allowed to reject

things they don't like!" I cast my gaze into a far-off direction, frantically trying to deflect their well-placed criticisms and those big, round childish eyes.

"Geez, why do you hate it so much? It's good for you. Plus, it's yummy, too!"

"Yeah, it's sticky and sweet. You'll like it! Come on!"

"Urgh... Can I at least swallow it without chewing?"

"No! Who was it who said to always chew our food?!"

"...That was me..." I admitted.

In Japan, every child was taught to chew before swallowing, but that custom was not followed here. In fact, it was good manners to gulp down your food as quickly as possible, while it was still fresh. I understood the logic, but I still thought it was important to chew, both to aid in digestion and to make sure you got all the nutrients out of the meal.

Although...

I can't help what I can't eat. How can you kids see these living creatures as snacks? And, Kelly, that liquid hanging from your mouth, it's drool, right? Right?

"Oh, Kelly. You've got some of its goo on your mouth there," said Shenfa, and leaning over, she licked the mysterious substance off his lips.

"Wh-whoa? What are you doing?!" shouted the blushing young boy. Shenfa looked puzzled. The two of them couldn't have been older than eight, but Kelly was just starting to get embarrassed when in close proximity to girls.

It was a heartwarming scene, disregarding the bucket of squirming creatures in the boy's pail.

"Look, Kelly, Shenfa... I'm sorry. The frog, I could just about manage, but this... It's just too much."

Apologies to all the boys and girls who were just trying to live life to the fullest, but I just couldn't touch that stuff.

It was then, while I was playing in the orphanage garden with the children, that Metelia called out to me.

"Ah, Kaito. There you are."

“Hmm? Oh, hey, Metelia.”

The kids looked up when she arrived, letting out cries of “Hey, it’s the priestess lady!” and “Are you coming to pick up Mr. Hero?”

Even on a hot day like today, Metelia was dressed in her usual floor-length robes. That was partially a blessing for me, though, because if I had to see those massive breasts of hers under any less clothing, I think I’d lose my mind. With how benevolent and modest she was, I couldn’t believe she was only a year older than Mai and Alicia. Although those two were beautiful in their own right, Metelia was truly a sight for sore eyes. I was only just realizing it now, but the average person here was far prettier than back home.

“I’m afraid so,” said Metelia with a warm smile, “but I’ve brought you something to make up for it. Here, it’s freshly baked ricolle pie.” She opened the basket in her hand and took out a delicious-smelling pastry.

““Yay!”” cried the children.

“Hold it, you little whelps!” I shouted, slapping away two hands that reached eagerly for the pie. “Make sure you share that with Miss Myun and the other children, you hear?”

““Oww!””

That teacher was particularly fond of sweets, and she did so much work looking after the children that she deserved a break like this once in a while.

“Anyway, nice work, Metelia.”

“Nice...work?” she asked, puzzled. “Are we on a job, Kaito?”

“No, it just means you did a good thing.”

“Ah, no, not at all. I am simply following the teachings. This is what any decent follower of Lunaris would do.” Metelia wore a peaceful smile and clasped her hands in front of her face in prayer. Then she turned to the children and added, “Worry not, children, for I have packed much more than usual, so there will be plenty to go around. I am afraid this shall be the last care package for a while, though.”

“...”

I had nothing to add to that. It was as she said. We would be leaving the city tonight. It had taken a bit of time, but our fight with the demons was coming to a head, and the empire and the beast lands were finally mobilizing for all-out war. I had done everything I could here, too. It was time for me to take the fight to the demon lord and end it once and for all.

At this proclamation, though, the kids started complaining again.

“Aww... Why can’t you stay here for a bit? We only just met...”

“Yeah, yeah! I want the priestess lady to bring us more sweets, too!”

At that point, Miss Myun, who ran the place, showed up.

“Settle down, children. You mustn’t ask the impossible!”

““Miss Myun!””

“The hero has his own work to do,” she continued. Then to us, she said, “I apologize for their imprudence.”

“Oh, no, not at all,” I reassured her. “We’ve enjoyed our time here as well.”

When I thought of an orphanage matron, the image came to mind of a wizened old lady, but Miss Myun was actually quite young. I had heard she used to have a husband who helped her manage the place, but unfortunately, he’d passed away when out hunting monsters to help pay off the orphanage’s debts. As luck would have it, her spouse had been in possession of a rather expensive sword, so Miss Myun had been able to sell it to keep the place afloat. Ever since, she’d been taking care of the orphanage all by herself.

“I made some pie, Miss Myun. Would you care to share it with the children?”

“Why, thank you, Metelia. They’ll love this. Why don’t you come inside, and I’ll pour you some tea?”

“Kaito!” came a voice as someone suddenly hugged my legs from behind.

“Whoa, Toria. Stop running into people like that; it’s dangerous!” I said.

Toria was the first girl I’d met from the orphanage; I’d saved her from monsters, which was how I had gotten involved with Miss Myun and the kids in the first place. She was the eldest of the girls, and quite mature for her age, and

it seemed she had wanted to surprise Miss Myun by picking some herbs from the surrounding forests to sell. When the kids turned eight, they usually began working in town, but Toria had heard about the price the herbs sold for while working at the guild and had decided to go looking for them by herself. If I hadn't happened to have been passing by at the time, she might have been killed. Ever since then, she clung to me more than any of the other children. Whenever she spotted me, she would run right up and give me a big hug.

"No, no! Don't go, hero! Let me come with you!"

"Toria?"

She was dressed in her going-out clothes and wore a small pouch with her things in it.

"I wanna be together! If you're going, then I'm going, too!"

She had black hair and black eyes, an unusual combination around these parts. Perhaps that was why I felt such an affinity with her. Her face looked slightly Japanese as well, and she demanded attention all the time... It reminded me of Mai when she was younger.

"T-Toria... Come on, calm down... I'm not going away right now..."

"Yes, you are! Because once you go home, you're not coming back tomorrow!"

"Come on, Toria," said Miss Myun in an attempt to placate her. "Let go; you mustn't interfere with the hero's duties."

"I don't wanna, I don't wanna!"

"Toria..."

The girl usually did whatever Miss Myun instructed, but now she was clinging to me and sobbing, shaking her head furiously into my back. I tried to treat all the children fairly, but I couldn't help but feel a special fondness for her in particular. I knew I had to be firm with her and tell her off, but when I looked into those round, tear-filled eyes, I lost my nerve.

"...You know you can't come with me. It's dangerous out there."

Out in the wider world, I couldn't predict what could happen. I had grown

strong enough in these last two years to handle whatever evil it had in store, but I couldn't always come running to Toria's aid whenever she got in trouble. Above all else, though, I couldn't bring a child onto the battlefield and let them witness the horrors that took place there.

"Waaah...waaah..."

Toria didn't respond, but her grip slackened.

"Please, Toria. If you come with me, who's going to look after the others? They'll be all alone without their big sister."

"...*Hic*... Waaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Toria seemed to understand my point of view, for she let go of me and instead just stood there bawling in a flood of emotion.

"Come on, don't cry, don't cry... You look so pretty when you smile..."

I tried to calm her down by gently patting her head. Miss Myun had kindly given us some space by corralling Metelia and the other children inside.

"*Hic...hic*."

We stayed like that for a while until Toria had finally let it all out.

"Oh yeah, I've got something for you."

"...For me?"

"Yeah. I was going to give it to my sister when I got home, but you can have it instead."

It was a pendant I had picked up in the elven forest, a plain wooden carving that was suspended on a string and depicted a bird. I placed it around her neck, and the crystal in place of its eye glimmered in the sun.

"Here you are. See? It looks good on you."

"...Really? Do you think I'm cute?"

"Ha-ha! I don't just think it; I *know* it."

It was a little funny because she reacted just like Mai. I suppose girls that age were all worried about the same things.

"Hee-hee-hee! Then I'm gonna be your mistress, hero!"

"Pfft! What?! T-Toria?! Wh-where did you learn that word?!"

The pleasant mood I had worked so hard to achieve immediately came crashing down. I mean, I thought she might say something close to *I'm gonna marry you when I grow up*, but not this!

"Er...it was the lady at the guild information desk. I heard her saying something like '*Who needs a wife when you have a mistress like me?*'"

"...I really didn't need to hear that..."

"Huh?"

I see. I didn't realize that lovely receptionist lady talked like that... Ahhh, the world's a grim place...

"So, um, Mr. Hero."

"Hmm? What?"

"I'm gonna wait for you to come back! Make sure you do, okay?" she said with an expression of pure joy brighter than the sun itself.

"...Yeah, for sure," I replied, giving her a reassuring smile.



"...A dream, huh?"

I awoke and slowly sat up in bed. It was still dark inside the room. It seemed my brain was unearthing old memories now that we had come to Dartras once more. After taking supper at a nearby pub, we had dropped the proprietor a little extra to learn where to find the softest beds in town.

"..."

In this world, I was finally strong. I really thought, without a single doubt, that if I couldn't save everything, I could at least save the things that mattered to me.

That was why I smiled at her back then. I really thought I could save them all.

It was that self-indulgent pride that led to what happened next, and in this

cruel world, it might as well have been me who pulled the trigger.

“Still, this sentimentality is getting to be a bother.”

Had I always been such a wistful person? Thinking back to Elmia, the same thing had happened my first night there, too, but I didn’t think I’d dream of the past *again*. Was this going to happen every time?

“Don’t tell me...”

I silently conjured up the Holy Sword of Retribution. Using my Appraise ability, I double-checked its unlock requirements and effect. When I did, I noticed the text had changed somewhat from before. Where previously there had been a blank spot, it now read, *Makes you dream about traumatic moments from your past.*

“How is that supposed to help...?” I muttered with a sigh. There was no way to tell when they would occur, or even which dreams were the product of this effect, and it wasn’t like the visions advantaged or disadvantaged me in any way.

“Huh... What the hell, man...?”

My intrinsic ability, Soul Blade, could be awfully unkind at times. Whenever I gained a new soul blade, I understood its effect more or less immediately. I could also Appraise it for more detail if I wanted to, but that still didn’t tell me everything. There were certain hidden abilities it didn’t alert me to up front, some of which even Appraise only displayed as a row of question marks. Others, like the one I had just gained, came with no prior indication they existed at all. They only appeared if certain conditions were met, similar to the requirements for unlocking a soul blade in the first place, or else they showed up once the user noticed their effects, as I had just done. All in all, it was a very user-unfriendly experience.

Let’s take the Fairy’s Blade of Water, for which I had recently relocked all the abilities, as an example. Its ability to control fluids was granted upon defeating a specific monster, but it wasn’t until I got a strange feeling on the battlefield that I learned of its ability to control the *temperature* of fluids. If I hadn’t noticed that, it might have stayed hidden forever.

Well, it was what it was, I guess. It wasn't as if someone designed soul blades specifically to be intuitive, like a game mechanic. I had learned the hard way that this world was far more complicated than it needed to be. Whatever mental model I could construe, reality was always one step ahead of me.

"Mmrh... Master...?"

Lying in the bed next to mine was Minnalis. She slowly sat up, rubbing her eyes.

"Oh, sorry," I whispered. "Did I wake you up?"

The room we'd rented contained three separate beds. I had given up trying to convince the others to let me have my own space, but in return, I stipulated that I at least have my own bed to stretch out in. Leaving aside the bad dreams, the bed itself was exceedingly comfortable. Ahhh, there's nothing better than a nice warm bed all to myself...

Minnalis did a few meager stretches and looked at me with a lazy expression on her face.

"Mm... Mmm... Hwaaah... Master...gimme a kiss..."

She leaned over the short gap between the beds and craned her neck out toward me. She was starting to remind me of the old Minnalis from when I first met her, before she'd gotten obsessed with all this maid nonsense. However, she was only wearing the thin nightgown she slept in. I might get a glimpse of all sorts of bits and pieces if I wasn't careful, and that would be bad. Especially in the morning.

"Sure, whatever," I said, pushing her back. "Just go wash your face."

"Mmm...okay..."

Minnalis got up and put on a cloak before heading outside to the well. It didn't really matter what I agreed to in this state, because there was no way she was awake enough to remember it by the time she came back anyway.

"And, Shuria, I'm not going to step on you, so please get up off the floor."

"Hmph. You're such a meanie, Kaito," she pouted. However, she stayed where she was on the floor beside my bed. There was only one way to get her

to do as I asked, so I lowered my voice and said:

“...Get up and wash your face already, you flat-chested mongrel!”

“Y-yes! At once, Kaito!”

Shuria sprung to her feet and disappeared out the door in a flash, looking worryingly thrilled at my frankly abusive words.

“...Ahhh... How did it come to this...?” I moaned, head in my hands.

My head hurt. It throbbed even more when I realized that they seemed to be doing this because of me.

“...God, I just need to stop thinking about it, or I’ll get stuck in a loop.”

It was not for me to say what other people could or couldn’t enjoy. They weren’t doing any harm, either, and there were other, more important things to put my brain to work on.

“I guess I should go freshen up, too.”

Everything looks different with a clean face. I couldn’t laze around forever. I was finally here, in the town where Grond lived.



“Mr. Gordott, sir! I’ve collected the information you requested. Here’s my report.”

“I see. Give it here.”

An orangish light came in through the window. Sitting in my office, immaculate as it always was, I perused the report my subordinate had brought me. After giving it a once-over, I placed the bundle of papers on my desk.

“I see. So she has finally agreed to relinquish that sword.”

I sat down in my large armchair, which creaked under my weight. The brand-new leather perfectly and luxuriously accommodated me.

“Yes, sir. Her husband passed away the other day, so once we threatened to take away the orphanage, she caved immediately. I wish you’d seen the look on that woman’s face, sir. It was so damn hot seeing her cry. If it hadn’t been for those screeching kids nearby, I’d have taken her right there and then.”

“That’s quite enough of that. Tell me about the sword.”

“Oh, yes. It’s right here, sir.”

With a soft *clunk*, the subordinate placed upon my desk a sword in a dark-green sheath decorated with light ocher trimmings. The blade was about seventy centimeters long, and the handle looked to be made of raw wood, like tree branches twisted together.

“Ah, so this is the legendary ‘Leafstone Blade,’ the rank-4 magic item from the A-class dungeon ‘Dragonfang Trail.’”

I stood up and withdrew the weapon from its scabbard, revealing the gleaming steel of the blade.

Rank-4 magic items were so scarce that only the very best adventurers, or decently rich noblemen, were able to get their hands on them. I sighed as I held it in my hand.

“What a waste of time. Even if I can shift the liability now, this is going to run our projections into the red.”

“Sir?”

“You’ll see what I mean, liability.”

I clicked my fingers, and into the room ran two more of my subordinates, who pinned the first one in place.

“Wh-what?! What is...? Guh?!”

With a punch to the gut, the worm stopped struggling. He simply looked up at me with fear and surprise in his eyes and slumped to his knees.

“Wh...why...?”

“Did you really think you could fool me with this fake blade? You think I don’t know what you’re up to?”

It was not a dungeon-made sword, that was for certain. Most likely, this worm had gotten it forged by some blacksmith somewhere. I placed it down on the desk and stood up.

“I would venture to say that you were hoping I’d try to sell this counterfeit

and embarrass myself in front of my business partner. Then with my influence curtailed, *you'd* show up with the real sword and take my place as president. Isn't that right, you vermin?!"

"Kh...hah!"

Coming around the desk, I stomped on the trash beneath my feet.

"How *dare* you defy me?! You rat! You maggot! Because of you...! I'm going to be late...! To my next meeting...! You think your time is worth even a fraction of mine?! Talk to me! Tell me how you're going to repay your debt to me!"

I relentlessly kicked the *thing* that was my subordinate, letting all my anger fall upon him.

"This sword...! Was supposed to be...! A gift for Count Garland! You...! And that bitch of a matron, too! You're all cutting into my bottom line!"

The request had come in from one of my regular Imperial clients about a month ago. He wanted a powerful blade for his son to use in the upcoming festival, and the earlier I could secure the goods, the better, as that would give his son more time to practice with it. I'd get a bonus for a prompt delivery. We could have arranged to procure the goods through normal channels, but that would have been so slow as to ensure we forfeited this bonus.

That was when I learned of the orphanage. It seemed the place used to be run by an ex-adventurer and his wife, but for the last few years, it had been struggling. A couple of weeks ago, that man had lost his life in a terrible accident, and now the orphanage stood on the brink of financial ruin.

So I'd attempted to step in and offered to make the woman's money troubles disappear in return for the sword her late husband left behind. However, she refused. And for what ludicrous reason but that it reminded her of her husband.

"Haah...haah...phew..."

After calming down a little, I began to think. Presumably, he wasn't lying when he said he'd gotten that wench to part with the weapon. He surely knew I would discover a lie like that before the deal with Count Garland took place. If the fool was *that* shortsighted, I'd have fired him long ago.

That meant that he had to be keeping the real sword elsewhere.

“Extract the location of the sword from him. You know the drill. Use whatever means you have to.”

“Pl...please... No...”

“Silence, mongrel! You steal from me, you pay the price! Take him away!” I roared, and the two men dragged him out of my office.

“Urgh... Now then.”

I rang a bell on my desk, and after a few moments, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” I said.

“You called, sir?” came the gravelly voice as a slender older gentleman in a black tailcoat walked into the room. While his age was clear from the deep wrinkles on his face and his graying yet well-kept hair, his blue-green eyes blazed with a vigor not in keeping with his years.

This man was Fegner Rielt. His family had served the Gordott line for generations. He was a man who swiftly completed any task given to him and was well-suited to a range of activities, both public and private.

“Fegner, take a message to Nonorick. He is to come to my office after suppertime. I have a job for him.”

“Understood, sir. I shall take care of it at once.”

Then with a bow, Fegner left.

My ambition was to make as much money as possible and spend it on living a life of luxury. Money could become anything. Food, housing, clothes, titles, weapons, pride, prestige, power, human lives...even nations.

It was impossible to find happiness in this world without wealth. To feel truly satisfied, you needed more money than you knew what to do with.

Everything in this world had a price. A price paid in gold. To me, money was no different than a god. It could ensure I had everything I ever wanted.

I would keep on making coin, as much as it took, until I stood at the top of this

world, with more than anyone else.



“All right then, that should be enough.”

“U...urgh...”

“Ghh...”

In the darkness of the alley, Grond’s henchmen lay writhing around in agony. They had left his mansion to find somewhere away from prying eyes, which made it very easy for me to ambush them. I took the dolly they were using to transport their precious cargo and headed for the slums. Eventually, the rattling cartwheels came to a stop outside a building in the heart of the run-down district.

“Up we go.”

I lifted the wooden box off the dolly and into the cellar of the dilapidated house.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Master,” came Minnalis’s voice.

“We’ve already finished preparing on our end,” added Shuria.

“Yeah, I barely recognize the place.”

What used to be a pile of rubble and dust had now ranked up from a “destroyed room” to merely a “messy room.”

In its center was a worn-out chair and a few broken pieces of furniture. Minnalis and Shuria were miracle workers, that was for certain.

“Now, it’s time for the grand unveiling.”

I pried the lid off the crate to reveal a man, bound and gagged.

“Mmm... Gh...”

I tipped him out and undid his gag.

“Wh-who are you...? Wph?!”

As the man peered around, trying to figure out where he was, I stuffed a potion down his throat. Before my eyes, any trace of the pummeling he had

received at Grond's hands disappeared.

"I—I see. Friends, are you? Thank you... Dammit! That old man... He really gave me a beating."

"..."

"Hey, would you mind undoing the rest of my ropes? They're digging into my wrists."

"Listen, I think you've got the wrong end of the stick here."

"What? *Guph!*"

I launched my foot into the man's jaw.

"Minnalis, Shuria, give me a hand with this."

"“Okay!””

"Wh-what?! Gaaagh!"

I pulled the man to his feet before Minnalis and Shuria sat him down in the chair in the center of the room. Its splintered wood and protruding nails gave rise to a series of groans that were as music to my ears. The two girls swiftly tied him to the chair so he couldn't struggle.

"Wh-what is the meaning of this?! I thought you had come to save me! *Guh!*"

"Ha-ha-ha! You must be kidding! Who the hell would come to your rescue? You're disgusting."

I couldn't stand to hear his whining any longer, so I silenced him with a punch to the gut.

"Seriously. What's wrong with you? You think that orphanage is just there for you to leech off of?"

"Urgggggh! Gah!"

I stomped down on the man's bare foot.

"Save you? I'm here to do nothing of the sort. I just need something from you before you're completely broken. Besides..."

"Rrrgh! Aaaargh!"

“...I’ve already decided you’re all going to hell.”

Then I picked up a splintered plank off the floor and drove it like a stake through the man’s leg.

“GAAAAAAAAGH!”

“That’s not fair!” whined Shuria. “I wanted to go first!”

“I’ll take the other leg, then!” said Minnalis, drawing the sword at her hip and slashing at his toes.

“Hgrhhhh!”

“Heh-heh-heh. For a toad, you have a rather nice voice,” said Minnalis, licking her lips with a sadistic smile.

Suddenly, Shuria interrupted our fun. “Aah, geez, you two! He hasn’t taken his medicine yet! What if you kill him?!”

We both stopped. ““Ah.””

Whoops, I forgot.

“Really, what am I going to do with you two...?”

“Ahhh, sorry. You’re right. We’ve got to stay cool,” I said.

Otherwise, I was no different from them. There was plenty of time, so we didn’t have to kill him just yet.

“I must be more careful...,” said Minnalis, dejected. “It has simply been a while since I cut loose... Well, no matter. First things first, we shall have you drink this.”

At this, Minnalis took out the tonic she had prepared earlier.

“Grh! Guh! Ghh! Ghoh?!”

“Don’t worry, this is just a little something to keep you alive and awake. Well, it does turn you into a mummy after four days, but I doubt you’re going to last that long anyway! Hee-hee-hee!”

“Aaargh! Grhhhh! Owww! Wh-what the hell is going on?!”

The man fought and struggled against his bindings, rattling the chair against

the floor.

“And since you’re going to be awake, that of course means you’re going to feel everything we do to you,” said Shuria, pressing a carving knife into the flesh of the man’s upper arm as though she were dicing up meat for supper. “Come on, let me hear some different screams already! ♪”

“Hrg! Grhhh! Raaaargh!”

“Yes, that’s good. More screams. More shouts. It’s too soon for you to break.”

This building had not seen use in over two years, but we liked it just as it was.

“Nobody will hear you die here. We’re going to take things nice and slow.”

The air in that cellar was sordid and stagnant, but soon, it would be rich in the sound of screams and the smell of fresh blood.



“Phew. What lovely weather.”

“The sun feels so nice and warm.”

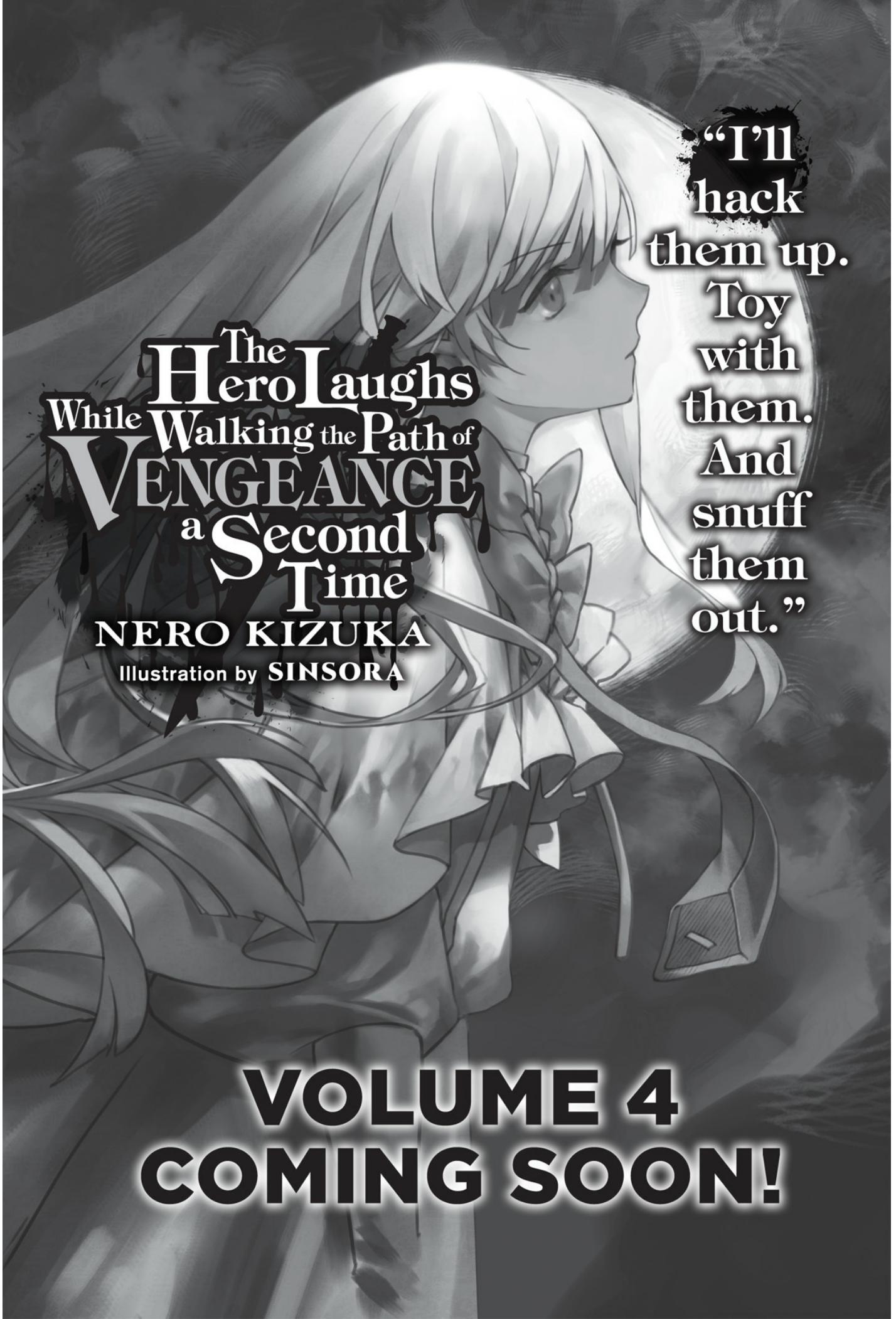
The three of us emerged from the cellar into the ruins of the building, through which we could see the clear sky above. Just as I stretched my arms and cracked my back, our three stomachs sounded off in sync.

“Oh my,” said Minnalis. “Now that I think about it, I am rather peckish. Let us have supper.”

“Yeah,” I replied, “but before that, we need a bath. We reek of blood.”

“Yes!” Shuria chimed in enthusiastically, and the three of us departed. The only thing left in that cellar was a shriveled-up cadaver, face frozen in a look of utter despair, his body covered in the scars of brutal torture. Torture not for information or persuasion, but for the sole purpose of giving him an agonizing death.

“Now, Grond. You’re next. I’ll send you to hell myself,” I muttered, twisting my lips into a sadistic smile as I savored the thought.



The Hero Laughs
While Walking the Path of
VENGEANCE
a Second Time

NERO KIZUKA

Illustration by SINSORA

“I’ll
hack
them up.
Toy
with
them.
And
snuff
them
out.”

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