

I Could Never Be a Succubus!

Volume
1

Author
Nora Kohigashi

Illustrator
Wasabi



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Tending to the flowers was a girl named **Lisalinde**. She was a pure, prim, and proper eighteen-year-old girl.

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Unfortunately,

Sylphonia

had a speedy response to my scheme. She immediately spotted me as I positioned myself and fired a spell to counter mine.



Melvy began
pressing her fingers
here and there.

**"Does it
hurt if
I touch
here?"**

Something
fiery throbbed
within Sylphonia.

"Don't get any closer,
witch...!"

"Hee hee..."

A bewitching smile
spread across Liz's lips
as she slowly and
gently stroked
Sylphonia's thighs.





Aina was dumbfounded.
I was clinging to Cain, topless
save for my brassiere.
Cain and Melvy both looked
incredibly flustered.
But what did it matter?

"Hurry and
make me
feel
good...♡"

Hurry...
Hurry up and hit me...!

"...Huh?"

Characters

OVERVIEW



Sylphonia

The proud Princess Knight and a member of the hero's party. Princess of the nation of Bahelgarn.



Lisalinde

A pure and well-mannered girl, top of her class. She is well-admired within the academy.



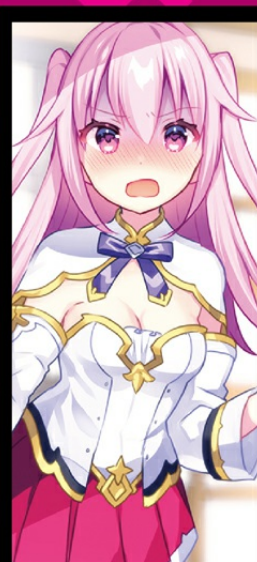
Cain

The hero fighting against the demon lord. He has opted to stay in the academy until his comrades' wounds have fully healed.



Melvy

A white mage and a member of the hero's party. Also the saint appointed by the Russel-Bell sect.



Aina

A flashy girl who is desperate to head her own clique within the academy.

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Prologue

There was a roar as the flames surged higher and higher, a blazing black inferno beginning to envelop the great hall of the castle. Every last one of the magnificent furnishings that decorated the room scorched and burned until the whole picture resembled a scene from hell.

The room was unrecognizable. It typically gleamed with a gorgeous luster, but the heat that filled it had erased all signs of life.

Unlike normal red fire, these black flames were pure malice manifested. The inky shadows flickered as the light was devoured away.

This was the work of a demon lord.

Holes in the crumbling ceiling revealed the sky above—darker and more sinister than any sky of the world of man as a swirl of pitch-black mana sprawled across its expanse.

“Hah!”

“Grrn...!”

It was in this burning room that a battle between hero and demon—a battle to decide the fate of the world—unfolded.

The hero swung a sword of blinding silver light at the demon lord. He was a tall young man with a fierce expression.

The demon lord, meanwhile, wielded a sword with a black glimmer—the same sword which had birthed the black flames now swallowing the room whole. He emitted flames that could consume all matter, and even the stone walls and floors that should have been immune to flame were burning and melting. He had two horns growing from his head and sported three eyes. A pair of large wings sprouted from his back, and though he was vaguely humanoid, he was most certainly not human.

Paying no mind to any of the damage he had inflicted upon his own palace,

the demon lord scattered the dark flames. The grand hall burned hotter than what any normal human would be able to bear. There was hardly anything left in the room that hadn't been burned, sliced, or pulverized.

"Hrah!" The hero swung his holy sword with a gruff yell.

The demon lord shielded himself with his flames as a silver light erupted from the blade. Both forces boasted unimaginable power.

The hero's comrades grouped together to aid him. The princess knight, the saint, and the magician all fulfilled their roles, gradually backing their sworn foe into a corner. The hero, the most powerful of all men, crossed blades with the demon, bombarding him with a rain of attacks that even the denizens of hell would fear.

It was a scene out of a nightmare.

However, the one controlling the flow of the battle was neither the hero nor the demon lord. It was in fact the hero's comrade—the woman who served as the magician.

"Phantom Vision!"

"...!"

The magician was a master of illusions. She created sights and sounds to alter cognition, greatly hindering the demon lord's actions. The demon loathsomely clicked his tongue as his own eyes continued to betray him.

Of all the hero's comrades, the magician stood out the most.

"So she's the greater threat..."

"Huh?"

So the demon lord took an unexpected measure: a life-and-death suicide attack. Casting aside all defenses, the demon lord made a mad dash for the magician.

The hero and his comrades hurried to stop him, but they could not halt this reckless advance. The demon paid no mind whatsoever to his own arm being sliced off, his injuries grievous, as he proceeded straight for his mark.

Then the demon lord's blade pierced the magician's chest.

"Gah!"

"Liz!"

The hero called out her name.

The magician spat up a mouthful of blood as she began to burn from within, the demon lord's black fire bursting from her chest. Her comrades paled. And the demon, knowing that he had done what he set out to do despite the cost, grinned.

Everyone who looked upon the sight was certain Liz would die.

But the demon lord wasn't the only one who was smiling.

"Heh heh..."

"Hm?"

As blood trickled down her lips, the magician Liz still found the strength to laugh.

"I thought...this might happen..."

"What?"

Liz swiftly drew a dagger from her hip and plunged it into the demon lord's heart. The demon lord, with his blade still buried in her chest, was unable to avoid it. Liz channeled all the mana she could into this dagger, prepared to sacrifice herself to take her opponent down with her. This triggered a massive magical explosion within the demon lord's body, opening a devastating hole in his chest.

"Gruuugh?!"

The demon lord groaned as he violently yanked his sword out of Liz and took a great leap backward.

"Kuh-huh..." Liz, now cast asunder, collapsed on the spot.

"Liz!"

"Ms. Liz!"

The hero and his comrades raced over to her.

And with a flap of his wings, the demon lord propelled himself to a hole that had opened in the side of the room. “It seems I miscalculated... To think I would suffer such injury...” he hatefully muttered, despite the gaping hole in his chest. “Pathetic though it might be...I’ll be taking my leave, hero...”

His words were met with silence.

“In a few years...I swear, I shall stand before you again...and slaughter the lot of you... Cower and wait...”

And with that, the wounded demon lord leaped out of the castle.

The hero and his party did not give chase. They couldn’t—not when their precious comrade lay on the ground.

“Liz! Liz! You have to keep it together!”

Within the black flames, the hero held up Liz’s body.

“He...ro...”

The magician cracked open her mouth, only replying in bits and pieces. She was a sweet, beautiful girl with wide eyes and long, wavy golden hair... But now that beautiful face was contorted in pain.

“Liz! Hold on! There’s no way you’re going to die here! I won’t allow it!”

Again and again, the hero called out to her, desperately trying to keep her conscious.

But the hole remained in her chest, and the black flames were still smoldering inside the wound as red blood flowed from it. The demon lord’s flames ravaged her body inside and out; normally, she would have been dead already.

Liz, however, maintained her shallow breath as she desperately held on to life. Beside her, the woman known as the saint cast recovery magic with all her might. Yet the power of the demon lord obstinately clung to the wound and seemed to prevent any attempts at recovery.

It seemed hopeless. Her comrades looked on with despair growing in their hearts.

But...

"It'll...be all right..." Liz said in what was barely a voice. "I'm not...going to die..."

"Liz..."

The hero tightened his grip on her.

"My...mana, my power as a demon, my memory... If I put all my strength into healing...my life...will be spared..."

"Liz..." he repeated.

Even as a member of the hero's party, Liz was a bit of a strange one. Atavism—as they called it. She had manifested the traits of a demon that had been a distant ancestor of hers. These traits manifested fiercely within Liz, and through them, she had become a very proficient magician.

"So if you convert everything you have, you'll be saved?"

"Yes..."

"Then...your power, your *memory*...you're going to lose everything?"

"Yes," Liz replied, nodding feebly. "The demon lord...got away, didn't he...?"

Liz shifted her eyes, gazing at the hole that the demon lord had fled through. Wherever he was, he was already too far away to spot.

"You should have left me...and chased after him..."

"Of course not," said the hero, stroking her cheek. To him and his party, their comrade's life was more important than the demon lord's head.

"I'm sorry...for dropping out in the...middle of the journey... For being so useless... I'm sorry..." Liz spoke slowly, sounding on the verge of tears the whole time. The comrades around her shed tears of their own.

"Don't worry about it. Your life takes precedence. Now use your power already, and save yourself."

His curt way of speaking elicited a faint smile from Liz.

"Of course..."

Light poured from her body—a light so strong that it was nigh impossible to make out her form. Slowly, the wound in her chest closed itself.

“Cain...”

From within the light, Liz called out the hero’s name.

“What is it?”

“Goodbye...” she muttered as she shed a tear.

“Yeah... See you again soon,” the hero replied, stroking her head.

Liz laughed. The great light bathed the entire room in dazzling radiance.

Thus, a mage lost her powers.

It was a day as dark as the black shadows shrouding the sky.

* * * * *

A year had passed since the hero party’s temporary victory.

Unlike that dark day, today was tranquil, blessed by the warm sunlight that poured down upon the earth. Little birds chirped, the soft wind blew, and the leaves rustled in the trees that swayed in the garden.

This was the campus of the national academy, a place of traditions with a storied history. There was magnificence carved into the very bedrock upon which the solemn and vast schoolhouse stood.

There were over a thousand students enrolled at the academy. Attendance wasn’t limited to only the children of prominent nobles; the sons and daughters of normal commoners attended as well. Nor was it simply limited to only the nation’s citizens—anyone with extraordinary ability was accepted. Many aspired to study there.

In the yard, the students all spent their after-school time however they pleased. Some sat on benches chatting with friends, others energetically passed around balls, and others still—the more peckish ones—enjoyed a light meal before going home. The academy’s students used the place in various ways.

Flowers of all colors bloomed in their beds. The blue sprigs of lavender let off

a calming fragrance, while white marguerite daisies spread their petals beautifully. Blossoms of red, gold, and all sorts of hues and varieties stretched far and wide.

This well-maintained flower bed was almost a painting. Whoever maintained the bed was clearly meticulous, watching over and raising each flower with love and compassion.

And in fact, there she was now—a lone girl who stood before the flower bed, tending to the blooms. She held a watering can in hand as she poured water over the flowers with slow, calm motions. The girl carried out her loving work with a graceful smile. The wind blew, and the colorful array of flowers trembled beneath it. The girl's long blonde hair wafted in the breeze.

“Phew...”

The sweet fragrance of the flowers filled her lungs as she took a deep breath. The warm light of the sun reflected off each colorful petal and made her beautiful golden hair glisten.

“Good day, Lady Lisalinde.”

“Lovely weather we're having, Lady Lisalinde.”

Two students greeted the girl tending to the flowers. She turned to them, her smile like a blooming flower itself, and replied, “Yes, good day, everyone.”

The girl's name was Lisalinde. She was a fine-featured girl with a lovable face, long blonde curls, and large adorable eyes—a perfect amalgamation of both beauty and cuteness. She gave off a very pristine impression, without a single wrinkle on her academy uniform, while the very faint smell of perfume bestowed her with an aura of softness.

“Are you doing the usual maintenance, Lady Lisalinde?”

“Yes, there's that too. But today, the teacher told me to do a bit extra...”

Lisalinde enjoyed talking to her school friends. Her grades were top-tier, and her morals were beyond reproach. She came from a fine pedigree, hailing from the prominent noble house of Marquis Lafort. She was highly popular within the academy, and her refined conduct charmed many who saw her.

She was a pure, prim, and proper eighteen-year-old girl.

“Extra? Whatever could you mean?”

“Well, you know that there’s the ceremony tomorrow, right? I was told to prepare some flowers to garnish the festivities.”

“Oh!”

This earned some big nods from the two female students. There was a very important event set to take place tomorrow.

“Tomorrow, the hero is finally transferring to our school!”

“To think, the hero’s party at our academy. My heart won’t stop racing!”

Their faces flushed, and their voices grew excited.

This was currently the talk of the academy. The hero and his party—whose great achievements were known all throughout the world—would be attending the national academy. The arrival of the fine men and women who many across the globe had admired caused great waves within the academy.

“I-I never even dreamed that the hero and his comrades would be my classmates!”

“They said he’s taking a temporary break from his travels in order for his comrades, the princess knight and the saint, to recover right?!”

“Yes, I hear they were terribly wounded while fighting one of the generals of the demon lord’s army... Still, to think I’ll get to live alongside them!”

The two girls gushed on and on.

The reason given for the hero’s transfer to the academy was to alleviate the fatigue of his lengthy journey. Not long ago, the hero party had succeeded in taking down a powerful general of the demon lord’s army, but a number of the hero’s comrades had been injured in the process. To treat these injuries and to rest from their travels, they needed to temporarily settle down somewhere. And that somewhere just so happened to be the national academy.

“Please settle down,” Lisalinde calmly told the excited girls. “I understand well that you’re happy about the hero’s party’s arrival, but we must value a

temperate heart. Please refrain from any actions that could place a burden on our fair heroes.”

“Yes, of course, Lady Lisalinde.”

“It is as you say, Lady Lisalinde.”

Lisalinde’s words caused them to straighten up a bit. It wasn’t as though they wanted to bother the hero in any way. Seeing them tense up like that, Lisalinde giggled.

“But, well... I’m also very excited, admittedly.”

“Why of course!”

“I mean, we’re going to be studying with the hero!”

They shared a laugh at that.

“Anyway, Lady Lisalinde, you’re preparing flowers for the ceremony to welcome the hero’s party, correct?”

“That’s right.”

Lisalinde smiled before the vibrant flower bed. The heroes would be met with the many flowers she’d raised herself. This was something she was incredibly proud of.

These famed heroes were going to be their classmates. The girls’ chests swelled with maidenly hopes as they spoke of the exploits of the hero party, their cheeks flushed.

That was when it happened.

“Ah! Watch out!”

All of a sudden, an urgent shout rang out from the edge of the yard. They turned towards the sound.

“What?”

“Huh?!”

“Eep!”

Some students had clearly let their game get out of control as a ball came

flying in the girls' direction. Worse yet, it was about to hit one of Lisalinde's friends. She was stunned, her body seizing up. She didn't even try to avoid it.

The people who'd been playing ball as well as the others milling around the garden all merely registered what was about to happen, knowing there was nothing they could do about it.

Indeed, there was only one person who managed to react in time.

"Wall."

Lisalinde stuck up her index finger and gave it a small wag. In an instant, a wall of mana formed between the ball and her friend, preventing the impending impact.

"Huh?"

"Ah!"

The ball lost its momentum as it collided with the magic wall, and it fell to the ground with a bounce. Startled by the sudden development, the female student fell onto her behind.

"Are you all right?" Lisalinde asked.

"Oh yes. Lady Lisalinde... Thank you."

Lisalinde held out her hand to help her up. While there was some sand on her skirt, the girl was otherwise unharmed.

"S-Sorry about that!"

"Hey, that was dangerous!"

The students who'd sent the ball flying raced over with apologetic faces.

"Please be more careful next time," Lisalinde scolded them as she picked the ball up and tossed it over.

"Y-Yeah...sorry..."

Unable to stick around any longer, those students promptly took off from the schoolyard.

Thanks to Lisalinde, the crisis had been averted.

“Lady Lisalinde! You were so quick with that defensive magic back there!”

“I wasn’t able to do a thing!”

“Aha ha, it wasn’t anything special,” Lisalinde said, growing a bit bashful from all the praise.

“That’s Lady Lisalinde for you! The best magician in the academy!”

“A-Aha ha...”

Lisalinde was skilled in magic. She achieved excellent grades, even in the magic combat classes, ranking within the academy’s top five. There were hardly any students who could have activated defensive magic as quickly as she had just now.

Of course, Lisalinde also excelled at academics and martial arts, and even her posture was elegant. Being the young lady of a noble house, she was so perfect it bordered on ridiculous.

“Well then, it’s about time I returned to my work.”

“Oh, certainly. Good luck out there.”

“Yes, thank you.”

With that, she turned her back to the two girls, picked up her watering can, and made her way to a different flower bed, her fluffy blonde hair trailing behind her. The two girls found themselves entranced by the sight of this prim and proper lady walking beside the blooming flowers.

It wasn’t just the two female students, however. That small ruckus had made her the center of attention, and many others found their eyes pinned on Lisalinde.

“She’s beautiful...”

“We’re both girls, but I’m...*charmed* by her...”

“She’s so delicate, but strong too. She’s wonderful...”

“If I had a girl like that...”

“She’s too good for you.”

“Ouch...”

She had everyone’s heart in the palm of her hand. The aspiration of the academy—that was the girl known as Lisalinde.

And so, the curtain closed on a refreshing afternoon.

The next day...

“The hero is here!”

A loud voice boomed from the school gate. The carriage carrying the hero party had arrived at the academy.

Soon, there was a great clamor as many students flocked over. There were those who went all the way to the gate to greet the hero party while others stole glances from afar. The students of the academy were all desperate to catch just a glimpse of the heroes.

The carriage passed through the gate and slowly entered the schoolyard. The students parted to both sides so as not to get in the way as they stared intently. Then, the carriage came to a stop. The academy’s principal, vice principal, and student council president lined up before it.

The door creaked open.

“It’s the hero!”

The world’s shining beacon of hope appeared from within, and the students raised a cheer.

There stood a tall young man with black hair. He was finely featured, his slitted eyes giving the sense of a man who had surmounted countless trials with his own strength. His relaxed walk and stature were striking enough for the surrounding students to swallow their breath.

They appeared one by one from within the carriage: Sylphonia, the country’s heralded princess knight. Melvy, the saint of the Grand Cathedral. The great warrior Rachel, the noble knight Mitter, and the seasoned sorcerer of the Great Laboratory, Lalo.

They were all legendary figures told of in stories and songs.

“Thank you for such a warm welcome. I have been called a hero ever since I drew the holy sword Andros. My name is Cain. I will be in your care for the time being.”

The hero Cain stood before the principal and offered an elegant greeting, entrancing any and all who watched him.

“Hero Cain, you must be tired from your long journey. Please, do use our academy to heal your fatigue, endeavor in your studies, and form lasting relationships with our student body.”

“It is an honor.”

“You there, please take care of their belongings.”

“Yes, sir!”

The students waiting right behind the principal had been tasked with carrying the hero party’s luggage. With brisk and precise movements, they took charge of the bags and unloaded them all from the carriage.

Lisalinde was one of the students chosen to be a bag carrier.

Wh-Whoa...! she thought. *It’s the real hero!*

Her face red, Lisalinde awkwardly moved herself closer to Cain, the hero. Just because the hero had come to the academy didn’t mean it was okay to cause a ruckus and trouble him—she had just warned her friends of this, and yet she had no way to quell the beating of her heart.

“P-Please, hand me that bag...Hero...”

Lisalinde reached out as she nervously tried to take a bag off of the hero’s hands.

But suddenly, Cain’s lips curled into a grin. His tone when he spoke next was completely different from before, now casual and lax.

“Sure, Liz. It’s all yours.”

The height difference forced her to look up a bit to stare into his face.

Cain the hero was smiling. His stiff tone, his stern expression—it had all dissipated. His voice and smile were light, like a mischievous child; he had

become far easier to talk to. It was like this face was for her and for her alone.

Her heart skipped a beat.

She was unable to speak.

Upon hearing his voice, upon seeing his form, Lisalinde could feel heat rising from all over her body. It was like every drop of blood within her had begun to boil. Her face grew hotter and hotter, and her body began to quiver. Just a few words from Hero Cain had dug up something—some heated emotion from deep within her.

The strong impulse raced all around her body.

“Ah...”

By the time she realized it, Lisalinde had grabbed the hem of Cain’s shirt. Cain noticed and peered into her reddened face.

“Umm...”

Why had she done such a thing? Lisalinde didn’t quite know herself. Her body was moving on its own as it attempted to drag the hero towards her almost instinctively.

“What is it?”

“Pl...”

Her heated urges were trying to form themselves as words.

There was something she wanted to say. There was something she *had* to say. It was like she felt something towards him—something that had faded away and then had been brought back in full swing.

“Ple—!”

Strong emotions were overflowing from her innermost depths and burning through her chest.

She brought her face close to Cain, and Cain bent down to accept her words.

No one else could hear. This was an exchange between just the two of them.

She whispered to him.

“Please give me your underpants!” the prim and proper girl said with conviction.



A year prior, there had been another member in the hero party. A magician, in fact. Lisalinde was her name—though most called her Liz.

She was an atavist, an inheritor of demonic traits. She was a human who had strongly manifested the powers of a distant demon ancestor. With this demon's power, she assisted the party as a powerful magician.

However, a year ago, Liz had suffered a terrible wound and lost both her memory and her power in exchange for her recovery.

In order to prevent a then powerless girl from getting wrapped up in any more battles, the hero party had bid her farewell. She had forgotten everything and became a student of the national academy, living her life as a normal human.

Liz was a descendant of a particular breed of demon. Her impulses could not be stopped by anyone, be they enemies or allies. For she had inherited the power of those that inspired obscene dreams in humans and tempted them to darkness. The dream demons of lust—the succubi.

Chapter 1: Present Day—I Am Not a Pervert!

The unimpeded sunlight streamed in through the window. The large auditorium—the pride of the academy—was filled to the brim with onlookers, be they students, teaching staff, or anyone else who had found their way in. All sorts of people were looking forward to what today’s leading man had to say, and they’d all dressed up for the occasion.

Currently, the stage was set for a ceremony to welcome the hero’s party to the academy.

“In a battle with a general of the demon lord’s army, my comrades—Sylphonia, Melvy, and Lalo—were gravely injured. It was thanks only to our good fortune that everyone survived, but as it stands, we must take some time off for recuperation.”

The hall had been adorned with flowers and ornate decorations, yet Cain was still the centerpiece as he took the stage and gave a speech, cool and collected.

“This academy, where we can rest our bodies and spirits while endeavoring to better ourselves, is the perfect environment for us. We can further our studies of healing magic on top of forging bonds with the greatest students this nation has to offer. I am incredibly grateful to have been given this opportunity.”

Cain’s words were smooth, and he spoke in a beautiful voice that tickled the hearts of all who heard him. A red tint spread across the cheeks of everyone in the room.

And among all of that, *I*... Well, *I*...

WAAAAH?!

I held my head.

Why...why...?! Why did I...?!

The same words went round and round and round in my head. I didn’t raise my voice—not by any means. But a cry far greater than what I—Liz—would

consider a mere scream resounded in my head, never petering out for even a second.

AAAAH?!

Cries of regret rose in my chest. The insides of my head were in chaos. *What was it? What had I just said? What exactly did this godforsaken mouth of mine spew in front of the hero?*

“Please give me your underpants!”

Those were the words—nearly the very first words I said to the man.

Whyyyy?! Why did I say that?! Underpants?! Why underpants?! Why did I say that?! Impossible, no way, this is not happening...! There’s no way I would say that! There’s no conceivable reality where I would. Why meeeeeeeee...?!

The moment Cain spoke to me, I’d been driven by an uncontrollable impulse. An uncontainable passion surged within me prompting me to open my mouth as if on instinct.

And then, I went on to ask the hero if I could have his underpants.

Why?!

Seriously... Why?!

I’m not like that! I am not that sort of human being! I am not a pervert who would say such things! I’ll have you know I practice constant discipline! So why?!

Why did that come from my mouth?!

“This is the finest academic institution in the nation of my dear comrade Princess Sylphonia, and my heart is astir as I imagine the life I will lead here. My good ladies and gentlemen, I hope that we will all get along wonderfully. The pleasure is all mine.”

The ceremony solemnly marched on, in complete disregard for my mental state. As Cain lowered his head, the auditorium erupted in applause so great I feared the rumbling would bring the whole place tumbling down.

But I could not clap. I did not have enough composure to clap.

WHYYYYYYY...?!

I was feeling so ashamed I would have writhed in agony if given the chance.

WHYYYYYYYYYYY DID I SAY THAAAAAAAT?!

I was so wrapped up in my own personal concerns there was no possible way I could concentrate on what was going on.

“Huh?!”

By the time I realized it, I was in the classroom. I could see red sunlight filtering in through the winter sky. The sun was already beginning to set.

Yes, I was in the classroom, my head pressed firmly against my desk. Looking at the clock, I saw that the ceremony had ended ages ago. I’d spent the entire day on autopilot, barely conscious of any of it.

The classroom was empty. Everyone had either gone home or headed off to the after-party along with our resident heroes. Right, I did remember a little bit. The welcoming ceremony had gone on for a long time before it transitioned to a stand-up lunch party. Once that was over, we had returned to the classroom, where there had been introductions and whatnot. Then came the after-party, and anyone who wanted to join in on that had gone over to the event hall.

“Hah...” I heaved a heavy sigh as I glanced at the rays of fiery-hot red light pouring in.

What exactly have I been doing all day? I wondered. I’d quivered out of embarrassment and lost my mind...and that was about it. All because of such an incomprehensible word as “underpants.”

I pressed my forehead against the desk again to calm myself.

And that was when it happened—the classroom door swung open.

“Hm?”

“Huh?”

I lifted my head and found myself face-to-face with Cain the hero, who’d just barely crossed the threshold.

“H-Hero...?!”

“Oh, Liz. What are you doing out here?”

The man’s appearance suddenly had my head boiling. I was surprised and panicked. Planting my hands on the desk I’d fallen flat over, I shot up with gusto.

“Ah, umm, you know, err?! Well, yes, you see...! Cain?! Wh-What brings you...here at this...lovely hour...?!”

I was clearly losing my nerve.

“I slipped out of the after-party for some rest. I didn’t think I’d run into you, Liz.”

“Huh? Umm, you, uh...”

You know my name? I wondered. *Come to think of it, hadn’t he also called me Liz back when I offered to carry his bags?*

Cain seemed to realize what he’d just said. “Y-Yeah...sorry. I guess it’s creepy to suddenly call you by a nickname when we’ve only just met. Well, here’s to a long and lasting acquaintanceship, Lady Lisalinde.”

“Oh, no... I don’t really mind whatever you call me... But how do you know my name to begin with?”

Liz was a nickname only people who were quite close to me used. Not that I really minded if others used it too.

Cain scratched at his hair awkwardly. “Oh, that...” he said. “Well, you know... I heard it from the teaching staff. They said you’re from a noble house with a long history, and seeing as we were going to be classmates, I thought I should remember it.”

“I...see...”

For some reason, that sounded like a poorly constructed excuse, but I simply didn’t know how to respond. I mean, it wasn’t like I could think of any other reason he’d know my name.

“Um! So, err! Sir Cain...!” I loudly blurted out his name. “It’s not what you think!”

“Hmm?”

He looked back at me blankly. But this was one thing I simply had to get out of the way. I was desperate to correct my mistake.

“When I said I wanted your underpants, it was a slip of the tongue!”

“Huh?”

“I fumbled over my words... I was really trying to say I want your *wonderful pancakes*! Umm, you know, the edible kind!”

“But wait, why?!” Cain asked, startled. “I’ve never even made pancakes before!”

“E-Even so, I’ve always wanted to eat pancakes made by you, Sir Cain!”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying!”

Cain was stunned. Of course he was—I had no idea what I was saying either. Why was I trying to haggle pancakes out of a hero I was meeting for the first time? Surely he now saw me as an incomprehensible, insane person.

I averted my eyes.

But still...!

But still, it was a hundred times better than “Give me your underpants”! With that, I wouldn’t just be weird and crazy—I would also be a pervert! Yes, I’d go with anything else over that.

There’s no way I’d ever say something so ludicrous anyway. So, it had to be some sort of mistake! I was desperate to correct it, whatever it was originally supposed to be!

“Y-You know, hero, I think you’re overflowing with pancake-making talent!”

“That’s the first time anyone’s ever told me that!”

“I’m sure of it. I just know your pancakes are going to save the world! Mark my words...!”

“What sort of crazy pancake is gonna do that?!”

I was getting incoherent. But I was desperate. Backing down now simply

wasn't an option.

I don't want him to think I'm a pervert! I am a wholesome person! Whatever I said, it was all a mistake!

I convinced myself of this and pressed on.

"N-Now, now, Liz. Calm down." Cain held out his open hand to contain my fervor. "It's all right. I don't think anything of what you said back there."

"R-Really? B-But..."

"That sort of thing? Well, I get that every day. It's fine."

"Every day?!"

What?! What part of that was an everyday occurrence?! Were people demanding his underwear every day?!

"Do you have crazy fans chasing after you or something...?!"

Cain was a martial artist renowned throughout the world. Come to think of it, it wouldn't be strange if he had a bunch of dangerous groupies who were completely indifferent to the trouble they caused. Though it would have been quite notable if that were the case.

"Oh, I wish it were just a fan..."

Judging by his reaction, the truth of the matter was a bit different from what I'd been imagining. His eyes trailed off into the distance. *What's this?* I wondered. For some reason, I felt a deep sorrow emanating from his being. Was that person who demanded his underpants somehow dearer to him than I could have possibly known?

The sunset was starting to sting my eyes.

"Umm... I know I'm an outsider and I shouldn't be sticking my nose where it doesn't belong," I said, pausing to choose my words, "but don't you think you should do something? About that person, I mean."

"I'm glad you agree," Cain said. But for some reason, he was staring at me with eyes filled with scorn.

Hmm...? Why is he looking at me like that? Is it just my imagination?

“Incidentally... Ah... Well, it might be a bit late for that,” he said.

“Yes?”

Cain scratched his head; he seemed to have a difficult time saying whatever was on his mind.

What could it be? A bit late for what?

“That desk you were just sitting at...” he continued.

“What about it?”

“It...happens to be mine.”

“Huh...?”

I surveyed the classroom. Sure enough, I wasn’t at my seat. My desk was three to the side and two forward. This was, as I recalled, a seat saved for transfer students. Meaning, now it was Cain’s.

“...”

Although my mind had been hazy all day, I managed to dig up some memories from a corner of my mind. After the hero party had been welcomed, Cain and his allies came to this classroom where we held homeroom. Cain had definitely been sitting in this seat for that.

“.....”

“.....”

The silence continued.

Which means...what, exactly? In my absent state of mind, I’d somehow gone out of my way to transfer myself to the hero’s seat before collapsing over it? My cheek and forehead had been pressing against his desk...?

Ah... I drooled a bit.

“...”

“.....”

I could feel the blood shooting up to my face.

“WAAAAAH?!”

I had no choice but to scream.

“Y-Y-You have it all wrong! This is...! It’s a mishap! A m-mistake! Yes, this is all some sort of mistake...!”

“No, umm, it’s fine... I’m used to these eccentricities. They’re pretty much an everyday occurrence...”

Please don’t console me like that! I mean, I know I’m not one to talk, but...!

“You’re wrong! This isn’t me... It’s not...! I’m not like this! It’s the work of a demon! I’m sure this is all the work of a demon!”

“Well... You might have a point,” Cain said as he looked away from me, staring into the distance as though that was the only way he could respond.

My entire body was shaking in embarrassment. My face was bright red, so terribly, terribly hot it was unbearable. I felt like I was going to die from shame.

There were tears in my eyes.

“WAAAAAA-aaaaaaah...!”

“Ah...?! Liz?! Hey, Liz...!”

My eyes teary, my nose dribbling snot, I took off.

Where had it all gone wrong? It was all my fault, but I hadn’t the slightest inkling of an idea why it had come to this.

“Hey! Liz!”

Cain called out to stop me. But I couldn’t stop. Farther, farther... I ran and ran, off into the sunset.

Why? Just what exactly had happened? What led to this?

My days of suffering and ecstasy had begun.

* * * * *

The town was simply called Academy Town. It was a town built with Forst Academy at its core, and it provided the necessary environment for all the students who attended.

Its large-scale shopping district supplied all the books and stationary

necessary for study, as well as all the necessities for daily life. There were also clinics to manage the health of the student body.

For the students' training, there was even a branch of the adventurers' guild equipped with a teleporter that linked to some dungeons. The students would often challenge themselves here for practical training.

The academy wasn't just a high school; there were elementary and middle school divisions, as well as a university and even a preschool. It housed a wide range of teaching institutions.

After all, this was the institution that the country had invested the most resources into, and there were hardly any inconveniences one would face when it came to studies. The entire town existed solely to support the students' growth.

But owing to the sheer number of students, there were inevitably some who used these facilities for things outside of their intended purposes. Those who did not invest their efforts into academics or club work, and who put their time towards less productive endeavors.

"Oh, you're so dashing, hero!"

"Th-Thanks..."

A sickly sweet voice resounded through the classroom. A female student with pink hair had wrapped herself around Cain's arm, fawning all over him.

"You're so wonderful—what's a little Aina to do?" the student said, apparently referring to herself. "You'd better take responsibility for this!"

Cain said nothing.

This student putting on a flirtatious act was named Aina. She kept a firm grip to ensure Cain did not run away as she pressed his arm into her chest. It could not have been any more blatant that Aina was trying to seduce our hapless hero.

"My word, what a shameful display!"

"Wasn't she trying to curry favor with Duke Reston just the other day?"

“Now that the hero’s here, she immediately shifted her target. She’s a threat to the very dignity of this academy!”

Aina did not have a terribly good reputation among her peers. She hardly put any effort into studying or learning magic—which should have been her duty as a student—and was instead mostly eager to bolster her faction within the academy. This didn’t earn her much respect from those around her.

“Oh, hero. I heard you obtained a wealth of silver and gold from the depths of the labyrinth. Are you rich?”

“W-Well... That might have happened, I guess...”

“Oh, Aina doesn’t know what to do!” she gasped, referring to herself again in the third person.

About what? the people around her silently spat.

“M-Ms. Aina... Please get off of me.”

“Oh, you don’t have to be so embarrassed, hero! That’s just how it is between us, isn’t it?”

Cain was clearly at a loss as Aina put even more strength into her grip.

“Lady Lisalinde! Don’t you think you should give that girl a stern talking to? The dignity of our academy hinges on it!”

“That’s right! The hero looks quite troubled!”

Unable to watch a second longer, my classmates brought the matter straight to me. That said...

“Yeah... Yeah...”

That was the least of my worries.

I held my head and groaned from my actual seat. My true foe was not Aina—it was this mysterious something that had made a home for itself within me.

“Wh-What’s the matter with Lady Lisalinde?”

“She looks like she’s in pain...”

I am in pain.

Ever since the hero had transferred in yesterday, my strange behavior kept repeating itself. I'd incomprehensibly asked for his underpants and subconsciously stuck myself to his chair and desk. Something inside of me was causing me to act like a pervert.

That can't be! It has to be a mistake! There's no way I would ever do that!

I am a wholesome person!

"Aaah... Aaaah..."

"Wh-What seems to be the matter? Lady Lisalinde..."

"D-Did something happen?"

My classmates were all worried about me. But I simply didn't have it in me to deal with Aina.

I sighed.

And so, I made my way to the end of the school day, my condition showing no signs of improvement. In order to discipline myself, I decided to engage in a bit of volunteer cleaning work. I picked up trash littered around the campus, hoping to cleanse my soul along with the school.

"Haaah..."

But again, I sighed. Recalling my actions from yesterday, I could not escape my own gloom.

I wasn't as bad as Aina, but even I wanted to grow closer to Cain and his comrades. If possible, I wanted him to have a positive impression of me, and though I knew I was insignificant by comparison, I hoped to help him out in some way.

But what was that yesterday?

Underpants? Inconceivable. His impression of me was surely at rock bottom.

I'm really not that sort of person...

I was still feeling quite out of it as I began cleaning... To be quite honest, I was in perfect health. Even better than that, even—my mana flow seemed exceptionally good today. In my magic practical lessons, I'd manage to draw out

my spells with even greater firepower than ever before.

It was almost like my pervy harassment of Cain had given me strength...though that was just absurd.

I heaved another sigh.

Anyway, my body *was* in perfect condition, but my mind not so much. *I've lost count of how many times I've sighed by now*, I thought as I headed behind the gymnasium, where there was often quite a bit of litter.

"Hmm...?"

That's when I noticed it—the smell of a cigar on the breeze. I could see white smoke rising as well. Someone was smoking behind the gym.

Outside of a small sectioned-off area, the campus had a total ban on smoking. If someone disregarded this to smoke in secret, it was up to me to give them a warning. I put aside all my gloom and took in a deep breath before turning the corner.

"Hey! Who do you think you are, smoking here?!"

"Whoa!"

"Eh?!"

The smoker was exposed—and I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Cain?"

"Ah..."



The one holding a smoldering cigar with smoke pouring from his mouth was the talk of the town—the hero. He looked at me awkwardly with a furrowed brow.

“S-Sir Cain...? What are you doing here?”

He didn’t reply.

I was taken aback.

The world knew the hero Cain as a pleasant, affable young man. He was always polite and elegant in every gesture. He had a reputation for being humble and sincere. Surely, he wasn’t the sort of person who’d hide behind the gym for a smoke.

“Well, I guess there’s nothing to hide around you...”

“Huh?”

Even with me chastising him, Cain didn’t stop smoking. He kept the cigar between his teeth and took in a big puff. The cut tip of the cigar glowed hot and red as fresh air rushed through it. Cain enjoyed it all the while.

“I’ve always been this sorta guy.”

“What?”

His tone was a bit lower than it had been when I talked to him the day before.

Cain went on, “Well no shit. Sure, they made a right ruckus about me being the *hero* after I pulled the holy sword, but before all that hullabaloo, I was just some country bumpkin who only knew how to swing a sword around. You can take a farm boy outta the farm, but you can’t take the farm outta the boy. You get where I’m coming from?”

“Huh? Huuuh?”

“That’s just how I talk,” Cain said, flashing a bit of a mean-spirited smile.

“I-Is it really...?”

“Pretty much.”

This wasn’t just a matter of tone; he had completely changed up his way of

talking. His sudden transformation had me dumbfounded.

“B-But everyone says the hero is refreshing, elegant, and courteous!”

“Well yeah, everyone starts mouthing off at me if I don’t play the part. Always on about how ‘you don’t look like a hero,’ or ‘you don’t talk like a hero.’ That’s all got jack squat to do with battle, but they’re still hell-bent on dragging me down. Those nobles are a real pain, good grief.”

I was speechless. I’d never seen this side of the hero before.

“But if I keep snapping back at them and they cut off their support, it’ll be an even bigger pain. So I gotta play the good boy when everyone’s watching. Guess that kinda just makes me a pushover.”

“I-I’m shocked...”

“Don’t you go snitchin’.”

Cain turned to me and grinned. It wasn’t the refreshing smile I’d seen the day before; it was a shrewd, bratty look. And yet, his smile was also alluring and genuine.

I giggled. “I won’t, but how should I put this...?”

“Hmm?”

“This seems a lot more like you. That’s the feeling I’m getting right now.”

It wasn’t like I’d known him for a long time, nor did we have any special relationship... It just felt like this brusque attitude fit him better.

“Really? You think so?”

“Yes, strangely enough.”

“I see. You might be right...”

And with that, Cain removed the cigar—which had burnt a bit shorter now—from his mouth. He pressed the lit portion against the ground to put out the embers.

I opened the garbage bag in my hands, and he lightly tossed it inside.

“Still, talking to you like this feels a bit—what’s the word?—bizarre.”

“Huh? Why would you say that?”

“Mm, never mind. Don’t worry about it.”

Cain shook his head.

Why, though? I don’t really get it...

“More importantly, there’s that Aina girl in our class... Liz, can’t you do something about her? Having a thot like that hovering around me is just trouble, plain and simple.”

“Wh-What am I supposed to do about it? H-Honestly, I think that’s beyond what I’m capable of...”

“No, well, we happen to know someone who’s got her beat hands down on thottery. Maybe we can overwhelm her.”

“A bigger thot than Aina...? Ahem! Umm, I mean... You have someone who can be a bit problematic as a woman, I take it?”

Is he talking about the same person as yesterday? The one who makes “Please give me your underpants” an everyday thing...?!

“I-I know I shouldn’t stick my head into someone else’s business, but if she’s a bigger problem child than Aina, isn’t that a little...no, *quite* problematic?”

Cain didn’t reply.

“Why are you staring at me? Sir Cain...?”

For some reason, he was looking at me with pity and disdain. *I-I don’t really get it.*

I retrieved the cigar he’d tossed into my garbage bag. “I might not be able to personally do anything about Aina, but... At the very least, I would recommend changing the spot you use for smoking. The campus is generally nonsmoking, but there is a designated area next to the staff room.”

“Don’t be stupid. If someone sees the hero smoking, they’ll start heckling me again,” Cain scoffed.

I playfully stuck the unlit cigar between my own teeth. “It must be rough...having the title of hero,” I said.

“Pretty much. I’m glad you understand.”

Cain shrugged and I giggled.

Everyone had something to hide. The hero shouldered the burden of being the world’s beacon of hope, and had to hide his true self to keep it up. But I’d coincidentally been able to catch a glimpse of the real him. Although it was incredibly selfish on my part, this simple fact made me happy.

“Are you sure you don’t have to put on an act in front of me?” I asked him.

“I never intended to,” he said with a laugh.

I hadn’t planned for it, but I’d come to know his secret. I wanted to form a relationship with him where neither of us had to put on an act.

A warm smell wafted off of the cigar in my mouth.

“...”

“What’s wrong?”

Cain was staring at me, blinking as though in disbelief. *What could it be?*

“No...you pulled it off so casually that I failed to point it out, but...”

“Yes...?”

Cain pointed at his own mouth. “You really shouldn’t go around putting other people’s cigar butts in your mouth.”

“Pardon...?”

For a moment, I couldn’t understand what he was saying. I touched my lips.

“Huh...?”

My fingers came against the cigar he had smoked and thrown in the trash.

“Hmm...?”

So, what did this mean...exactly? Umm... I was chewing on Cain’s leftover cigar butt?

“...”

In short... I’d subconsciously dug through the trash for his garbage and put it

in my mouth?

“.....”

“.....”

That’s almost like I’m...

“Wait, am I a *pervert*??!”

I screamed and screamed, hurriedly pulling the cigar out and returning it to the trash bag.

“You have it all wrong! It’s not like that, Sir Cain! This is, you know! It’s some sort of mistake! I’m definitely not that sort of person! It’s true!”

“Well, everyone’s got a thing or two they like to keep hidden. Just like me.”

“That’s not it! Please believe me!”

He let out a dry laugh.

You’re wrong! I really am a wholesome person! I’ve never done anything indecent, not once in my life! So why?! Why have I been acting so strange lately?!

“That’s not it! That’s really not it!”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it, I get it.”

“Aaaah! I don’t want this anymoooooorrrre!”

“Well, I keep quiet about you, and you keep quiet about me. Sound fair?”

“You have me all wroooooonnnng!”

I hung my head and wailed, while Cain watched me with an amused smile on his face.

Something’s been off about me ever since the heroes arrived, I concluded as I clutched my head yet again.

Chapter 2: Then—Might I Offer You a Succubus in These Trying Times?

It happened back when Cain had just been selected by the holy sword. Back when he had only just started his travels as a hero.

“The humans of this town are falling ill?”

“Yes, Hero Cain... None of us have any idea what is going on.”

He had been summoned to the manor of a certain marquis. He hadn't thought much of it when he visited this town; it was merely a stop along the way. But as soon as the marquis caught wind of the newly appointed hero's arrival, he came to him with a rather peculiar request.

According to the marquis, there had been several cases where people were mysteriously falling ill in the night. When morning came around, they would be too weak to even rise out of bed, with absolutely no memory of anything that had happened the night before. Most worryingly, the cause was still unknown, and the incidents had been occurring for quite a while.

It afflicted men and women alike, and though there had been no deaths thus far, there was already a very lengthy list of victims.

“If the demon lord's army is plotting something in the shadows, then we have no way of doing anything about it. I'll pay you an ample reward. Hero, is there anything you can do about it?”

“Well, I'll have to take a little look before I can say for sure. Give me a bit of time,” Cain said before taking a puff of his cigar. And with that, he had accepted the nobleman's request.

“Th-Thank you...” The marquis lowered his head. “My daughter will show you around town and provide any support you need for your investigation. Please don't hesitate to ask her for help.”

“Daughter?”

“Liz! Come in!”

On the marquis’s order, a girl entered the room.

She was a lovely girl with long blonde hair that fell in fluffy waves. She was fifteen; a sweet young thing with the charm of a flower bud that had only just begun to open up.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, hero. I am the eldest daughter of this household, and my name is Lisalinde. I look forward to working with you,” the girl said, offering an elegant curtsy.

At the very sight of her, Cain was enraptured.

That was how the two of them met.

And so the days of investigation began.

“Another fruitless day, huh...”

“There really are no leads, it seems...”

It wasn’t yet noon when they returned to the marquis’s manor, which had become their base of operations. Cain let out a deep sigh as he fell into a chair.

Nearly a week had passed since the pair had begun their investigation.

The weakened victims would always be found in the morning. Thus, it could be surmised that the incidents were happening at night, and whenever night came around, Cain and Liz would split up to patrol the town. However, they had yet to grab hold of a single clue.

Their days and nights had been swapped around, and this was now the time when they went to sleep. Cain leaned his head back.

“My humblest apologies, Sir Cain. I am using up your valuable time, yet there is absolutely nothing to show for it...”

“No, it’s not like it’s your fault, Lisalinde,” he said as Liz went to brew him a cup of black tea. “Anyway, slow and steady, as they say. If ya rush through it, you’ll miss what shoulda been obvious.”

“Hero... I do not think it is a good thing for someone of your magnitude to

waste so much time on such an incident in our humble town. If it seems like the investigation will drag on much further, please forget about us and press on.”

“Well, just give me a bit more... I think I’m getting somewhere...” Cain said as he took a sip of Liz’s tea. His eyes opened wide. “Ah! This is delicious! Seriously!”

“Th-Thank you.” Liz gave an elegant smile. “Being able to properly brew tea is only good sense for a noble.”

“Good sense? How so?”

“It is one of the things I was taught.”

“You gotta study tea preparation?”

I never knew tea could taste this good, Cain thought with surprise. He lifted his face and looked at Liz.

“Yes. To be a noble is to pursue grace and dignity. To this end, I must devote myself to many facets of culture. I have been very thorough in my studies.”

“Hmm? So what can you do, anyways?”

“I attend classes on piano, violin, tea, and flower arranging. Then there’s watercolor painting, horseback riding, swordsmanship, magic, academic studies, etiquette, cooking, and needlework among others...”

“That’s a lot!” Cain quivered. “Seriously, what’s with that? I’d get fed up in no time. Don’t you get tired?”

“Aha ha... It is certainly tiring, but an understanding of culture is vital to a noble. I must do my utmost...”

“Ick, sounds suffocating. I’m glad I’m not a noble, then,” Cain said with a frown.

“Ah...aha ha...” Liz laughed wryly.

Despite his incredulity, that did not stop Cain from fully enjoying the delicious tea that had been the fruit of Liz’s studies.

“I-It is a lot of work, yes, but I find it quite fulfilling,” she continued. “Cooking and needlework are important as a part of bridal training as well.”

“Hm? Bridal training? You gettin’ married?”

“Oh, no. I don’t have any plans at the moment. However, father has said it’s about time I found someone.”

“Hmm...”

“Sir Cain?”

Evidently thinking hard about something, Cain folded his arms and pressed his body into the backrest. He closed his mouth, temporarily putting a pause on the conversation.

Then, struck by a stroke of brilliance, Cain grinned and turned to Liz.

“Hey, Lisalinde...”

“Yes?”

She could practically see his desire to tease her burning in his eyes.

“How about I take ya, then?”

“Wha?!”

Liz was petrified by the sudden proposal. Her long blonde hair shuddered and her brow oozed with sweat, her face turning redder by the second.

“What?! Wh-Wha...? C-C-C-Cain...?!”

“Wah ha ha ha! It’s just a joke, I’m joking!” He cackled, his teeth showing.

“Ah!”

Liz’s eyes opened wide as she was taken aback.

“Ha ha ha! You’re all red!”

“Mrph... Mrrrrngh...!”

Cain sipped at his tea, a satisfied look on his face. Liz puffed out her cheeks, a vein bulging angrily on her forehead.

“I don’t think you should be making such jokes! You have wounded me, deeply!”

“Ha ha ha, my bad, my bad.” He laughed. “How about ya forgive me?”

“Hmph.” Liz was having none of it. She turned away, her puffed cheeks red with anger now rather than embarrassment. But soon, she hung her head and muttered, “Please don’t provoke me as I am right now. I won’t be able...to hold back...”

“Hmm?”

Her voice was faint, and Cain failed to catch most of what she was saying. She gripped at the hem of her dress like she was holding something in.

Then, she raised her head and smiled. “It’s nothing. I was just thinking how you are quite the womanizer.”

“I said sorry, okay? In the first place, you’re a marquis’s daughter, and I’m some countryside brat from who knows where. It was never gonna work out, right?”

“But aren’t you the hero, Sir Cain?”

“That’s what they call me, but I haven’t done anything important,” Cain explained, waving his hand around dismissively. “And most people don’t see me as anything yet. I’d reckon a large majority don’t even know I exist. But just you watch. I’ll rise up and achieve greatness. My name will echo across the world.”

“Oh dear... You’re more ambitious than I thought.”

“I just don’t like bein’ selflessly devoted to a cause. Just doesn’t sit right with me. So, if I’ve gotta defeat this demon lord guy, I guess I might as well get famous while I’m at it.”

Cain’s eyes were practically sparkling. They were filled with desire, yet were somehow still strong and pure. Lisalinde swallowed her breath. *Perhaps this person really will save the world*, she couldn’t help but think.

“Phew,” Cain sighed softly. “Hey, Lisalinde, can you teach me a bit of etiquette?”

“Beg your pardon...?”

That came out of nowhere, she thought, staring at him blankly.

“Well, you know. As I said, I’m still a no-name. A stupid kid from the sticks who just tugged at some sword. Each time I meet a noble, they make snide

comments about how I've got no manners or etiquette, and it's a huge pain in the ass."

"They...must be very rude people, to disrespect the hero so..."

"Well, I do think they're makin' a mountain out of a molehill here."

Cain leaned even farther into the backrest, balancing back with the front two legs of the chair in the air. His posture certainly was somewhat lacking in elegance.

"But if I pick up just a bit of etiquette, I think it'll clear away some of the snark. It's a huge pain, but right now I'm the world's hope. I think I should act the part a bit."

"That's..."

"What?" Feeling embarrassed after he'd said it, Cain pouted. But Liz was smiling.

"That's a very good thing. I think..."

"You think so...?"

"Yes, if you'll have me, I would love to assist you."

And with that, their etiquette lessons began. Even in the midst of a dreadful incident, they found some time to spend in peace.

It was midnight, on a night some time after that.

The town was quiet and slumbering, with the moon being the only light left to illuminate the streets. In a corner of this quiet town, a man and a woman confronted one another. There was danger in the air.

"So, it was you all along..."

"..."

A demon had just tried to assault a man, and the hero Cain put a stop to it, finally unmasking the culprit behind the mysterious illness.

Cain looked down upon the girl who knelt before him, pointing his sword at her.

It was Liz.

“No wonder we could never find any leads...”

Liz was silent.

She had been investigating the incident alongside Cain, so she had a complete grasp of all his movements. She just had to make sure they split up for investigations and to make sure she did not go where he would.

But Liz had fallen for Cain’s trap. Cain had lied to her about where he had planned on patrolling and had instead followed her in secret. Now he’d managed to corner her.

“Why are you doing this?”

“...!” Liz pounced at Cain. She used the mana she had stockpiled as a succubus to unleash her assault, and a fierce battle unfolded between the two of them—a furious flurry of slashes and spells.

And in the end, it was Cain who came out on top.

Her body beaten and tattered, Liz lay limply on the ground. Cain cautiously walked up beside her.

“I’m...done for. It’s over.”

“Huh?”

Liz spoke in a wavering voice, barely louder than the breath escaping her. “As a noble, I did my utmost to learn etiquette. I studied music and cooking... I was honest and upright, fulfilling my noble duty... Diligently, earnestly, I built up my skills and my character... So, why...?!”

Cain remained silent.

“Why did I have to be born an atavist? A succubus?!”

Liz began to weep where she lay.

She hadn’t always had her succubus powers. She had lived her life as a normal noble girl at the start. However, as her body grew, her succubus powers and passions grew with it. The entity that dwelled within her had all too easily destroyed her life.

“I tried to live a proper life, honest and righteous... But my body is lewd! It’s vile! There’s nothing I can do anymore! I can’t stop myself!”

Cain was quiet.

“I can’t stop it...” Again and again, she had attacked people. “It’s over for me... I can’t live as a noble anymore... The succubus within me just won’t allow it.”

“...”

“Please, just kill me...”

Liz buried her face in her arms as she sobbed. Everything she had endeavored for, everything she’d built up to that point had been brought down by her carnal lusts. She’d done her best to contain them, but this was beyond her control.

Cain slowly stooped down over her.

“Hey, Liz...”

She didn’t respond.

“How about you find yourself about five good men to live with? Then, you can live whatever degenerate life you want. How’s that sound?”

“Huh...?”

The hero had just suggested something preposterous. Liz—startled as could be—stared up at him through bleary eyes.

“Yeah, five or ten or however many it takes. Anyways, get yourself some lovers. Then you spend all day and night rotating between them. You’ll be satisfied as a succubus, and I’m sure the men will be pretty satisfied too. Or women, right? Whichever floats your boat. I’m sure you’ll have a fun life.”

“Umm...excuse me...?!” Liz cried out, hysterical. “There’s no possible way I could do that!”

“You can do it! I mean, all this time, there hasn’t been a single death!”

“B-But what about my morals as a noble?! Having five or ten lovers—what happened to good sense and virtue?!”

Hearing this, Cain cracked a grin. “You can throw that nonsense to the dogs.”

Liz was taken aback.

Cain, meanwhile, put a hand on her head and gently patted her. “It’s fine, even if you let your desires get the better of you. It’s fine if you’re lewd, or indecent, or a pervert... You can let your true self out. You can be honest with yourself. It doesn’t matter what anyone says—just laugh in their faces.”

She didn’t respond.

“Just do that, and I’m sure...someday you’ll find someone who accepts you, just as you are.” Cain went on, “You’ll never find someone who’ll accept the real you if you keep hiding it away.”

A light lit up in Liz’s eyes.

“You need to love yourself more, Liz,” Cain said with a laugh.

The heavy, painful existence she had been living for so long suddenly felt so much lighter. Her night had just opened up to dawn.

Thus, the mysterious incident plaguing the town was resolved. The hero received his handsome reward from the marquis, and after resting a bit, he readied himself to head to the next town. He intended to resume his lonesome journey, but...

“Caaain! Wait for me!”

Cain was taken aback.

A succubus wearing the standard black pointed hat and robes of a magician was running after him. There was a hefty travel bag on her back.

“Sir Cain...!”

“...”

Liz’s eyes were sparkling as she stared up to lock eyes with his tall stature—a complete change from the dark expression that had once been carved into her face.

“How about a succubus to accompany you along the way?!”

“I don’t want one!”

Cain tried to brush her aside, but Liz desperately coiled herself around his arm.

“Why, you’re the one who said it! I need to be more honest with myself!”

“Augh, shut it! Be honest, sure, but go do it somewhere where it doesn’t bother me!”

“You brute! You monster! Take responsibility!”

She squawked and grabbed at him, and a fight began. Her pretty blonde hair wafted behind her.

“I’m the hero’s exclusive succubus now! I won’t get it on with any other men anymore!”

“Not my problem! Go do that somewhere else!”

“Oh, what an enviable hero you are! To think, you’re a man who can make a succubus your pet! All the men across the world will be crazy jealous of you! Yes! Please go crazy with me!”

“Having a succubus pet won’t improve my status at all!”

“Oh, but maybe I should listen to what you said the other day. Should I get myself a few women?! Then, it won’t be cheating!”

“Yeah, yeah, just get off of me!”

Liz laughed.

The morning sun blessed their journey.

This was the very moment when the hero Cain’s troubles began.

* * * * *

From then on, the hero’s journey proceeded smoothly. He had found reliable comrades in Sylphonia, Melvy, Mitter, Rachel, and Lalo. With them by his side, Cain took down the demon lord’s subordinates one after the next.

His exploits as a hero received great support from the public. He had saved many people and was raised up by them in turn. However...

“Sir Cain! I’ve come to take your underpants!”

“...”

There happened to be a succubus leeching off the hero’s party.

“...”

“What’s with you? Cain? Why are you caressing me with a gaze like you’re looking at spoiled milk?”

“Well, the latter half was right, but I sure as hell ain’t caressing you.”

“If you look at me with that much scorn...you’ll excite me... ≡”

“I swear...”

Liz wriggled while wrapping her arms around her own chest. After the incident that had occurred in her hometown, Liz had gotten more honest with herself and regained her vigor along their travels.

However, she had perhaps become a little *too* honest.

“Fine, I get it, so stop with that... Here, take the laundry already.”

“Thank you very much.”

Cain let out a big sigh at the problem child who happened to be his comrade. He held out the bundle of laundry that had grown over the journey.

Her demanding of his underpants had simply been her way of asking for his laundry. Within the party, Liz would take the initiative with chores, tackling the cooking and laundry among other tasks. The food she made was delicious, and it always served as a bit of reprieve for these weary souls. She diligently ensured that everyone’s clothes were clean, which helped to prevent illness.

“Well...despite everything, I am thankful for all you do.”

“Oh, what praise, you’re making me blush. Should I interpret that as an invitation to your bed tonight?”

“I said no such thing.”

Whenever she opened her mouth, she would constantly be spewing nonsense.

“Make sure you tell me if it ever feels like too much of a burden. We’re all ready to take on our share of work, okay? Well, I guess none of us know how to sew, but everything else.”

“Hee hee, I appreciate the sentiment, Sir Cain. But housework is like a hobby to me. I enjoy it...” Liz gave a gentle smile. “The reason being...men love a woman who can do housework! If you want to nab a man, you must first aim for his stomach!”

“Now that’s a refreshing reason!”

“How about a succubus who’s wife and mother material to accompany you for the rest of your life? How does that sound, Cain?”

“I don’t see what part of you would make a good mother.” Weary of this ridiculous exchange, Cain lit a cigar. “Ah, right, apparently, this inn will do the laundry for you if you pay ’em. How about we leave it to them so you can get a bit of rest?”

“What are you talking about?! Seriously! Are you really going to deprive me of the joy of gathering up your dirty laundry and sniffing your shirts and underpants?!”

“I knew you were up to no good, woman!”

As it turned out, Liz’s housework served a practical purpose for her on top of being a hobby.

“You’ve got more comrades now, and that means more panties from Sylphie and Melvy! I’m living a good life...”

“E-Even the girls’ panties... No, I always knew you were a pervert, but...”

“Honestly, man or woman doesn’t really matter to me. I’ll eat them all,” Liz said, looking awfully pleased with herself.

“E-Even if, for the sake of argument, I don’t mind you harassing me...you’d better not do anything to Mitter or the other guys. Don’t go destroying the lives of people with partners and families.”

“No need to worry! You’re the only man I’ll ever lay a hand on! Believe it or not, this succubus here is surprisingly devoted.”

“Ah... I don’t know if I should be relieved or mad at you for that one.”

“How about a devoted and domestically oriented succubus to accompany you for the rest of your life? How does that sound, Cain?”

“Please, I’d never call you domestically oriented! Fool.”

“Ah. ≡ Please insult me more... ≡”

Liz wriggled.

“Well, getting serious here, I’m counting on you to do your job as a magician too. It’d be stupid if you were all tired out from housework and got injured or something. I really worry sometimes.”

“Yes, so please give me your underpants! Just sniffing them up will have my arousal meter shooting to the roof! I’ll be stronger than ever before!”

“You little...! Quit giving excuses that make it hard for me to refuse!”

Liz’s succubus abilities could be raised by mere arousal as well. Even if she did not collect life force directly, performing sexual harassment and other assorted perverted deeds did actually replenish her mana. Her targets did not have to be men—women were well within the scope of her abilities.

That wasn’t to say she wasn’t collecting energy directly on top of that...

“Heh heh. ≡”

“...”

Liz sat beside Cain, leaning her body against his.

“Sir Cain, what do you want for dinner tonight?”

“Salisbury steak.”

“Yes of course. I’ll prepare the finest demi-glace sauce for you.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Cain didn’t push Liz away when she nestled up to him like this. He was staunch when it came to sexual harassment, but he didn’t grumble when she was genuinely affectionate.

“If you keep this succubus by your side, you can eat delicious food for all your

life.”

“That does sound like...an appealing proposal.”

Cain put a hand to his forehead and pretended like he was thinking hard on the matter.

His comrades all recognized that Liz was an excellent cook. The fact that they could always eat delicious food even in the middle of a long journey was a great comfort to them. It was like nutrition for their souls.

“I’m not saying you have to make me your wife. Whatever shape it takes, as long as you keep me around, I’ll happily flex my cooking chops for you. That’s right! You can keep me as a pet, or as a slave...!”

“Quit it!”

“A slave, oh yes! In fact, please make me your slave!”

“I’m telling you to stop it!”

It took only a moment for the tranquil mood between them to fall apart. Liz was on another rampage.

“Huh...?! Wait, don’t tell me you’d treat this succubus more lowly than even a slave?! Is livestock what you’re looking for?! Do you want me to sell my body to earn money for you to splurge on other women and gamble the rest away?!”

“The guy you’re describing is the absolute worst!”

“But being treated that roughly...is honestly exciting... ≡”

“Ah, for crying out loud. How do I rein this girl in?” Cain muttered. “Hey...”

“Huh...?”

He wrapped a hand around her back and pulled her shoulder in. Their bodies had already been touching, and now they were being pushed together even more forcefully.

“Wah?!”

“Quit suggesting this stupid stuff. You just need to shut up and cook delicious food.”

“...”

“Right by my side. Forever. Okay?”

Liz’s face flushed red. She looked up at Cain’s face and saw that he had become quite red himself. And as she saw this, it made her own face even hotter.

“Yes...” she meekly muttered. “I’ll do just that...”

Cain stared at her.

“This succubus is...wife and mother material, after all...”

They spent a long, quiet time just like that, their faces red, their shoulders pressed together. The sun set, and this moment of serenity passed by. It was a moment of warmth in their days of harsh battle.

That day, dinner was a little later than usual.

Chapter 3: Now—The Grace of Sylphonia

Let me just make one thing very clear!

I am a wholesome human being...

Although I've been acting inexplicably strangely ever since the hero came along, that is not who I really am. In the eighteen years since I was born, I have lived an exemplary life as a high-class noble. I endeavored in my studies, I upheld courtesy in every form, and I fulfilled all the noble duties I was born with.

Apparently... I suffered a heavy injury when the demon lord's army attacked a year ago. Thanks to this, roughly two years' worth of my memory has become quite hazy. Seeing how it's *memory loss*, it might seem blatantly obvious, but I don't really remember what happened then. My mother and father told me, "Nothing really changed during that time," and, "You lived as a normal noble," as they wiped away their tears, so that was probably precisely what had happened.

And that goes to show that I have constantly upheld my dignity for eighteen long years.

Certainly, some pervy, salacious thoughts did cross my mind now and then, but that happens to any and everyone.

So I will say it again!

I am a wholesome human being!

And with that said... I decided to diligently apply myself to my studies.

"Hyah...!"

"Hah...!"

Spells flew wildly around the academy's fighting arena in every direction. Today's lesson was practical combat training. We each found a partner and a

spot on the vast grounds, where we would exchange magical blasts in an intense sparring match. The other students let out spirited cries as they fired off spell after spell.

Fire magic, ice magic, and lightning magic. The arena was bathed in a prismatic array of lights. Each sparring zone had been sectioned off with a barrier, so thankfully you'd never be struck by someone else's stray shot.

If you slacked off in this class, then you would fall short when push came to shove. Perhaps you'd die at the hands of monsters, or the demon lord's army. Everyone was serious about this.

"Hraaah...!"

"I'm not going to lose here!"

This was, additionally, the first practical combat lesson we had since the hero party transferred to the academy. Everyone was even more motivated than usual, as Cain and his comrades watched closely over how their classmates performed.

There was actually a certain rumor on the wind. Apparently, the hero party had come to the academy to search for anyone that might be a valuable asset. That they were scouting for any promising individuals to aid in their journey to defeat the demon lord.

If the hero party recognized you, you could proudly join their ranks as one of their exalted comrades. And so, everyone was fired up, the spells flying around larger and more potent than usual.

"Oh nooo! You're sooo strong, Princess Sylphonia! Aina is shocked!"

"..."

Aina, the very same girl who had been trying to seduce Cain the other day, had fallen on her behind. She was sparring with the princess knight Sylphonia, who was one of the hero's powerful comrades as well as the princess of our country.

Sylphonia had gallant features, with her long red hair tied into a tight ponytail. She was a woman who embodied pride and elegance in her very

posture.

The wound she had suffered while fighting the demon lord's army had yet to heal, and her body was wrapped in bandages. Apparently, she had joined in to get a bit of light exercise—just enough to loosen up her body and aid her rehabilitation.

Even so...she took down student after student with her overwhelming might—as one might expect of one of the world's greatest fighters.

"You're way too amazing, Princess! Aina is moved to tears! Oh, what can't you do, Princess Sylphoniaaaa?!"

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes! I doooo! The demon lord could never be a match for you with such strength! Oh, you're the best!"

Aina borrowed Sylphonia's hand to stand back up. But she rose with a little too much momentum, her body staggering forward and pressing firmly against the princess while she kept a tight hold on her hand.

No matter how you looked at it, they were far too close.

Aina looked at Sylphonia's face with upturned eyes. "You really are cool, Princess Sylphonia. Aina wants to watch you from up close, forever and ever," she whispered in a sickly sweet, fawning voice.

"Tsk..."

"She's after the princess now. What a creep."

"She's really trying to wedge herself into the hero's party."

The snide remarks came from everywhere. It was blatantly obvious that Aina was trying to earn the heroes' recognition, not through combat ability but flirtation. Well, it's not like she was doing anything illegal... But it certainly was not improving anyone's opinion of her.

"Princess Sylphonia, please teach Aina all you know, from sunrise to sunset!"

Aina gave the princess a vibrant smile. However...

"I'd like to focus on my own training. Could you try someone else?" Sylphonia

said as she turned her eyes away, clearly uninterested.

“Huh? D-Don’t be like that! Aina would love to get to know you better and better! You were very beautiful as you fought... Err, I would love to be attacked by you!”

Sylphonia began to sweat a bit as Aina drew even closer to her.

“I want to see more of your cool side! Is that so wrong, Sylphie?”

“...!”

Sylphonia reacted the moment she heard that name. *Sylphie*, as Aina had put it, was Princess Sylphonia’s nickname. That was what Cain and her other comrades would call her, and we’d heard them say it a few times before.

So presumably, Aina had tried to take a page out of their books and had tried to do the same. But her saying it only made Sylphonia’s eyes widen.

“I’m sorry... Aina, was it?”

“Yes?”

“Only those I have personally approved of are allowed to call me Sylphie. I mean no harm, but please do not use that name so lightly.”

“Huh?”

Aina was petrified, making it easy for Sylphonia to shake Aina off before she took her leave.

“Liz!”

“Hmm?”

Huh? Me?

Sylphonia was headed straight for me, calling my name in her crystal clear voice.

“Let’s have a match! Are you good to go?”

“Huh?! You mean me?!”

I had suddenly been challenged. It went without saying that Sylphonia’s skills were some of the best the world had to offer. She said she wanted to focus on

her own training, so I was certain she would pair up with one of the other members of the hero's party, but...

Why me...?!

"P-P-Princess Sylphonia?! I am very sorry, but I lack the necessary ability to serve as your opponent!"

"Don't be so humble. Now, a match."

"Huh?!"

She's not even listening to me! Are you telling me I really have to take on someone of her caliber?!

I was practically dragged into one of the fighting zones, facing none other than this country's princess. There was no way I could turn her down.

She stood right before me, grinning boldly. I didn't quite know what was going on, but the pressure the princess exuded made it clear she would not permit a poor performance on my part.

"Look! Lady Lisalinde is about to spar with Princess Sylphonia!"

"Oh! Our academy's finest is fighting a member of the hero's party!"

"Lady Lisalinde might just have a chance!"

Yeah, no, of course not!

The cheers from the peanut gallery were like torture to my soul. How pathetic would they find me if I lost in the first instant? Aina was already staring at me with murder in her eyes.

"Begin!"

As I faltered, the referee gave the signal.

Why did Sylphonia single me out? We'd hardly even spoken since her transfer. These thoughts continued to occupy my mind, but before any of these questions could be answered, I needed to focus on the match.

If I ever dared lower my guard against a bona fide war hero, I was going to be killed in an instant.

“Hraaaaah!”

For crying out loud! Well, I’m already here, so it’s do or die! I’m going to give it my all!

I fired off consecutive rounds of fire, lightning, wind, and earth. I was casting so fast I didn’t even leave any time for myself to breathe. Manifesting so many simultaneous spells my foe couldn’t keep up—that was what I was best at.

Although I didn’t want to come off as boastful, I did have some of the top grades in the academy. My mana capacity was high, and I could construct spells very quickly. Put these two traits together, and I could crush any average opponent before they could even get close to me.

“You’ll have to try harder than that!”

“Gweh?!”

However, this did not work on Princess Sylphonia. She wove her way straight through all of my attacks, deploying only the bare minimum defensive spells and dodging everything else. I’d heard that she generally fought as a mage knight. By skillfully using both sword and spell, she could exercise a very wide range of tactics.

However, today’s practical lesson focused purely on magic. The use of swords was not permitted. Meaning, without even fully using her own strength, she was completely canceling out my offense.

First off, those movements are insane! How is a human supposed to move like that?! She runs too fast, she turns too sharply, and she’s just darting all over the place... I don’t even know what’s going on anymore! I mean, she’s dodging so much it’s almost like she’s showing off...! The way she moves makes the other students seem like toddlers!

“Eep?!”

Her magic struck me, knocking me off my feet and sending me rolling across the floor. I managed to recover and stand, but by then she had already closed in. When I rose, her finger was pressed against my forehead.

I had been utterly defeated.

“Thank you,” I barely managed to say.

“Yes, thanks,” she replied. “It was fun.”

“I-I’m sorry, though... It looks like I was too weak to help with your training.”

“No, that’s not true at all. I think it was worthwhile.”

I felt a bit bashful when she said that. But surely, she was just being polite—after all, my loss had been overwhelming. I couldn’t lift a finger against her. Feeling a bit awkward, I scratched my head.

“But...it looks like your powers really *have* grown weaker...”

“Huh?”

The princess had said something in a faint whisper, but I failed to pick it up.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

She slowly smiled, not saying another word. It was a gentle smile, the sort of smile one would have as they consoled a wounded soldier. An emotional smile from a war buddy who would patiently wait for the scars to fade.

But why was she looking at me like that? What was I supposed to know?

“By the way, about that battle...”

“What about it?”

“Why didn’t you use any illusions?”

“Huh?” I cocked my head quizzically at her question. “Well, I don’t really know how to answer that. I am not an illusionist or anything...”

“Hmm?”

The princess gave me a doubtful look. *Seriously, why?*

“Ahem... Liz, your fighting style involves bombarding with a diverse array of spells in rapid succession. If you mixed some illusions in with the real attacks, I...think...it would be very effective. Yes.”

“Th-Thank you for the advice.”

As she offered her advice, she seemed to struggle to find the right words for some reason. She was constantly scratching her head. How to put this—it felt

like the frustration of trying to explain something that should have been obvious. That was the feeling I was getting from Sylphonia. But why?

Also, for some reason, the princess was calling me Liz. Again, why?

“All right! Now that we have that cleared up, it’s time for round two!”

“What?! Already?!”

The princess was already rushing me on.

“No, no, wait! I’m not used to using illusions! If I try using them in battle right now, I’ll just disappoint you, or, um, like... If I just head off to the real gig without a rehearsal, it’s not going to work out! Trust me!”

“You’ll be fine, perfectly fine. I just know you can do it, Liz. How about you just play along for now and battle? Battle away!”

“Huh?! HUUUUUH?!”

She forcefully dragged me by the arm, and I had no choice but to prepare for combat.

Was Sylphonia always this kind of person?! What’s weirder is...why am I not having trouble accepting this?

When it came to battle, the princess was more enthusiastic than anyone else. She became aggressive, even, whenever battle tactics became the topic of conversation.

No... I don’t really know anything about Princess Sylphonia. Where exactly did I develop that image of her? And wait...what’s this? For some reason, Cain and his comrades Melvy, Mitter, and Rachel were all watching our match intently.

“Begin!”

The referee gave the starting signal again.

Umm...? Use illusions to interweave real and false attacks? I’ve never done anything like that before, but do I really have a choice?

“Firebolt! Snapfreeze! Tornado!”

The field within the sparring barrier was gradually filled up with spells. It seemed far simpler to give off the illusion of various magical effects than it did

to actually invoke them. I managed to construct them far faster than my other spells. I assailed Sylphonia with what looked like a far denser magic barrage than what I'd mustered in the previous battle.

"...?"

What's going on? How does this come so naturally?

This was my first time using this tactic, but the technique flowed from my body without a shred of disruption. I could instinctively tell exactly where to put an illusion and where to launch a real attack. *What is this sensation?*

My spells erupted freely as though I was recalling my true self. It was like my body had grown wings—like I had been let loose from my cage. What a supreme sense of liberation.

Are you telling me Princess Sylphonia realized my aptitude with just one glance?

We weren't close by any means, and we'd only fought one match against one another. And with that alone, she managed to give tactical advice that was perfect for me?

Incredible! That's one of the hero's comrades for you! Long live Princess Knight Sylphonia!

"Guh!"

Yet still, Sylphonia managed to rise up to match this dizzying typhoon of fact and fiction. The entire expanse of the barrier was now completely crammed full of magical attacks, be they real or not, and yet she managed to see through it, defending against every real attack. She handled it almost like she had fought against this very tactic countless times before.

I guess...that makes sense. She's the one that taught it to me. I'm sure the princess fought an enemy that used this fighting style somewhere.

"Ah?!"

"Hrah!"

Sylphonia's spell passed straight through one of my illusions and straight towards me. The illusions had no defensive capabilities, and she had taken

advantage of this fault.

I quickly raised my arm to defend myself as the force sent me stumbling back three steps, then four. I managed to stand my ground.

But the princess took advantage of my momentary daze. Sliding through the illusions, she closed in at inconceivable speeds. I was still struggling to get my footing at that point, and she took the opportunity to hammer in a powerful spell from point-blank range.

Or at least, she thought she did...

“Hmm?!”

Sylphonia’s spell passed through my body and collided with the side of the barrier. Her face contorted a bit in her surprise.

“An illusory clone!”

Right before I’d guarded her attack with my hand, I had made an illusion of myself. I’d certainly stumbled, but just barely in a different direction. The me that Sylphonia had attacked hadn’t been me at all.

Using this opportunity, I circled around to her side.

“Take this!”

Aiming at her flank, I immediately fired lightning magic—the fastest magic in my arsenal.

“Heh, I knew you could do it.”

“...?!”

Unfortunately, Sylphonia had a speedy response to my scheme. She immediately spotted me as I positioned myself and fired a spell to counter mine. We each reached an arm out, our fingertips close enough to touch. And our spells whizzed past one another.

Had I grown negligent the moment I thought I’d outwitted the princess? I was so taken aback by how quickly she had reacted that I ended up taking the full brunt of her fiery blast.

“Eeek!” I let out a farcical groan as I flew through the air before tumbling

along the arena ground.

By the look of it, Sylphonia had managed to avoid my spell, despite having not moved a single step from where she had shot at me. Yet again, it was a complete and utter loss for me. Sylphonia was the victor of our mock battle.

However...

“Ah! Look!”

“Mm?!”

“A mark on the princess’s face...!”

A single trail of blood dripped from Sylphonia’s cheek.

She scooped it up with her finger. The healing magic cast within the entire expanse of the barrier immediately erased the wound, but my attack had still managed to graze her.

Sylphonia started towards me. I was still planted firmly on my behind, staring up at her as she got closer and closer.

The crowd was astir.

“H-Hey... What happens now?”

“Maybe Lady Lisalinde...earned Princess Sylphonia’s recognition?”

“Stupid! She just hurt the princess of this nation! There’s no telling what’s about to happen!”

All sorts of speculation flew back and forth as Sylphonia came to a stop in front of me. There was a strange tension in the air.

“She probably hurt her pride as a knight...”

“Oh, you mean it’s an insult that a comrade of the hero was harmed by a mere academy student?”

“Well, I’d reckon she just dragged the princess’s name through the mud? Maybe the hero will get mad at her for being so inept...”

Everyone seemed to have their own take on the matter.

Looking down at me as I sat on the floor, Sylphonia said, “It was a good

battle.”

I was speechless.

“Come to my room later. We need to talk.”

And with that, she turned and left. I was dumbfounded; everyone else was in an uproar.

“S-So what is it? Did she just recognize Lady Lisalinde and recruit her into the hero’s party?”

“No, she could have just incurred her wrath. Exile’s still on the table...”

“Lady Lisalinde... What’s going to happen to her?”

Everyone seemed dead set on spreading their own arbitrary speculation.

“Hmph! Stupid woman! Bringing shame to the princess knight! She’s done for,” Aina loudly proclaimed, folding her arms and puffing out her chest.

“P-Pardon me...”

“Oh, Liz. I’m glad you’re here.”

After school, I dropped by Sylphonia’s room just as instructed. Every member of the hero’s party had booked a long-term stay in a top-class hotel in Academy Town. Security was top-notch, and the building had convenient access to the academy and the adventurers’ guild.

The academy had gone all out to support the heroes’ activities, providing food, medical treatment, training, and all sorts of assistance.

“Well, have a seat. Take a load off.”

“Th-Thank you...”

I was quite nervous. Obviously. I didn’t know what Sylphonia wanted to talk about, but whatever it was, there was a high chance it was going to change my life forever. Whether it was a recruitment offer or an exile notice.

The princess sat across the desk, facing me.

“There is, naturally, only one matter to discuss. I need some advice...”

Her maid set two cups of black tea on the table. I gulped—not on the tea, but on my own spit.

Princess Sylphonia started out slowly. “It’s about my nightly affairs with Cain...”

Umm...what?

“I cannot deny that it has become repetitive lately... Despite how he looks, Cain is very kind, so he never says anything about it... But I want to make him happy.”

“Pardon me?”

“How should I put this...? I was wondering if you knew of any other ways to pleasure him. Unconventional ways. If you know a way to spice things up, I’d like to test it out on Cain, but...”

Her face was a tad red and she fidgeted a wee bit as she spoke. Why...was she going on as though this was a perfectly normal conversation?

“Hey, Liz? Can’t you give any good advice? Please tell me some new ways to play.”

We both stared at each other in silence.

I took a deep breath...

“I have absolutely no idea!” I cried out.

“Huh?!”

“What is all this, even?! Why are you even asking me that?!”

“W-Well, you’re the only one I can consult on these matters, and...”

“And why me?! Seriously?! How am I supposed to react to this?!”

What is she asking someone she’s only known for a handful of days?! What’s wrong with this princess?!

“This is absurd!” Sylphonia exclaimed, hanging her head.

Well, of course it is! Why does the princess look so shocked?!

I was at a loss for words.

“W-Wait! Please don’t abandon me in my time of need! Just tell me! Why are you being so mean?!”

“I am not being mean! Nightly affairs? I have absolutely no idea about any of that!”

“That’s ridiculous...”

“This whole situation is ridiculous!”

“There is no way that’s possible!” she shrieked. “Not in a million years! Pervmaster! Please bestow your advice unto this lowly peon, Pervmaster!”

“Who are you calling ‘pervmaster’?!”

I’ve never been called that in my life!

Sylphonia grabbed my sleeve as she pleaded with me, her eyes upturned. *Someone stop this princess already! Hey, maid! What are you doing?!*

“Dammit! I didn’t think losing her memory would’ve changed her entire personality...” she muttered. “Even without her powers, I was sure that Liz would be the same pervert I knew and loved...”

“Huh? What did you just say?”

“Nothing...”

Sylphonia bitterly muttered something under her breath that I didn’t catch.

“I-I’m really sorry, but please ask someone else about that sort of thing! I don’t think I can help you out in the slightest, Princess Sylphonia!”

“Sylphonia sounds so stiff. Please call me Sylphie—*Sylphie*, okay? Isn’t that how it is between us?”

“Just when did I earn that honor, exactly...?! ”

Sylphie was Sylphonia’s nickname, and as I’d recently learned, only those who earned her respect were allowed to call her that... She had said so herself.

In what field did I earn her seal of approval?!

“I’m begging you! Look, I’m on my hands and knees, so give me some advice, Liz! You’re always the only one I can count on!”

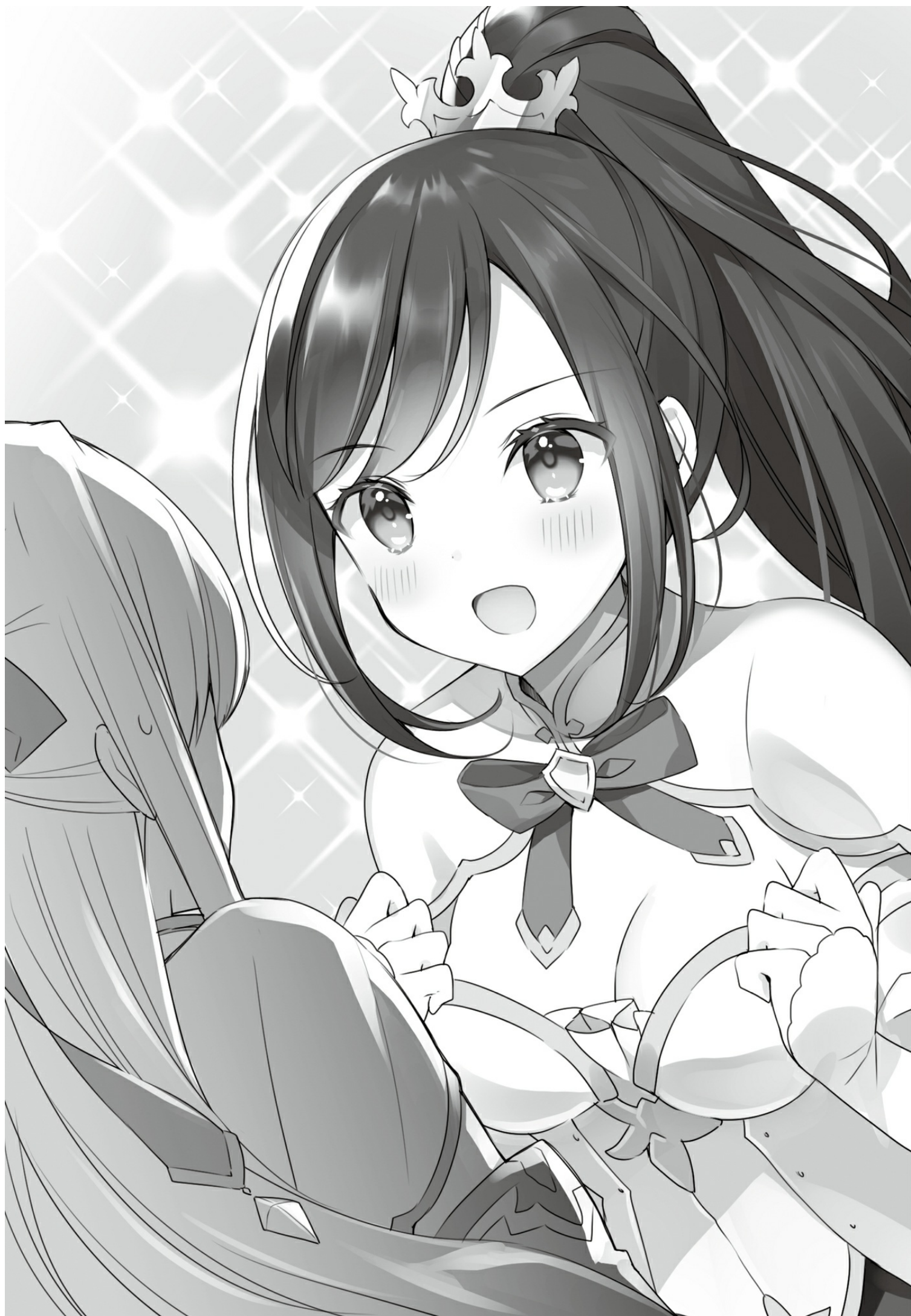
“Ah, seriously, I’m clueless about that stuff! Asking me will get you nowhere, honest!”

“Anything works! Please, just anything you can think of. A slightly unconventional fetish, perhaps?!”

“I have absolutely no idea, I’m telling you! You can take this matter and shove it straight up the hero’s behind for all I care... Wait, what are you making me say?!”

I just offhandedly threw that out there. What sort of conversation was this? How very bothersome.

However, Sylphie’s face lit up. “Oh?! Cain’s...behind?! I see! That never occurred to me! I knew you had it in you, Liz!”



“Huh?”

“Thanks! I’m glad I came to you! You really are a wonderful ally!”

“Eh? W-Wait a second! Sylphie?!”

Sylphie plucked her cup of hot tea off of the table and enthusiastically downed it in one gulp.

“All right! Let’s get right to it! Thank you, Liz! See you at school tomorrow!”

“Ah, h-hey, err...?”

She raced off like the wind, leaving me staring at the space she had just occupied. I’d been left alone with the maid.

The next day...

“Liiiiiiiiizzzz!!!”

Cain stormed up to me, his face bright red.

“What dangerous ideas did you drill into that girl’s head?! Last night, S-Sylphie suddenly...! You had to be involved with this! There’s no other way!”

“Wh-Whoa! Y-You have me all wrong! Sir Cain! I don’t know what’s going on either!”

Presumably, something terrible had happened to Cain’s behind last night. Now, he was grabbing me by my lapels.

“You really... You’ll never be anything but trouble!”

“It’s a misunderstanding! A complete misunderstanding!”

“You should learn a bit of self-restraint!”

“This is all wroooooong!”

That day, Sylphie had a strangely glassy-eyed look to her face while Cain seemed terribly worn out. And I was standing in the center of it all, the victim of calamity.

My shoulders dropped despondently.

What did I do to deserve this? Someone, please tell me...

Chapter 4: Then—Meeting the Princess Knight

“Very well, chosen hero of Andros. Cain... You will become the groom of my daughter Sylphonia!”

The king’s grand proclamation resounded through the palace’s audience chamber.

“Huh...? Wha?!”

The hero Cain’s eyes opened wide at this bolt from the blue; his mouth hung open limply.

This was around when Cain had become widely recognized across the world as the hero who managed to draw the sacred blade. He had protected the lives of many. With his usual rough attitude, he’d grumble, “This is a pain, such a pain,” but would still go out of his way to save people. He would even solve the less consequential worries of the townsfolk, offering advice whenever he could.

His journey had been proceeding smoothly.

If there was a single problem to speak of, it would have to be the succubus that had latched on to him; she was a constant source of worry. Still, the journey of a hero and the succubus disguised as a magician had received such wide acceptance that the two of them were permitted an audience with the king of mighty Bahelgarn.

There, the king proclaimed that the hero would wed his daughter.

“W-Wait, hold on... Please pardon my...interruption!” Cain paused a few times to find his words, following Liz’s lessons in speaking politely. “Springing that upon me out of nowhere is rather troublesome...”

“My country has passed down this tradition from ancient days: Whenever a hero chosen by the holy sword Andros appears, he is to be welcomed into the royal family. He will marry the princess and produce descendants with her.”

“You serious?!” Cain couldn’t hide his shock, but Liz—wearing a black

magician's hat—was giggling away.

“You did it! Sir Cain! A commoner like you's about to become royalty! That's a huge promotion!”

“H-Hang on, Liz... It's just so sudden... I don't know what's going on!”

“You get to have a princess as your wife! You can do whatever pervy things you want to her! She's a princess whose face is known all around the world, and you get to train her however you see fit!”

“Can you shut up for just a second?!”

It was business as usual for the succubus, royal audiences be damned.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Hero Cain. I am Princess Sylphonia, your betrothed. I do hope we'll get along.”

The princess of Bahelgarn came out before Cain and offered an elegant curtsy. She had red hair tied back in a ponytail, and her expression was dignified and unwavering. She wore a dress of an even deeper red than her hair, and it fit her very well. This was a woman who exuded elegance just in the way she stood.

“Th-The pleasure is all mine, Princess Sylphonia. I have heard rumors of your exploits as a knight.”

“I'm glad to hear it.” Sylphonia giggled.

Despite being the princess of this country, she was also a skilled enough fighter to serve as a knight. Bahelgarn was a large, powerful nation, yet her strength was said to put her within their top five soldiers—a prodigy.

Just from the beautiful silver sword on her hip, it was clear she was a master of her art.

“I understand that you may be confused, hero, seeing as this engagement was suddenly dropped on you. And so, why don't you forget about the engagement for now? I think it would be best to get to know one another as friends first.”

“If that's the case... I gratefully accept.”

“I'm sure we'll be well acquainted with one another after we have traveled

together as comrades. And you can take it as slow as you want—I would be happy if you could consider being engaged to me.”

With this, Sylphonia became one of their traveling companions. There was nothing to criticize when it came to her skills, and her sense of justice burned strong. She wanted to help the hero—to help the world.

However, this sudden proposal still left Cain baffled.

“I-I apologize. I’m sure you’re just as zonked out...ahem, I mean *puzzled* by this engagement as I am. But I’m the only one acting like this, shamefully enough. I’m sure you hate the thought of being engaged to some nobody who crawled out from who knows where.”

Cain hesitantly scratched the back of his head. His mind had yet to process the situation he was in.

But Sylphonia returned a refined giggle. “Oh, no. I am very happy to be engaged to you, Sir Cain.”

“Huh?”

“I often hear about your valor. Each time I heard of how you bravely cut down another one of the world’s evils, my heart would skip a beat. I have patiently awaited the day when I might finally meet you.” Sylphonia put a hand on her chest as she took a step towards Cain. “If you could please be a little more optimistic about the matter...”

Cain stared at her in silence.

“It is so nice...to finally meet you,” the princess said, her face red.

She was at that age where her heart swayed to and fro, where the flowers of love could easily bloom and just as easily wither.

“But by meeting you today, a question has entered my mind,” Sylphonia said. Her passionate gaze at the hero became sharper; she turned to the woman who stood by his side. “What exactly are *you*, Lisalinde, follower of the hero?!”

“Hmm? Me?”

Sylphonia was glaring at none other than Liz. The magician looked a bit puzzled.

“I have heard much about you. But...my apologies...now that I’ve met you in person, I have been forced to revise everything I thought I knew.”

“Excuse me...?”

Sylphonia spoke to Liz in a stern tone. Her harsh eyes harbored clear hostility. “As I stand before you, I can feel it... There is something pitch-black within you! It is vile and demonic—a wicked darkness lurking within!”

No one responded.

“Hero! This woman is dangerous! She is not someone you should keep by your side as an ally! Please know I am only speaking in your best interest when I say this, but say it I must! This woman is a monster wearing human skin!”

Sylphonia could instinctively see straight through to the demonic powers that lay within Liz. Liz was a succubus atavist—she had manifested the recessive traits of a succubus ancestor far, far up her family tree. The powers she had were certainly not meant to be wielded by human hands. They bore a terrible resemblance to the powers of the demon lord, the enemy of the world.

And Sylphonia could sense these vile powers of evil.

“Sylphonia! What are you saying to the hero’s comrade?!”

“I apologize, Father, but please stay silent! It is possible that someone with evil intent has infiltrated the hero’s party!”

“Wh-What? P-Princess? This girl has a few things going on... She’s definitely a little...no, a *huge* pain, but she’s harmless. I guarantee it.”

“Sir Cain! You can’t let her fool you! Do you not feel any wicked intent emanating from her?!”

The hall was in an uproar.

Sylphonia raised her voice, asserting the danger of the situation. Those around seemed unsure whether or not to believe her. Meanwhile, Cain was doing a terrible job at persuading her. After all, Sylphonia’s words were backed by facts and logic.

Liz was the only one smiling.

“Okay, and...? Princess Knight? What exactly are you going to do to me?”

“I won’t let you anywhere near the hero!”

“Oh ho? You’re going to tear us apart? You’re going to separate a couple that’s spent the night in each other’s embrace? Then who exactly is going to contain the hero’s boundless sexual energy?”

“Wha?!”

“Ah, hey! You little!”

Cain flew into a rage, his bedroom affairs exposed to the whole hall, while Sylphonia turned red in the face. Even so, Liz behaved no differently.

“If you’ll console the hero for me, Princess, then I’m fine with that, but...if you don’t mind me asking, Princess Sylphonia, do you even have any experience? Will you be able to satisfy little Cain here?”

“Wh-Wh-Wha...?”

Sylphonia’s entire body turned red as she retreated two steps. Liz slowly advanced upon her with a grin.

“I’m not so sure. Are you experienced? Does the princess do well in bed?”

“Wah... Wha-hah...”

There was no way she could say it. They were still in the palace audience chamber surrounded by plenty of prominent nobles. She couldn’t possibly speak on such matters here of all places.

Liz gave an amused laugh. Cain covered his face with his hands and heaved a great troubled sigh.

Everyone was at the mercy of Liz’s whims.

“I-I-I-I...”

“Hmmm...?”

Sylphonia trembled as she screamed, “I challenge you to a duel!”

She drew the sword at her hip and pointed it towards Liz. Her challenge seemed like an attempt to escape the conversation.

Liz laughed.

And so, a battle for the hero had begun.

A raging inferno surrounded the pair.

“Ah ha ha ha ha! What’s wrong, Princess Knight?! You won’t be able to reach me like that!”

“Gah?! You monster...!”

The battle took place at the training grounds set up for the kingdom’s knight brigades. There, the hero’s follower, Liz, and his latest comrade, the princess knight, faced off.

The duel was conducted under the following agreement: *if Sylphonia wins, Lisalinde will never approach Cain for the rest of her life*. Sylphonia trusted in her own judgment and challenged Liz to protect the hero and the world.

Unfortunately for her...

“Too bad! That one was an illusion! Now, how about you try a bit harder?”

“Dammit! I can’t afford to lose!”

The princess unleashed a sharp sword slash at Liz, but her blade passed right through an image of the girl who wasn’t there. She had once again sliced Liz’s illusion.

Dozens of Liz populated the training grounds—illusory clones created through her magic, now all dashing around the area. These were the movements of someone who had boosted their physical abilities to the absolute limit with magic.

Liz’s fighting style consisted of mixing illusions into her magic. She would assault her foe from every possible direction with spells, some real and some not, all while creating countless illusions of herself. Sylphonia simply couldn’t handle it.

“There’s more where that came from, Princess Knight! On your guard!”

“Erk?! Grrrraaah!”

The barrage was overwhelming. No matter how Sylphonia swung her sword,

she was never anywhere close to the illusionist's real body.

"Huh?! What's this fog?"

"Hee hee hee..."

Something was wrong. Sylphonia looked around and noticed that she was completely surrounded by a vague red mist.

"That, my dear, is a poison mist that will steal away your body's freedom. I've been slowly disseminating it bit by bit. It took some time until it was thick enough."

"What?! Poison?!"

"The poison will interfere with your mana. It will lower your offense, your defense, and your stamina. And even your magic. On top of that, your whole body will slowly stop listening to you. You'll feel numb, your mind will go blank, and you'll lose all your faculties of reason. Then comes the vertigo. Finally, it will worm its way into your soul and fill you with a horrific terror."

"Gah?!"

Sylphonia could feel a lethargy setting in. Her arms and legs were quivering. The sweet poison was mercilessly stealing her freedom away. Cain looked away with a heavy sigh. Liz's methods were nasty. As the one who was always by her side, he knew better than anyone how troublesome she could be.

"Kuh...! I can't let this drag out any longer! The next attack will decide everything!"

"Very well! Come at me!"

Sylphonia mustered the last of her strength and kicked off. In a straight mad dash, she rushed towards one of the many illusions. In all likelihood, this should have been an illusion as well.

But now that she had been pushed to the limit, Sylphonia seemed to finally grasp Liz's presence; the one she attacked was indeed the real Liz.

"Take this, you witch!" Sylphonia took a large and powerful swing.

"Hee hee hee..."

But Liz laughed.

“What?!”

All of a sudden, a massive explosion erupted right next to Sylphonia. The explosion had come with no warning whatsoever, and she had no means to counteract it. Her body was blown all the way to the edge of the training grounds.

“Illusions don’t just create false sensations, you know... They can also conceal real ones.” Liz chuckled.

In short, Liz had covered up every trace of her explosive magic with illusions, ensuring Sylphonia wouldn’t notice until it was too late.

Up to that point, Liz had merely added false spells and clones of herself to the battlefield. Sylphonia, having not seen this type of illusion before, was caught completely off guard. She took the full brunt of the explosion head-on.

The thunderous boom slowly faded.

“Guh... Urgh...”

A stillness settled over the training grounds, and Sylphonia’s consciousness faded away in turn.

It was an overwhelming victory for Liz.

Thus, Princess Knight Sylphonia became one of the hero’s comrades, and a new journey began. At first, the princess had wanted to opt out, as her crushing loss to Liz had made her doubt her own competence. But Liz had insisted.

“The promise was for me to leave Sir Cain’s side if I lost. We didn’t say anything about you keeping away from him if it turned out the other way. Are you going to back down on your word?”

So Sylphonia joined in humiliation. This did little to help the awkwardness that had bloomed. There was a strained air between Liz and Sylphonia.

Liz, for one, did not seem to harbor any hostility for the princess. However, Sylphonia still carried a bitter taste about it all. Even after Cain informed her of Liz’s circumstances, this had not erased the misgivings she harbored towards

the girl. Putting aside all the rational reasons, Sylphonia had been beaten so shamefully, with so many people watching, that she couldn't help but feel a little salty.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Seriously, we need to get rid of any factors that could trip us up when we're not looking.”

Liz and Cain were holding a strategy meeting. These strained party relations were an issue that had to be resolved and resolved fast. It was causing the hero quite a headache.

“Also, could you at least stop teasing and messing with her, Liz?”

“Huh? But when you see such a stiff, innocent girl, don't you just get the urge to tease her? Of course you do, right?”

“Yeah, no, I don't see it.”

It wasn't like Liz was completely without fault. Teasing Sylphonia would of course only put the princess in a worse mood.

“So in short, I just have to prove that I am a meek woman who's completely harmless to humans and that I will never bring harm to my party members, correct?” Liz asked, twirling around her index finger.

“Essentially...”

“Understood, then I'll show her I can be a meek and faithful pet.”

“Wha?”

“Sir Cain, please put a collar around my neck and take me for a walk. I'll get down on all fours like a dog. If I do that! I'll show her just how harmless I am...!”

“That's just gonna make it worse, damn fool.”

“Oh. ≡ Please insult me more... ≡” Liz moaned, her body twisting.

Cain took a sip of the tea Liz had brewed and heaved a deep sigh. He had grown largely accustomed to her strange outbursts—or corrupted by them, some might say.

“Understood,” said Liz suddenly. “Then I'll have to use my last resort...”

“Hmm?”

With a clattering, Liz rose from her seat. “I’ll have to...get on good terms...with Princess Sylphonia!”

“Huh?”

Liz resolved herself—to do goodness knows what—and left the room, leaving Cain behind.

It was a peaceful night.

“Welcome, Princess Sylphonia. Come on in,” greeted Liz. “I thank you for coming to my tea party.”

“Well...honestly, I wasn’t that eager to come.”

Sylphonia had come to Liz’s room at the inn at the girl’s invitation. It seemed that this would be a tea party for just the two of them. The table was lined with tea and cookies.

“I also...think that our discord is causing an awkwardness that’s becoming a problem within the party,” Sylphonia explained. “That is why I answered your invitation.”

“Hee hee, thank you for being so understanding. Today, let’s just take it easy and have a chat. After all, conversation is the first step to getting along.”

“I don’t really think a chat will be enough for me to further my relationship with you.”

Sylphonia looked a little sullen. She simply could not hide her distaste for Lisalinde. But as the princess took a seat, Lisalinde pushed the tea and the sweets towards her regardless.

“Ah...these cookies are delicious...”

“Do you think so? Well, thank you. Truth be told, I made them myself.”

“Huh? Y-You did?”

“Yes, despite what you may think about me, I do have a few strong points: cooking, baking, brewing tea, and so forth.”

“I see... Well, it’s frustrating to admit, but the tea is delicious too...”

“Hee hee, there’s no real need to be frustrated, is there?”

“H-Hmph! The cookies may be tasty, but that doesn’t change the fact that you’re a witch! Lisalinde, please don’t think this is enough to dispel my doubts about you!”

“I’ll take that to heart.”

Their conversation continued.

“In your opinion, then, Princess Sylphonia. What can I do to help us get along better?”

“Frankly...I can’t even imagine the two of us *ever* getting along.”

“Now, now, don’t be like that. If we continue to stay on bad terms, it will cause nothing but trouble for Sir Cain, you know.”

“Urgh... You have a point...”

“Could you give it some serious thought?”

“I’m trying... Really, I am... But I can’t think of anything. If I could somehow find a way to forget about all our squabbles and do away with all my suspicions...then we would finally be back at the starting line. But I don’t think that’s possible...”

“Oh, you’re so quick to give up.”

“Hmm... You say that, but what about you, Lisalinde? Do you have a way to dramatically better our relations? You don’t, right? There’s no such—”

“I do have an idea,” said Liz.

“Huh?”

“I think it’s quite a simple method, in fact.”

“A simple method... Wh-What is it, then? I really can’t think of anything myself. Is there really a shortcut to getting along with someone?”

“Certainly, Princess Sylphonia... In fact...”

“Huh?”

“Is your body not feeling numb yet?”

“...Huh...?”

The cookie Sylphonia had pinched between her fingers dropped to the ground. Her fingertips... No, her entire body was growing hot and numb.

“Wh-Wh-What...? What did you do...?!”

“I told you, didn’t I? I made these cookies myself.”

“Why is it getting so hot?! My body... It’s burning!”

Something fiery throbbed within Sylphonia. Liz grinned.

“Y-You...! What did you do to me?! What did you put in the cookies?!”

“Hee hee hee!”

Liz stood from her seat and slowly made her way towards Sylphonia on the opposite side of the table.

“St-Stop...! Don’t get any closer, witch!”

“Hee hee... It’s all right... There’s not a single thing for you to be afraid of.”

“Eep?!”

Sylphonia inadvertently let out a high-pitched squeak as Liz slowly brushed a hand against her thigh. Liz had barely touched her, and yet her body had quivered in response.

“Hee hee hee...”

A bewitching smile spread across Liz’s lips as she slowly and gently stroked Sylphonia’s thighs. Sylphonia’s body was burning up.

“H-Hyah?! S-Stop?! Why, why is this...? I’ve never...!”

“It’s quite all right, Princess... I swear I will never force you to do anything. I will just be slowly stroking your arms and legs. I would never force myself on you when you don’t want it.”

Sylphonia stayed silent in bewilderment.

“But I’m sure you’ll soon be begging, all on your own...” Liz brought her mouth up to Sylphonia’s ear and whispered, “Please give me more.”

Sylphonia's body jolted at hearing Liz's enchanting voice from so close up. There was so much of a tantalizing, feverish heat squirming—*writhing*—within her that she didn't know what to do with herself. Her ears, her heart—they had all become so much more sensitive.

"Now... Let's have a nice and long chat and get to know one another better. Is that all right with you, Princess Sylphonia? Don't worry. The night is still young..."

"Eeeeeeeeeeep!!!"

Liz's smile was elegant and enchanting, and it sent waves through the heat that Sylphonia was trying so hard to resist.

"Grrrrrrrr! Just kill me already!" Sylphonia cried out in a desperate bid to keep control of herself, but her resistance was in vain. Bit by bit, the noble princess knight was going to pieces.

The sunlight shone brightly the following morning. Outside the window, little birds chirped their tune.

"Err... What exactly...?"

"Do go on."

"Is something wrong, Sir Cain?"

The hero's party was eating breakfast in the dining area adjoining the first floor of the inn. Cain furrowed his brow as he carefully inspected Liz and Sylphonia.

"No, I mean... Why are...?"

"Yes?"

"What is it?"

"Why are you so close together?"

The two women were eating their meal shoulder to shoulder. This was inconceivable given the awkwardness that had hung between them just the day before.

“There’s nothing particularly strange about this distance, is there?”

“I-Indeed... We’re all members of the same party. This is...perfectly natural...”

As Liz looked at her and smiled, Sylphonia’s face turned red.

“We were far, far closer last night, after all.”

“M-Much apologies... But about last night, I...still feel embarrassed, recalling it...”

“Hee hee... ≡ What a shy girl you are, Princess Sylphonia. ≡”

Cain couldn’t seem to pick his jaw up off the floor.

“Wh-Why, Sylphonia sounds so formal... We’re no strangers. Call me Sylphie, Liz. Just like you did in bed...”

“Oh, my apologies, Sylphie... ≡”

“Liz... ≡”

The two of them shared a heady look. The awkwardness and vitriol no longer existed, having been replaced by the brimming passions of youth.

“Say *aah*.”

“Aaahh.”

Cain watched on, dumbstruck.

Liz scooped up a fried egg with her fork and slowly brought it to Sylphie’s mouth. The two giggled away, their cheeks flushed as they harmoniously shared a meal. It was a pleasant sight to behold, but Cain couldn’t help but be horrified as he witnessed it.

“Ah...! Sir Cain, this is definitely not cheating!”

“Sh-She’s... She’s right, Sir Cain! My love towards you has not changed in the slightest!”

“It doesn’t count if it’s between girls. Definitely.”

Liz smiled as she clapped her hands together, while Sylphie blushed and fidgeted. Both of Cain’s party members were gazing up at him with upturned eyes.

“From now on, let’s all get along, okay?”

“What’s wrong with my party?!” Cain screamed, clutching his head. His troubles had only just begun.

A refreshing wind blew across the land, signaling the start of a new day.

Chapter 5: Now—The Saint in the Infirmary

A soft magical light poured from the girl's palm, enveloping the hand of a male student. The scrape that had been on the back, below his knuckles, faded right before his eyes.

"Okay, your healing is complete. Please be careful."

"Th-Thank you, Saint Melvy!"

The girl he called a saint—a young-looking woman with white hair—smiled at him, and his cheeks reddened.

This was the academy's infirmary. Saint Melvy, a comrade of the hero, was serving as a member of the health committee to help treat the academy's injured.

"Next person, please," I called out as the saint's assistant. Before long, the door to the infirmary opened and the next student entered.

There was a rather long line stretching along the corridor in front of the infirmary.

"Umm...so the truth is..."

"Yes?"

"Three days ago, I stubbed my pinky toe on my dresser, and..."

"So you came here for nothing!" I found myself crying out.

Ever since Melvy had joined the student-run health committee, there had been a massive increase in the number of students coming in for completely trivial things.

I doubt I even had to say it, but they were all there for Melvy.

She was a saint of the Russel-Bell sect, the religion which had more followers than any other in the world. Upon joining the hero Cain on his journey, she served as the white mage who would heal the party's wounds.

She had a petite build with a beautiful sheet of white hair that grew long down her back. Her eyes were wide and cherubic. She was as precious as a doll.

No, in fact this girl was more endearing than any doll. How could she possibly look so innocent when she was only a year younger than me?

Well, I suppose the tiny chest helped that.

“Umm, umm... Since you’re here, do you want me to examine your foot?”

She gave a troubled smile, but she would never turn down a patient. The way she proceeded straight to healing was almost saintlike. No, wait, she really *was* a saint, of course.

“Th-Thank you so much, Saint Melvy...”

“I’m... I’m going to remove your shoe. Please stay still,” Melvy said as she got down on her knees before the male student. As he sat in a chair, she stripped off his shoe and his sock.

Her pale, slender finger stroked his foot. Her small body stooped down even lower as she inspected it closely. We all had to bend down to get a look at her. Melvy began pressing her fingers here and there.

“So, so...does it hurt if I touch here?” she asked, raising her eyes as she remained stooped down.

Indeed, she was staring at the male student with upturned eyes, and I could hear him gulp in response. I couldn’t blame him. I was doing the same. Such an adorable lady was peering up at him, with her face right in front of his crotch. Her large pupils pierced straight through him.

Even as a fellow woman, I could recognize her surprising eroticism.

Here in this room, such a delicate specimen would feel you up and whisper to you out of concern. Even just observing it from the sidelines, I had now fully realized the true magic of the infirmary.

“Saint Melvy...!”

The boy suddenly stirred and grabbed Melvy’s hand.

“Eep?!”

“W-W-W-Would you be willing to go on a date with—err, to join me for a meal sometime?!”

“Huh...? Huh?! Umm, well... Huh?”

Apparently unable to contain his impulses anymore, he had suddenly asked her out. No, based on the look in his eyes...it was no exaggeration to say he was courting her, or even proposing marriage.

I have to stop him!

But the moment the thought crossed my mind, the door to the infirmary slid open.

“Now look here. That is my fiancée you’re talking to.”

“Huh?!”

In stepped Cain. He appeared out of the blue and wrapped an arm around the male student’s shoulders. Bringing his face close, he whispered to him, “Now, if my eyes ain’t deceiving me, Melvy looks pretty troubled there. Am I wrong?”

“Ah!”

Though Cain’s voice was gentle, there was something terrifying about him. Despite his tone, he had brought back a bit of his rough way of speaking. “You should go home, yeah? You don’t want to become my rival, do you?”

“I-I’m leaving! I’ll leave right now! I’m so sorry about everything!”

The male student shot up and raced out of the infirmary, leaving his sock and shoe behind.

Cain sighed, as though he felt that he’d wasted a bit of time and effort. Then, he stuck a cigar in his mouth and lit it. “You don’t need to wait for me to do that, Melvy. For guys like that, a good slap will send them packing.”

“Aha...aha ha...”

As the hero, Cain was engaged to Saint Melvy. This was because the Grand Cathedral of Russel-Bell wanted his power for their own, even going as far as to have him wed to their saint. This arrangement was also partly to keep Princess Knight Sylphie’s nation of Bahelgarn in check.

Although from what I'd heard from Cain, Sylphie and Melvy actually got along pretty well.

"I got rid of all those idiots in the hall."

"Th-Thank you. B-But you know, you know, please don't drive off anyone who's actually injured."

"I checked, believe me. There were none."

Well, you rarely get injured enough to have to go to the infirmary, after all.

"You're on the health committee, Liz?" Cain asked, looking at me.

"No, I'm just helping out since the committee has gotten so much busier, since I can use healing magic."

"An infirmary with both you and Melvy's got to be illegal. That's a straight-up seduction pit."

"Wha?! What are you talking about, Sir Cain?!" The hero had said something absolutely outrageous. "I-I have never seduced a man! Not once in my life! I mean, I'll admit, Melvy was a little overly provocative a moment ago..."

"Huh?! Well, well, I never thought I'd hear those words from Liz! I'm insulted, deeply insulted! It just had to be Liz of all people!"

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

This was quite a shock to me—apparently, the saint whom I'd only just met had quite a strange impression of me. This had to be some sort of misunderstanding.

"Yeah, yeah. Got it," said Cain. "I really don't care, just please don't go around thoughtlessly seducing people, you idiots."

"Urgh... S-Sorry..." Melvy sincerely apologized, but I just couldn't accept it. Not when I'd never seduced anyone in my entire life!

"Umm, umm... I'm really grateful for what you did back there..."

"Tsk." Cain clicked his tongue and turned away as Melvy offered yet another apology. But his face was a little red.

"U-Umm, umm...so...so...! There's actually a reason I asked you to help me

out, Liz.” Melvy clapped her hands together as she changed the subject.

“Hmm?” Cain seemed interested.

“Not just because I can use healing magic?”

“Yes, there is actually a little something I need to do...”

Does she have a request for me, perhaps?

“Liz,” said Melvy. “Would you allow me to examine your body?”

I cocked my head and thought a bit.

What’s this about? I’m in perfect physical health; so healthy in fact, I’d never even consider consulting a doctor. At the very least, I don’t think I look ill enough to need an examination.

Even so, the saint’s large eyes stared straight through me, serious as can be.

Wh-What...? Is there really something wrong with me? Did I catch some nasty ailment that only the saint can see?

“Oh, so that’s what it’s about,” Cain said with a satisfied nod.

“Umm, I don’t think there’s anything particularly wrong with my body...”

“Don’t worry about it; just let her have a look at you, Liz. Melvy’s an expert. Her examinations are usually pretty accurate.”

“Oh, er...yes, yes, Liz. Your body can be deteriorating even if you don’t usually notice anything. I recommend scheduling regular appointments with your doctor.”

“Hmm... Then I’ll take you up on it.”

Although I wasn’t quite convinced, I decided to let her have her way. I mean, it would usually be a miraculous event just to have the saint examine me. Of course, she was so casual about it I nearly ignored it, but why was Melvy calling me Liz too?

“Then, yes, yes... I’m sorry, could you please remove your shirt?”

“Sure, on it.”

I paused.

“Umm... Sir Cain?”

“Hmm?”

Why is this man watching like it's the natural thing to do? I'm about to strip...

“Ah, sorry. That's right. My bad, my bad. Totally forgot.”

“Pardon me, but could you please face the other way?”

“Yeah, I may be used to seeing it, but I really lacked some delicacy there. Sorry.”

“U-Used to seeing what, exactly?! Me naked?! I'll have you know, the only man who's ever seen me naked is my father!”

What nonsense is he spewing?!

“Yeah, that's right. My bad, my bad,” he replied while waving his hand dismissively.

Erk! How are you so calm about this?!

“I'm curious about the results, so could I just listen to your conversation while facing the other way?”

“Err, sure... I don't really mind...”

Why was Cain so curious about my health?

“Certainly, you would have to be the one most worried about Liz's condition, after all.”

“Tsk...”

“Hm?”

“Okay, then let's begin.”

Cain turned around, while I pulled off my shirt. I only had a brassiere on as Melvy's examination began.

The saint concentrated mana at her fingertips and slid her fingers along my skin. She was presumably probing and measuring the flow of mana within my system. I could feel her soft, gentle mana entering me.

“It's as I thought... The flow is still sealed off in quite a few places,” Melvy

said, her fingers creeping across me. “But it’s gotten a lot more stable than before. It seems these blockages will heal themselves over time.”

“‘Before’...?”

“Ah, no, no. Umm, umm... It’s nothing...”

I’d never been examined by Melvy before. Lately, it seemed as though these disjointed conversations were becoming a frequent occurrence.

“Hmm? Would it heal faster if I stimulated it with mana from the outside? No, rather than forcing it, would it be better for her to slowly rest and recover?”

Melvy gazed at me, her face as serious as could be. But in the midst of this serious examination...though I’m very ashamed to admit it...

“Mm!”

I let out a strange sound.

No, I mean... Melvy’s pretty white fingers were gliding along my skin! She had a very gentle touch, brimming with tender affection...and that made it incredibly comfortable! Her soft fingers were very warm!

“Oh!” I gasped.

“I-I’m sorry, Liz! But pardon me for a second!”

“Mmm!”

Her fingers stroked my chest. She was presumably inspecting the mana of my heart. Her hands rested atop my left breast, pressing only slightly into the skin.

Bit by bit, her fingers shifted like they were probing for something, and oh, how captivating it was. Her digits were softly dancing over my chest.

“Haaah...”

“Hah!”

A wanton breath escaped my lips. She wasn’t just touching me. The mana she used for detection was racing around my body, stimulating all sorts of things. She was squirming...creeping around my insides.

“Umm, umm...pardon me...”

“Ahn!”

Her sweet voice sounded right beside my ear as she circled around to my back. Her fingers stroked me again, sending lightning racing down my spine. My face was red hot. She wasn't holding back one bit with her mana as it continued to crawl through me.

Isn't...marriage the only option now...?

A strange thought crossed my mind.

This was not good. Such...such a mesmerizing experience... I could not let any of the world's men experience this. I needed to keep it near and dear and protect it from all the ills of the world. That was what I thought.

And it wasn't like I could just act like nothing had happened after having this done to me. Yes, indeed, marriage was the only way.

“D-Don't misunderstand... You and Cain are the only ones I'll probe so deeply!”

“Hm?!”

You mean we're the only ones who can taste such supreme bliss?!

Melvy was ridiculously cute; there was no way any man would ever let her free. Cain was protecting her, but surely that was too much for him to handle alone.

I need to protect Melvy too. That's right, there's no doubt about it.

Were my thoughts turning strange? No, this absolutely, positively could not be happening!

I need to stay by her side forever and protect this lovely girl to my dying breath!

“Saint Melvy!”

“Huh?!”

I turned around and took her hands.

“How about we go on a date sometime?! Yes, a very lovely trip, four days, three nights! How does that sound?!”

“Huuuuuuuuuh?!”

I couldn't help screaming something rather peculiar. Melvy's mana lingered in my body and continued to heat me from my core.

“I think a hot spring trip would be nice!” I panted. “A nice chat in the buff...would be divine! We can invite Sylphie and Rachel too. Let's all go to the hot springs!”

“P-Please wait! Liz!”

“It's fine! Perfectly fine! It'll just be us girls! There's not a single thing for you to be afraid of!”

There was no stopping me now. Whatever she had stimulated within me was now screaming out. A me I had never known was screaming something.

“Now, now! Melvy! Let's go on a fun trip together! You've already messed with my insides so much, so you'd better take some responsibility! I'll make it a holiday you'll never forget!”

“No! Am I going to be eaten up again?!”

I pulled at her hands, bringing our faces closer. Before I knew it, I was the one standing over her.

That was when someone finally hit the brakes.

“You damn fool! Quit it!”

“Bah!”

Cain stepped in to stop me. He delivered a strong, merciless blow to the back of my head, sending me flying through the air. I rolled again and again across the floor until I smacked into the shelf with a huge *ker-thud*.

“C-Cain! Are you sure you didn't hit her too hard?!”

“O-Oh shit! She doesn't have her powers back! I instinctively gave her the usual...”

I could hear their panicked voices, but my mind was flickering and I could not comprehend what they were saying.

“L-Liz! You okay?!”

“...”

Cain lifted me up in his arms. The strong impact was still ringing in my head, causing my entire body to go numb. It did not seem like I would be able to move on my own. The pain was sending shock waves through me.

“S-Sir Cain...”

“Liz! You need to hold on! I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean it!”

He shook my body as Melvy cast healing magic on me. I remembered that Cain was supposed to be abysmal at healing magic, but I could feel he was desperately casting it too.

I... I...

“Please hit me more...”

“Hmm?”

“Eh?”

Why was it...? The pain from Cain hitting me felt very...pleasant.

“Wh-What is...this sensation? It hurts, but...I’m happy? I want more?”

“Wait a second... Liz. Y-You can’t. Don’t think about it.”

“Um... Cain...could you please hit me one more time?”

“Stop it! Liz! Stop awakening!”

I grasped at Cain’s clothes. Since he was holding me, he had no way of escaping.

“This is a very curious sensation to me... I don’t know what’s going on... I-I’m trying to process what it is, so could you please smack me one more time?”

“Wait, wait, Liz! That ain’t good! Don’t go to the light!”

“W-Wait, calm down, Pervmaster! You’ve finally become a moral, upright person! You mustn’t awaken so easily!”

Pervmaster... The name had such a nostalgic ring to it... But why?

“Now please hit me! Sir Cain! Or Melvy too, I don’t care! Come right at me!”

“Calm down, Liz! Don’t stick to me! Lay off!”

Owing to my medical exam, I was still wearing nothing up top but a bra. And in that state, in order to taste that very pleasant impact once more, I was clinging fast to him and pleading.

I could feel I was going crazy. But why? Was it because Melvy had stimulated the mana within my body? It didn’t seem like I could stop myself, and it felt more natural just to go with it anyways.

“Now. ≡ Hit me... ≡ Smack me with all your might... ≡”

“Ah! God! What a pain!”

And in the midst of all this, the door to the infirmary suddenly slid open.

“Saint Melvy, oh Saint Melvy! Is it true that I can get treated by the saint here? Poor Aina fell down a moment ago and her foot hurts so very, very much!”

The one who entered the room was Aina. Though this was a harsh way to put it, she was the female student who kept trying to suck up to every member of the hero’s party.

“So I thought I might just have the saint look at me, or something... Wait... Huh?”

Aina was dumbfounded.

I was clinging to Cain, topless save for my brassiere. Cain and Melvy both looked incredibly flustered. But what did it matter?

Hurry...hurry up and hit me!

“Sir Cain... ≡ Give it to me... ≡ Hurry and make me feel good... ≡”

“...”

“Don’t tease me, Cain... ≡ Hurry and give it to me... ≡”

Aina stood stunned, her mouth agape. She was petrified.

I must have had a look of ecstasy on my face. My cheeks must have been a rosy red. My eyes must have been misty. But what did it matter?

That fist of his would bring me to a new frontier!

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Aina screamed out, not in her fawning voice, but in a far lower one, as she took flight from the infirmary.

“Goddaammiiiiit!”

This time, it was Cain who screamed—a roar of sorrow and emptiness.

In my time at the infirmary, the world outside the window was filled with bright blue skies.

Incidentally, I regained my sanity that night and recalled coming on to Cain at the infirmary. Lying in bed, I writhed in agony and wished I were dead.

Chapter 6: Then—A Letter from Melvy

To my dearest family,

It is now the season where the trees are at their greenest. Father and Mother, from the bottom of my heart, I am delighted to hear that life is unchanged for you.

A little over half a month has passed since I left Russelum. Having passed through the Dols Channel, I am currently staying in the southern nation of Farbarossa.

The sun beats down strongly upon me. The people of this land are all brimming with cheer. Merely interacting with them makes it feel like the fiery blood of these southern lands has entered my veins.

Every moment I have shared with Hero Cain on our journeys has been dear to me. There is so much I would have never experienced had I continued to live as the saint in the cathedral.

Although I have encountered scenes of pain and sorrow and tragedy as well, I have also experienced much of the kindness, the strength and beauty we all hold within.

I respect Sir Cain and every member of his party, and I have managed to grow by leaps and bounds by traveling alongside them. As long as I'm with them, I can feel my will to protect the world growing stronger.

Having met so many comrades, and matured...yes, matured... Yes, I most definitely feel as though I *have* matured... Lately, I find myself recalling your warm, unchanging smiles. Mother, Father... I have realized how precious it is to have one thing in life that will always stay the same.

I... I have matured...yes, *matured*... Well... No...

I... I'm sorry.

It seems I have become a wicked girl.

Through this journey, I ended up becoming a wicked girl.

At first, to be honest with you, I was so terribly nervous.

The church informed me of my engagement to a hero I'd never met before, and my heart was filled with anxiety. I had heard of Cain's achievements before then, and I did undeniably look up to him, whom I thought to be an honest upright man who devoted himself to protecting the people. However, once I knew that man would become my husband, my heart was still filled with fear—for I had devoted my entire life to my role as a saint. I was but a naive girl who knew nothing of romance.

When I finally met Sir Cain, I found him to be a very kindhearted man, if a bit rough around the edges. He had an air to him that I'd never seen in anyone before, but no matter how he tried to hide it, he could not conceal the kindness that oozed out of him. I came to like him a great deal.

But at first, I was a failure of a wife.

I'm sure you must know, but by that time, he already had Princess Knight Sylphonia by his side as his bride-to-be. And, although this is not widely known, there was also a woman named Lisalinde who has devoted herself to the hero.

They were both beautiful and kind, and they wholeheartedly supported Sir Cain.

And...umm... From here on is a bit... I find it a little difficult to write about, but...they also supported Sir Cain in his *nocturnal* activities.

It happened around two weeks after I first joined the hero's journey.

We had defeated a strong member of the demon lord's army. That night, a great feast was held. Sir Cain seemed so terribly weary, but he attended the feast as he thought he ought to. In order to distract himself from the fatigue of battle, he ended up ingesting copious amounts of alcohol.

Cain was quite a bit drunker than usual.

I sat beside him and poured his drinks for him. Lady Lisalinde told a joke, and Sir Cain laughed and drank more in good humor.

It was at that moment that Sir Cain wrapped an arm around my shoulder and

pulled me close. My shoulder and chest were pressed against him, held in his strong embrace. Our bodies were stuck fast together.

I could feel my skin heating up.

Thinking back on it now, that was not anger. It was most likely a separate heat. But I cried out and pushed him away.

He hadn't acted that inappropriately...and I did not dislike it, but I had ended up acting on reflex.

Cain hit the floor, bottom first as he laughed. "Sorry, sorry. I don't know what came over me." He laughed.

My rejection caused the air to freeze for a moment, but Lady Lisalinde laughed aloud, teasing Cain and chiding him for his infidelity. This caused the hall to roar with laughter.

I had ruined the mood—I'd forced her to cover for me.

Following that incident, Sir Cain was very careful in how he interacted with me. He was just as openhearted—he showed the same rustic cheer—but he took care to create far more distance between us.

I was inadequate as his fiancée. I had to consult Lady Lisalinde on the matter.

And...that was where everything began.

"I see. If that's what's bothering you, just leave everything to me," Lady Lisalinde said as she puffed out her chest. And how dependable she seemed in my eyes.

However, thinking back now, I realize that I had been looking at none other than the devil at that moment.

Then she asked me, "Do you want to try at the real deal? Or would you like to first practice with me?"

"Huh?"

I hadn't a clue what Lady Lisalinde was saying to me. However, this was to be my turning point, the first step in my long descent to hell.

"P-Practice? Err, let's go with practice..." I said, not fully understanding what

was going on.

But who could possibly blame me for my answer?

“Well then, I suppose that’s settled!”

“Huh?”

Lady Lisalinde triumphantly dragged me to her own room. I still had a proverbial question mark lingering over my head as I was ushered in, and even still as the door clicked shut behind me.

The next morning, my mind was muddled and my face burned. All sorts of thoughts were spinning through my head—what had happened? What had been done to me? I understood logically, but my brain refused to process the information.

I simply sat there in a dampened white shirt, my eyes spinning.

Lady Lisalinde—no, Liz—still fully nude, told me, “And that was lesson number one.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll teach you much, much more tomorrow.”

She was smiling. Her smile was charming and provocative; her beauty was deeper than the ocean.

From that point onwards, I found myself trapped in a deep, inescapable mire. Could I have run away? Was there any way I could have gotten out of it? Even now, having come so far, I haven’t the slightest idea.

But there is one thing I can say...

Liz was amazing. On my first night, it felt like I had ascended straight to heaven.

And so...no matter what I did, it was pointless to even fight.

The wall I felt between myself and Cain vanished. Through Liz’s lessons, I found myself presented to him, much like a cow being shipped off to the slaughter. Sir Cain was confused, but with the help of Liz’s handmade cookies—

like the cow, I was ultimately devoured.

I could finally proudly proclaim myself to be Sir Cain's fiancée. And Liz received a firm fist to the head from Sir Cain.

But I was only continuing to tumble further and further into the depths.

Liz's lessons continued. I learned many techniques, many tricks. She taught them to me firsthand.

Liz praised me. "You're amazing!" she would tell me.

"Why, Melvy, you're overflowing with the talent for lewdness!"

"Someone of your caliber is only born every hundred years!"

"You're a master!"

"A hidden succubus wearing human skin!"

"A natural-born genius!"

She lavished me with praise. And I turned out to be the sort of human who naturally had a strong aptitude for the subject. As we journeyed, I continued to touch up on the field...and noticed that the entire world was overflowing with such wonders.

I couldn't comprehend it back when I was an innocent, ignorant soul raised within the church, but the outside world had no end to it. It was no exaggeration to say it made up a large portion of society at large.

Each time I would spot something related to the subject, it would stimulate my curiosity. My face would turn red as I'd steal glances, and I'd secretly sneak away later to have a peek.

It seems I had always been someone of that nature. My fascination could not be tempered. I continued to wade further and further into the mire.

"Wah ha ha," Cain heartily laughed one day. "Melvy might be a holy woman, but she's also a *horny* woman."

Liz told me, "Modesty is a talent. Please continue to remain innocent forever."

Of course, I am not unfaithful. I am never going to concede my body to

anyone apart from Sir Cain (and the women in his party). As Sir Cain's betrothed, I feel there is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. (As for the girls, well...it's, you know... It's just between girls...)

But, well... I have already gotten along with Sir Cain quite a few times...

If the person I was before leaving the cathedral were to look upon the current me, I'm sure she would be disappointed.

Yes... That's right...

I have changed. I have opened the door...

Mother, Father, I'm sorry...

The innocent, modest daughter you raised with love is gone. She has been replaced by a monster stained with lust. I am a failure of a daughter. The inviolable saint that the people sought after is no longer there. All that remains is a succubus's disciple.

Once the journey ends and the contraception magic is undone, please expect lots of children. That's all I can say at this point.

I have changed. I'm so sorry, Mother, Father. I changed...

My heart is now lost in the depths of that bog, and I doubt it is possible to pull it back. The pure saint that everyone so desired has vanished in her entirety...

Father, Mother. I'm sorry...

I have become a wicked girl...

... But, but please let me say one thing!

Yes, just one thing!

I know I said it myself—I'm a bad girl now...

But I'm not *that* bad, am I?!

Listen, I know that had I properly controlled myself, I wouldn't have strayed so far into the abyss. I know that self-discipline is a virtue.

But aren't you asking for a little too much of me?!

That supreme bliss isn't something that anyone can truly withstand, right?!

I mean, it was the church that officially gave me the duty of being the hero's fiancée in the first place. Umm...so...so... They were telling me to go make some babies, right?! That's practically the same as being ordered to get down and dirty with Cain!

As someone who was raised to fulfill the role of a saint from a young age, I had lived under the strict precepts of the church. I had even harsher restrictions placed on me than any of my peers, and I was told time and time again to lead a life of asceticism.

And where did that get me?!

I was suddenly thrown out into the wide world as someone's fiancée and told to make children, and you expect me to remain the same modest saintly human being?!

You're telling me to remain ascetic after my body has gone through such stimulation?!

Do you really think I can do that?!

Seriously, aren't you asking for the impossible?!

It's impossible, impossible I tell you! There was no way I could endure that burning feeling inside of me, I say! At the very least, it was impossible for *me*!

In fact, I'll say it now—the kickback from those harsh church restraints were precisely what made me so interested in pervy things! It really is scary what that feeling of liberation does to you!

It's amazing! Sex is really amazing!

Though I'm sure you know all about it! The fact that you gave birth to me and my sisters means you must have known for a long time!

Thinking back on it now, everyone in that church who had a child must have known all about this incredible, fun stimulation without exception! That dizzying pleasure!

It's a little unfair, don't you think?!

...My apologies. I lost my composure.

Anyway, I have become a wicked girl. Lately, I've learned to be a little rebellious, and I've begun to say some impertinent things.

I am no longer the girl I was before I set off—a girl who would do everything she was told and could never turn down a request.

Rather, if I didn't learn how to turn people down, I wouldn't be able to live with Liz for long. If I did not assert my discontentment, I would be eaten up whenever and wherever she wanted.

Yes, I could not have continued the journey without learning to say no.

And, in the end, I became a bad girl. So bad, I couldn't have even imagined it when I was living under the church's umbrella.

However, right now, I feel incredibly free. I'm such a bad girl I think I might just send a few complaints to the church's top brass the next time I get the chance.

Mother, Father, if you think this rebelliousness is also part of growing up, please tell me. I think it will take a load off my mind.

Thank you both for raising me with so much love.

I am doing very well. Better than ever before. Every day is fulfilling, and every step of the journey is filled with purpose.

You sent me out into the world because you trusted me, and I have been learning so many things each day. I've been growing and maturing. Please just leave the demon lord to me. I will definitely take him down alongside my trustworthy comrades.

Yes, my...*trustworthy* comrades.

Mother, Father, please take care of yourselves and spend your days in peace. I've heard that moderate exercise is important.

I'm...umm...doing some intense...*sporting* activity...so I will be fine... Yes.

I look forward to the day we meet again. And on that day, when you see your changed daughter, please feel free to laugh in my face.

Send the people at the church my regards.

Yours sincerely,

Melvy Ford Vass Russel

PS: Be careful around homemade cookies. Sometimes that is where it all goes downhill...

Chapter 7: Then—Yes, I Do Have a Bit of a Thing for Ropes

“And so, I think the burden on Sir Cain has grown a little too heavy.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes, I have to agree.”

Three women sat around a round tavern table, putting their heads together to discuss a matter most crucial.

Stars twinkled in the dark sky outside. The place was packed with those who had gathered there after a hard day's work, their voices merry, faces flushed with drink. The three women sitting calmly in the corner of the venue, however, were practically sober, only a few small cups and some snacks atop the table.

These resolute women were, of course, Liz, Sylphie, and Melvy.

“It's got to be because of Commander Darkbringer of the demon lord's army.”

“Who would have imagined that he came from the same village as Cain?”

The hero Cain had been irritated as of late.

The new formidable foe that stood in their way—Darkbringer—was Cain's childhood friend from his hometown, a man that Cain saw as practically family. But he had obtained the powers of evil and had become a commander of the demon lord's army.

Upon learning this, Cain—who was usually frank and easygoing—now seemed so anxious and depressed.

“If only there was something we could do to heal his wounded heart,” muttered Melvy, the petite saint with white hair. She sounded as worried as could be.

“Is there nothing we can do?”

“Well...at the very least, if we can find out why Mr. Darkbringer turned to the

enemy's side. If we just knew *that*..."

Sylphie and Melvy placed their hands to their chins as they thought long and hard over the matter. They wanted to stand by their precious comrade—and the man they loved—but they didn't know how.

"Understood," said Liz. "I have an idea."

"Liz..."

"Liz?"

Their eyes gathered on her.

"I suppose," Sylphie started, "that Liz knows more about the subtleties of the heart than we do."

"Umm, err... Liz... Can we count on you?"

"Yes, it is for my precious Cain. I will gladly pitch in to help."

Liz was not engaged to Cain. However, her love for him did not fall short at all when compared to his two actual fiancées.

"I will do something about the burden on Cain's heart!"

As she said that, Liz clenched her fist resolutely.

Not long after that, she lay on the bed in Cain's room at the inn. Tied up.

"Sir Cain!"

He stared in silence.

"Now! Please torment me to your heart's content!"



“The hell are you doing?!”

Liz was demanding a bit of BDSM.

After Cain had finished up his daily sword drill and returned to his room, he opened the door to find Liz already there, bound in rope tied in a tortoise-shell pattern.

“Lately, Cain, it’s like there’s been a haze over your heart. I know that it’s been hard for you.”

“Sorry for worrying you...”

“And at times like these, this is just what you need! Now! Sir Cain! Torment my body and work off some of that stress!”

“Augh, dammit! Why do I have to put up with this?!”

Liz’s strange outbursts did, after all, contribute to this very stress she was referring to.

“You see that whip there, right?”

“Yeah, I do...”

“Now you’re getting it! And here you’ve got a young woman who’s tied up and unable to resist! You’re going to use that to smack my limbs! Vigorously! With all your might! It will feel so very, very nice!”

“Seriously, quit it!”

“Hah, hah. ≡ Now, hurry. ≡ Please hit me already... ≡ The wait is killing me... ≡”

“So it’s just another one of your kinks.”

Although Liz was tied up and ready to take a beating, she was wearing underwear. She wasn’t fully naked.

“Wait. Hold on. Who tied you up? Melvy? You taught her about *this* stuff too?”

“Oh no, I tied myself up with magic.”

“I don’t get you.”

Liz had tied up herself. Which meant if she wanted to, she could probably untie herself too. Despite her appearance, she was as free as could be.

“Well, just try it. Do you see the tail of the rope there?” Liz insisted.

“The tail?”

“Yes, you see how there’s one part sticking out, right? Yes, right there. Can you give it a tug?”

There was a single strand that hung from her knots like a tail. Cain grabbed it and pulled.

Shrrrrrk!

“Ahn... ≡”

The rope grew even tighter.

“S-So, how did that feel?” asked Liz. “Are you feeling better?”

“I don’t feel any less confused than before.”

“Try giving it another pull.”

“Hmm? I don’t want to.”

“Oh, come now, just play along for now. Pretend I tricked you and go for it, Cain.”

He did as told, if only just to shut her up.

Shrrrrrk!

“Ahn... ≡ So intense... ≡”

Cain stared in silence.

But Liz simply writhed in pleasure. It did not lead to anything else in particular.

“Are you having fun, Sir Cain?”

“I’m not.”

“They call me King Masochist ♪ and sometimes King Sadist too! ♪”

“Just shut up.”

With Liz there, Cain couldn't even sleep in his own bed.

"Now, Cain. Please pull on that rope with all your might and torment me until you're satisfied! Slam all your stress straight into my body... ≡"

"Move over already."

"I've prepared a whip and candles! Extra rope and some handcuffs as well, if you want to restrain me even more strictly! Oh, and if you want to tear through my undergarments, there's a pair of scissors right on the table, so please use those!"

"..."

"I think the rope will make it hard to tear the fabric. But if you do it slowly and steadily, ripping it bit by bit and peeling it away as though you're licking me all over... I think it will work!" Liz cried out. "Now! Smash all your lust straight into my body."

Cain lightly plucked up the intruder and tossed her out of his room into the corridor.

"Eep!"

He then turned and shut the door.

"Ahn. ≡ Of all things, you chose abandonment play... ≡ What a real brute you are, Sir Cain... ≡ Aah, this rough treatment...the cold wind of the corridor...really gets me worked up... ≡"

"Shut up."

"Ahn! ≡"

Liz rolled on the floor, still bound. But Cain was exhausted—he ignored the pervert outside and lay on the bed.

"Wh-Whoa?! Liz?!"

"Ah, Melvy."

Cain heard a surprised yelp from outside the room. Melvy had just crossed the corridor.

"Umm, umm, what are you doing, Liz?"

“Well, I do have a bit of a ‘thing’ for ropes...”

“You’re really making an effort today, huh.”

“As I’m ashamed to admit. ≡”

Why is she complimenting her? Melvy really has been corrupted, Cain thought.

“Hey, Melvy. Could you go put out that oversized trash?” he called out.

“Ahn... ≡ Oversized trash... ≡ What lovely verbal abuse... ≡”

“Yes, right away, Sir Cain.”

“Oh. ≡ You’re all too much... ≡”

The succubus wriggled in glee as she lay there, abandoned.

“Do you want to come to my room, Liz? Or would you prefer I toss you in the dump outside?”

“The dump, if you would ≡”

“Okay.”

He could hear their exchange through the door.

And like that, the night came and went.

At a later date, Cain (using his own strength) managed to somehow or another reconcile with the formidable Darkbringer. And thus ended that particular arc.

Chapter 8: Now—The Guild’s Hidden Dungeon

“Allow me to confirm your order. That will be one herb-roasted chicken, one bacon-and-wild-plant pasta, two orders of fried potatoes, and two ales. Will that be all?” I asked the customers. I was in the dining area adjoining the adventurers’ guild, wearing a waitress uniform.

The customers, who were dressed in adventurer equipment, nodded and raised their voices a bit.

“Yeah, you got it just right!”

“All good, pretty lady! Gah hah hah!”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

I gave a slight bow to the excited duo before making my way off.

I was working my part-time job as a waitress. The adventurers’ guild of this town was quite a large building containing a wide assortment of facilities. Naturally, there was the receptionist counter and the bulletin board for requests; that was the guild’s primary function, after all. But the building also contained a restaurant, an inn, a teleporter room that connected to a few dungeons, a weapon shop, an armor shop, a miscellaneous item shop, and a training area. The building had everything, a fact which even brought adventurers in from outside the town.

Thus, the guild of Academy Town was something of a local landmark, and what a massive one it was indeed.

The academy’s students would often come by as well to train with the adventurers from the outside world, hoping to hone their own abilities.

“Order coming in! One herb-roasted chicken, one bacon-and-wild-plant pasta, two orders of fries, and two ales!”

“Coming right up!”

I went over to the kitchen and put in the order, and I heard a reply from my

school friend who was also working part-time. The girl busily cooking with a frying pan in one hand was Luna, my friend from school. We'd gotten to know one another at the academy.

Her pale brown hair was braided and pinned up so it did not hang down from her head. She was the daughter of a marquis who owned an estate in town, and she spoke in a polite way befitting a noble.

It was no coincidence that we were working here together. We'd gone job hunting as a group—the two of us and a few others. Of the many places we had found to work, there was a reason we chose this one in particular.

"Sorry about this one! We've got a big order coming in! Twelve hamburgers! Sixteen orders of fries! To-go!"

"Huh?! That's quite a lot!"

"Satina?!"

The door to the kitchen slammed open, and in stepped the girl who had apologetically read out the order. She was Satina, another school friend of mine, with short green hair and round eyes—a cute, lively girl. She also happened to be the reason we were working here.

Satina was the daughter of this guild's director. She often helped out around the restaurant, and given our connection to her, we decided to work here as well. On the busy days and the days they were short-staffed, we would oftentimes fill in.

On another note, since they managed such a massive facility, her family was a lot richer than the average noble.

"They'll never be able to cook that many orders in time!"

"Liz! Liz! We've got enough people on the floor, so please help out in the kitchen! I'll step in to cook too!"

"Yes, understood!"

On her orders, I donned an apron and began cooking hamburgers. I pressed the meat mixture against the grill and set the grilled patties on the buns. When we were out of meat, I quickly whipped some more up. Mincemeat, eggs,

onions, seasoning. I always did have a knack for cooking, and I finished it quickly enough.

“Here!”

“Here!”

“Here!”

“That’s eight burgers done!” Satina called out. “Just four left!”

Luna, Satina, and I worked in perfect sync, grilling up burgers at the speed of sound. Through our year’s worth of experience at the job, our coordination had been tempered to its peak.

“You’re always so fast...”

The kitchen staff looked at us with admiring eyes. Satina had helped out around the place since she was very young, so she was incredibly skilled, but we—the part-timers—did have a bit of renown around the kitchen. There was a reason they called us the Three Musketeers of the Kitchen.

And just like that, I worked together with my friends and somehow managed to overcome the lunch rush.

“Ah, shit! It’s all shit! It’s gettin’ so damn busy I can’t take it!”

As the peak hours drifted by and the restaurant had calmed down a little bit, another girl dived into the kitchen where we were working.

“‘Shit’? Adeline, you mustn’t use such foul language.”

“No, but, ya know!”

Luna tried to caution her.

The girl who’d entered the kitchen cussing was Adeline, another school friend who had taken the job along with us. She had her black hair tied up on one side and spoke with a slight accent.

It was the four of us working part-time together—me, Luna, Satina, and Adeline.

“Hear me out—hear me out, would ya? When it gets this busy, well, I just get thinkin’.”

“About what?”

“Even when it’s this busy, well, our wages don’t change.”

“Ah...”

Still in her waitress uniform, Adeline leaned her back against the kitchen wall.

“So it’s that, you know. Hourly pay is shit, is how I see it.”

“No, quit slacking and get back out on the floor.”

“Wheeew, I am *beat*.”

Adeline completely ignored Satina’s comment, yawning loudly. She was quite the free spirit.

Unlike the rest of us, she was neither a merchant nor was the daughter of a wealthy family. She was a working student who’d come all the way from the countryside of a foreign land to study at the academy. For this reason, the words she used were a bit different from ours, and she took on quite a few jobs to pay off her tuition and living expenses.

While Luna and I were only out to earn a bit of pocket change and to get some work experience, Adeline was serious about work. At least four days out of every week, she balanced her part-time jobs alongside her academics. As someone whose parents had paid for everything, I genuinely respected her.

Her foul mouth was her only flaw.

“I mean, don’tcha all think so? I think it whenever a customer comes through those doors.”

“Hmm?”

“‘Hurry up and get the hell out already.’”

“You’ve been serving our guests with that mindset?!”

The daughter of the director was shocked to hear this.

“I mean, can ya blame me?! Havin’ a buncha customers doesn’t earn us any more money, so when they come in, it’s like, ‘Get lost, don’t go orderin’ those pain-in-the-ass items.’ Give us a break already. I mean, you’ve gotta be with me, right? Luna? Liz?”

“No, please do not drag me into this.”

“I am not thinking that at all.”

“Man! What Goody Two-shoes! How *do* they stay so pure in this modern society?!”

“I’m being real here, you can’t just slack off like that.”

Even with everyone staring at her, our eyes urging her to get back on the floor, Adeline was unfazed.

“You gotta have somethin’, right? At least a bit of workplace discontentment...”

“When I see customers happily enjoying the food I’ve cooked, it feels worthwhile to me.”

“What, are you some kinda saint?”

“No, Melvy is the saint.”

“I guess. Can’t believe we actually get to interact with her.”

Melvy was a prim and pure saint who wore her heart on her sleeve.

“Satina, your family runs this place, right? Go tell your dad to do something about how the hourly rates are set up!”

“S-Something? What exactly do you want me to say?!”

“Go tell ‘im, *‘I know your secret.’*”

“You want me to threaten him?!”

Adeline was evidently in perfect form today.

“Satina... Satina, don’t you think it’s best to fire her already?”

“Point taken, Luna. I’ll try bringing it up with papa.”

“Anything but that!” Adeline fell into a panic.

She’d be out on the streets if she got fired. Her position was unfortunately rather weak.

And with that, the four of us completed our part-time work for yet another

day.

Once our shifts ended, we stripped off our uniforms and shifted over to the break room.

“Come to think of it, dungeon training is coming up, isn’t it?”

“Hmm? That time already?”

Luna and Adeline chatted as they lounged about on the sofa.

Since Satina and I still had some papers to write up, we were working on that. But the other two were taking it easy.

“Are you doing anything to get ready for it?”

“Nope. I’m countin’ on all of you to carry me.”

“Ah ha ha, should have known.”

A dungeon that was under the management of the adventurers’ guild was used as a part of the academy curriculum. It was a required class—a part of combat training where students would have to explore a dungeon on their own.

This dungeon we would be sent to was simply called the training dungeon.

The guild meticulously managed the internal layout and the monsters that appeared within it. The dungeon was also furnished with an emergency evacuation function, so it was a relatively safe place.

However the battles fought within would be very close to real battles, and the students were very excited whenever it happened.

We planned to form a team—the four of us—to challenge it.

“Are we really not going to think of a plan? If we dawdle too long, the other groups will get ahead.”

“Oh c’mon. Our plan’s always the same, isn’t it?”

“Hmm?”

Adeline placed a hand on her hip and declared, “The plan: Liz will do something about it! That is all!”

“Hey?!”

What a shoddy plan that was.

“Granted...that does take care of things most of the time.”

“Liz, we’re counting on you!”

“Now hold *on*.”

I found everyone’s complete trust...painful. I was certainly within the academy’s top five when it came to combat. However, the other three were also exceptional. Adeline and Satina were frontline fighters, while Luna and I were rear support. The gap in skill between us was not so great that we had to rely on a single person to do everything.

And yet, Adeline was actively trying to push everything onto me. How very troublesome.

“And wait, Liz. Didn’tcha get even stronger by trainin’ with Princess Sylphonia?”

“That’s...true...”

In our last combat practice, my sparring match with Sylphie had taught me how to skillfully use illusions. I was aware of the fact that my combat strength had consequently risen, but... There was an issue. In dungeon class, the difficulty of the training dungeon adjusted to match the abilities of the team taking it on.

Since our group had achieved quite good grades in the last training dungeon, the dungeon would probably be set to an even higher difficulty level this time. I just knew something terrible would happen if we let our guard down.

“N-Naturally, we are going to give it our all too!”

“You got that right! We’ll put in some elbow grease!”

“Luna, Satina...”

I could feel the strength of their friendship.

“Aight, that settles it. When in doubt, use Liz as a shield!”

“Please don’t use the rear support as shields!”

Only Adeline was heartless. *Should I just stop being friends with her?*

“Very well, then I’ll spend my remaining time developing a spell to make Adeline charge forth and explode.”

“Please don’t!”

What splendid dirty fireworks we would have on that day. After much discussion, we decided to simply go with the usual formation and do our very utmost on the day of. It was quite haphazard.

“Kay, I’ll be heading off, then.”

“I’ll be taking my leave too. Until next time, Liz, Satina.”

“See you later.”

Adeline and Luna left first. Satina and I still hadn’t finished our papers, so the work continued. The small break room was filled with the furious scratching of pens.

“Our outdoor lessons are also coming up, aren’t they?” Satina asked.

“I think so,” I replied. “The start of the school year is always full of all sorts of events.”

Once we were done with the training dungeon, we’d be spending two days and one night camping out in the wilderness.

“Ah, youth.”

“Yes, it really feels like our time.”

We chatted without a care as we focused a large part of our attention on our work. The clamor of the dining area did faintly reach our ears, and this sound was mixed in with the scraping of our pen nibs against the paper.

We spent a leisurely time, filling line upon line of the simple forms. And a while later, the door to the break room suddenly opened.

“Hmm?”

Satina and I barely glanced over, reacting to the sound. *Who could it be? Did Adeline or Luna forget something?* I thought for a moment. But the one who appeared was someone I hadn’t anticipated at all.

“Huh? Sir Cain?”

“Hmm? Liz?”

The one who appeared was none other than Cain. And he wasn't alone—he was accompanied by his comrades: Rachel the warrior, and Mitter the knight.

Rachel was a petite woman with purple pigtails. Contrary to her small build, she fought by swinging around a massive hammer, and was known across the lands for being a powerful warrior.

Mitter, meanwhile, was a renowned noble and knight from a foreign land. He had a slender body and lustrous golden hair, and he would wear sophisticated silver armor in battle. There was a rather androgynous look to his delicate face.

At first, there were dishonorable rumors about Mitter—rumors that he had been asked to join the hero's cause as a publicity stunt. These could not have been further from the truth. As it turned out, he was an incredibly skilled fighter. First-rate, in fact.

But what were they doing here? We were in a small room in the back of the adventurers' guild.

“What are you doing here? Liz?”

“Oh, come now, Sir Cain. That's what I want to ask you.”

We both cocked our heads.

I highly doubt that Cain is also working part-time here.

“Ah, Sir Cain. Are you here for that dungeon?”

“Yeah, if we could.”

But within that confusion, Satina stood from her seat and turned towards the hero. Evidently, there were some circumstances I was not privy to.

“‘That’ dungeon?”

“Y-Yeah...” When I asked, Satina gave a troubled smile. “Sorry, Liz. This one's a secret between the guild and the hero. I can't tell you about it.”

“Hmm, a guild secret?”

“No, feel free to tell Liz. She’s all right.”

“Huh? Really?”

I thought that an outsider like me would need to stay out of the adventurers’ guild’s secrets, but Cain casually spoke to the contrary. Satina’s eyes widened a bit, but Cain proceeded to take out a cigar and light it as though it was nothing.

“Right, well, it needs to get taken care of. Yeah, I think it’s fine if she knows.”

“Well...I guess Liz is fine.”

“Huh? I-Is that really all right?”

Even Mitter and Rachel gave their endorsement. *Hmm? Huh? What do you mean “Liz is fine”? I don’t think we’ve spoken before...*

“There are actually two reasons we’re taking an extended stay in Academy Town. First, to treat our wounded comrades and supplement our forces. That one’s the official reason, but...”

“But?”

“There’s actually one more reason. We’re here to clear the dungeon hidden in this city.” Paying no heed to my confusion, Cain went on, “As everyone is aware, the guild here manages dungeons that rank from F-to A-Rank. You know that much, right?”

“Yes, I’ve heard.”

“Well, there’s one more dungeon that hasn’t been made public. A super high-difficulty SSS+-Rank dungeon. We’re trying to conquer it.”

“Wait, SSS+...?”

Dungeon difficulty usually ranged from F to S. The highest-ranked dungeon that a first-rate adventurer could challenge was classified as S-Rank. However, there were rumors and urban legends that told of SS-Rank dungeons that only a select few would ever dare enter.

This time, however, Cain had distinctly said SSS+-Rank. *There’s something like that in this city?*

“We obviously can’t go public about the existence of such a dungeon, but it

certainly lies beneath this city.”

Rachel added, “To make matters worse, legend has it that the treasure required to undo the seal on the demon lord’s castle sleeps at the very deepest part of it. Point is, we came here to get our hands on it.”

“Th-The seal on the castle?”

“Yeah, we *need* to have that treasure.”

It was undoubtedly an essential item to Cain, who had been ordered to slay the demon lord.

Publicly, the heroes were supposedly staying in Academy Town for rest and recuperation...but was this actually a crucial part of their mission?

“We don’t want to have any idiots hearing about an SSS+ dungeon and heading off to challenge it out of curiosity. So this matter is top secret,” Rachel explained.

“But it has to do with defeating the demon lord, and that’s why we were told about it. Apart from a small portion of the guild, we’re the only ones who know,” Mitter added.

Then Cain said, “Don’t you go telling anyone, Liz.”

“Y-Yes! I understand completely!” I firmly replied.

No wait... Why are they telling me anyway? They could have just, well...not?

“I-I see. So, Satina, you know about it because you’re the director’s daughter?”

“Pretty much. Papa told me to support the heroes as best I can. Giving them the best possible rooms at our hotel, and such.”

“Hmm.”

Come to think of it... I did have a chance to stop by Sylphie’s room before, and it had been a room in the first-rate hotel managed by the guild. It seemed that the guild was supporting their efforts more than I had anticipated.

So that’s the situation.

“So anyway,” said Satina. “You can reach that hidden dungeon through a

secret door in this room.”

“Huh?”

Satina moved the desk in the corner aside and stuck a slender key into a gap in the floor below. There was a click, then the floor opened up, revealing a set of stairs leading down.

“Oooh...” A gasp of wonder leaked from my lips.

“We plan to spend two years working our way through this dungeon. A year ago, we inflicted a grievous wound on the demon lord, and it seems it will take a few years for it to heal,” Cain explained.

Mitter took over, “During that time, the demon lord’s army can’t make any major moves. That’s what’s letting us focus on recovery, and on completing this objective.”

“I see...” I nodded. It had been a huge headline a year ago. *The Hero Party Nearly Strikes Down the Demon Lord*, it said. “That’s amazing. It must have been quite an intense battle. What was it like?”

“Jeez.”

“Ow?!”

For some reason, Cain flicked me in the face.

“Wh-What are you doing all of a sudden?”

“I just get irritated when you ask me about the demon lord battle.”

“Huh? Wh-Why? Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, holding my head, but Cain didn’t seem keen on talking about it.

I turned my eyes to Rachel and Mitter, but they, too, merely looked at me as if to say, “Don’t bring it up.” Their mouths remained shut.

Wh-Why? What’s going on here?

“Anyways! We’ll be spending three days down in that dungeon. Our other members are still injured. For now, we’ll see how far we can get with our available forces. Once we start making attempts, though, we’ll probably be down there for weeks at a time.”

“Huh? Three days? Weeks? What are you going to do about school?”

“We’ll take time off, of course.”

Hmm, well, naturally. To them, the most crucial thing was defeating the demon lord—not school. The academy surely understood that.

“Come to think of it...” I said. “We’re supposed to have dungeon class in three days. Are you going to be absent for it?”

“Damn right we will. What good is a training dungeon going to do for us, anyways?”

“Well, point taken,” Satina concurred.

A dungeon that Cain’s party couldn’t clear wouldn’t be a training dungeon at all. It would just be hell.

Wait...huh?

“Are you guys even going to be able to graduate? Dungeon class is mandatory...”

“Ah...”

Cain and his comrades had transferred into the high school division as second-years. Our high school only went up to third year, so we would be graduating in two years.

However, when I asked Cain, he gave a troubled look, scratched his head, and said, “Well...there are a few courses the academy exempted us from. One of them’s dungeon class. We already have enough technique when it comes to close combat and magic. Don’t need any more of that.”

“Oh, in that case...”

“But...” Cain furrowed his brow. “We’ll definitely be lacking in the attendance department...”

“Huh?”

“I mean, we’re going to be going down there again and again, Liz,” Rachel explained. “We won’t be able to go to school, then, so we won’t have enough credits by the time two years are up.”

“Certainly...”

Huh? That means...

“Are you going to repeat a year, then?”

“No, once we clear the dungeon, we’ll have to go off and capture the demon lord’s castle. I reckon we’ll leave this place behind.”

“Leave...school?!”

I was stunned. It seemed Satina had not been aware of this either, as both of our eyes widened.

“What? Not much else we can do. I doubt I have to explain how much more important slaying the demon lord is than graduating school.”

“B-But if you do that...”

“Hmm?”

“You’ll be a high school dropout, Cain!”

“Huh?!”

Cain’s mouth hung open at my statement.

“Dropout... Who cares about that?!”

“I care!”

“No, no, she’s right,” said Satina. “The world’s pretty harsh to dropouts these days!”

“Wait, why is that your biggest concern?!”

Just going off common sense, it was very important to have good future prospects.

“You’ll be at a huge disadvantage while job hunting!”

“Job hunting?!”

Cain sent me a look of genuine surprise. *But, but you know! This is important! Even if you defeat the demon lord, it will be terrible if you can’t find a company that will hire you.*

“I didn’t even go to elementary or middle school in the first place!”

“So you’ve got no academic credentials?!”

“A-Are you going to be all right, Sir Cain?! That’s a pretty nasty situation you’re in there!”

“Why the hell would I need to go job hunting?!”

“You’re not going to find a job, then?!”

This was a very problematic statement to hear from Cain.

“H-Hey, hold on, hero. So you’re just proclaiming you’re going to be a playboy? I’m not so sure what to think of that...”

“Whoever becomes his wife will be set up to face a lot of hardship in the future. Poor Sylphie and Melvy...”

“Ah! Shut it! Just shut up! In what world would the bloke who killed the bloody demon lord have to go job hunting?! That’s the point I’m trying to get across here!”

I-Is this really all right...? Those people who grow negligent just because they insist they have connections...ultimately don’t find employment, can never settle down, and are always wandering from place to place... Isn’t that usually how it goes?

Does he really have a plan for the future?!

“Wh-Whether I graduate or not, that’s got nothing to do with you...!”

“That may be true, but ultimately, you’re the one who’s going to be in for a world of hurt if you ignore this sort of advice.”

“Argh! What are you, my mom?!”

Well, maybe I am being a bit too nosy.

But as that thought crossed my mind, Rachel grinned and chimed in, “Oh c’mon, Cain. What do you mean it’s got nothing to do with Liz?”

“Hmm?”

“She said it right there. Whoever becomes your wife’s gonna have a lot of

trouble.”

“Grr...”

“No, that has completely nothing to do with me...right?”

Rachel had said something completely incomprehensible. At present, I did not have any intentions of becoming Cain’s wife. And yet, for some reason was Cain making a bitter face like he had been struck in the vitals.

“Aaaaaah! Shut it! Shut up, all of you! Now, you two! Enough nonsense—let’s get in that dungeon already!”

“Huh? Oh, sure.”

“Ah! He ran away! Cain just ran away!”

“Shut up! Shut up!”

Cain’s face was bright red as he rushed down the hidden stairwell. As he fled from the room, Rachel shouted teasing words from atop the stairs. Mitter gave a wry smile as he followed behind the hero.

“Make sure you put some thought into graduation! Sir Cain!”

“Draft out a proper plan for your future!”

“Ah, seriously! Shut up! Shut up! Just let me do what I want!” Cain cried out like a pubescent boy as he cupped his hands over his ears and disappeared into the dark.

“He really makes me worry...”

“I know, right?”

I concurred with Rachel and shared a laugh.

I knew I was sticking my nose where it didn’t belong, but perhaps it was best if I helped him out with his studies. It hurt my heart when I imagined the troubles his fiancées, Sylphie and Melvy, would have to go through down the line.

And, how to put this...? Since we were all here, together, I wanted us all to graduate from the same school. I thought that would surely be the best youth we could have.

A certain...something I didn't quite understand was whispering to me from the depths of my chest.

"Well then... I'll be off challenging this strongest dungeon in the world, or whatnot."

"Good luck, Rachel."

"Take care."

Rachel lightly stretched out as she walked forth. I could still hear the dull, echoing sound of Cain's hasty footsteps. His intentions of leaving as soon as possible were amply conveyed.

"Hee hee..."

He was acting like a man who'd been lectured by his wife. I couldn't help but laugh.

Chapter 9: Now—The Secret Boss of the Red Lights

Aina, a student of the Forst National Academy, was feeling impatient.

“Grrrr...”

She held her head as she gritted her teeth in frustration.

Just the other day, she had come across a most curious scene in the academy’s infirmary. She’d seen the hero Cain embracing Liz, a student of the same academy. And they weren’t just holding one another. Liz had been half naked, shamelessly wearing nothing from the waist up but a brassiere.

Her face had been red and lustful as she pleaded for pleasure from the hero. No matter how Aina tried to spin it in her head, they were clearly going at it.

“Grrrrrr...”

Aina felt a strong sense of hostility towards Liz, not in the least because Liz had wormed her way into the very position Aina herself had been aiming for. From where Liz now sat, she could suck up to the heroes and become renowned as someone *special*, beloved by the brave men and women who performed heroic deeds all across the world.

If she could pull this off, it would strengthen her position in the academy, and it would give her an advantage after graduation as well. Indeed, if she could become Cain’s lover, that alone would probably be enough to let her live affluently for the rest of her life.

But for some reason, Liz had somehow managed to seduce the hero, right under Aina’s nose. That bland honor student, that coward who couldn’t hurt a fly, had somehow buttered the hero up when she wasn’t looking.

“Grrrrrrrrrrrr...”

Aina gritted her teeth. A girl, whom she hadn’t even registered as a threat, had stolen a march on her.

Now, Aina *could* have very well spread rumors far and wide about what had

happened in the infirmary. That would have given people a rather crude impression of Liz, and this would in turn stain her dignity as a noble. But truly, it would end in a very brief suspension at worst and nothing more. No, it was very possible that she would not suffer any real consequences at all.

On top of all the studies, the academy was also a place for noble sons and daughters to search for marriage partners. The boys and girls were all currying up to one another more or less, and at times they *would* hide away and get up to no good. In most cases, people simply pretended they didn't see anything. In fact, there was the terrifying possibility that by spreading those rumors, Aina might even get it in everyone's heads that Liz and Cain were in a relationship. If she exaggerated it to make Liz seem even more lewd, it would harm Cain's reputation by the fact of his taking Liz as his lover—and then, even if Aina did ultimately accomplish her goal of usurping Liz's spot, she would have sullied the prestige of that coveted role.

[illegible]

What was she supposed to do? Aina held her head and pondered the matter.

"Of course."

Suddenly, she lifted her head, her eyes popping open.

The dungeon class was set to take place in three days' time. They would use the teleportation circles managed by the adventurers' guild to warp to a dungeon and clear it. On the way back, they would be using teleportation circles too.

And...what if she did a little tampering with those circles?

This could work... she thought. She had some very close friends within the guild, and within the teaching staff too. And if I rely on them to mess with only Liz's circle...

“Hee hee hee...”

Aina's lips curled into a thin smile.

The plan was settled.

* * * * *

“Wh-Wh-Where exactly are we...?!”

“This is strange, right?! Why did a dungeon teleportation circle take us to a place like this?!”

“This is crazy! I’ve never heard of anything like this before!”

The sun was setting, night falling over the streets. And there we were, our group completely at a loss. It was dungeon training day. Our group managed to conquer our dungeon with little difficulty and achieve good grades in the process. All that remained was to use the return circle at the deepest depths to return to the guild, and yet...

For some reason, the place we were warped to was certainly not the guild.

“I mean, this is definitely the red-light district!” Satina cried out.

There were women in flashy clothing strutting about all around us, and men in opulent clothing inspecting the shops with slovenly looks on their faces. The road was lined with so many lights one might forget it was night. A woman nearby worked miracles on the men with her high-pitched, coquettish voice. She beckoned with her hand, her chest exposed, and they flocked to her like moths to a flame.

An obscene smell wafted from all over.

“The red-light district?!” Luna and I exclaimed.

It *was* the red-light district.

“Wh-Wh-What are we doing here?!”

“No clue! Don’t ask me! We should’ve been blasted right back to the guild!”

We were in a panic.

It seemed that only our group—Luna, Satina, Adeline, and I—had been sent here, as I could not see heads or tails of any other students. *We’re the only ones who ended up here?*

“Maybe the transfer circle was acting up?”

“What exactly would have to go wrong for it to send us to the red-light district?”

The training dungeon had its difficulty adjusted based on the past performance of the group challenging it. There were a number of different dungeons they made use of, and ours was the most difficult one they had to offer. Since there were few students who utilized it, it was hard to imagine it had been worn down or overused. So, for it to be malfunctioning...

What's more, it had been a one-way warp. We could not return to the dungeon from here.

"Once I get home, I can find out who was in charge of the dungeons today..."

"Satina, rather than finding out the one responsible, right now, we must focus on how to get out of this situation."

"Sorry, Luna. Nearly forgot about that."

Right, we had to prioritize securing safety for ourselves. We all quivered. *What do we do? If we stand around here...*

"Hmm? What are a bunch of brats doing here?!" Unsurprisingly, a threatening voice rang out from behind us.

"Eep?!" We all jumped. We all turned our heads stiffly, necks ratcheting like broken clockwork, to see four large-built men looking down over us.

"This is no place for kids! You got that?!"

"You come here to start something?!"

"Eek?!"

We cowered as they bludgeoned us with their jeers. They were presumably something like security around these parts. Their heads were all clean-shaven, their eyes were sharp, and they had tattoos covering their bodies. They gave off the impression of folks who made a living by interacting with their fair share of ruffians—and it was usually their fists that did the talking for them.

"Uh-Umm, well... We came here by a teleportation circle prepared by the academy. That's why we're here, and..." Luna stammered, her voice quavering. "Err... Have you heard anything about the academy preparing a lesson of any kind around here?"

"Huh?! The academy? Using this place for lessons?!"

“Of course not, dumbass!”

“You think we’re stupid?! Huh?!”

“We are well aware of how crazy that sounds!” I found myself retorting.

“Wait, those uniforms... Are you students of Forst Academy?”

“Huh? Oh, yes...we are...”

“I’m surprised you could tell just from the uniforms.”

“Ah, well, there are a few special cases around here,” one of the guards said, “so we’re knowledgeable about unif— Wait, you girls don’t need to know about that.”

“Huh?”

He scratched his head and changed the topic. “Anyways, get lost. You’ll find that not everyone here’s gonna treat you right. This district’s boomed in the past two to three years, see. A lot of it’s still untamed. It ain’t no place for some prim and proper Forst Academy students. No telling what’ll happen if you stick around.”

No one said anything. We knew that this wasn’t the right place to be. What we didn’t know was how to leave.

“B-But... We don’t know where we’re supposed to go!” said Luna.

Satina added, “We’ll be lost even if we make it out of here! Could you help us?”

“Why do we gotta go that far for you?! We ain’t runnin’ no nursery!”

“Just get out of here! You want those customers to take you or something?!”

“Eep!”

They continued shouting at us, threats heavy in their voices. We shrunk back—well, all but one of us.

“Hey, don’t be so stingy. Can’tcha call up a wagon to take us back to the academy?”

“Oh, this girl’s a bold one!”

“You’re in more danger the longer you loiter around here!”

Adeline was quite calm, given the predicament.

But what now? Clearly, we couldn’t stay here any longer. But we did not know how to get back, nor did we have the proper means. For what it was worth, I did have a general idea of where we were. But we had come by teleportation circle—it was theoretically possible we were not in the red-light district I was thinking of, and we were instead in some distant foreign land.

If we just ran out without any leads and it was all a far cry from what I expected, we would be left completely lost with nowhere to go. Additionally, as there was no need for anyone to take money into a dungeon expedition, we were all completely penniless.

Now, what do we do...

“What’s all the noise? Something happen?”

That was when a woman appeared. The guards turned to look at her.

“Boss Vanessa...”

“Evening, boss!”

“Sorry for the trouble!”

The guards loudly greeted her and lowered their heads.

She sported purple hair, which grew all the way to her waist. With her provocative clothing and the pipe she held in one hand, she carried an air of charm and allure. She was quite clearly a seasoned veteran of the industry.

“What’s wrong?”

“A few brats slipped in.”

“Don’t go making a ruckus over something so petty. What, you think that those girls can’t hear you if you’re not yelling at the top of your lungs?”

“Sorry, boss!”

It took only a few stern words from the woman called Vanessa for these robust men to shrink back. Pushing them aside, the woman came out to stand before us.

“That’s not to say you’re all innocent either. It doesn’t matter the reason. This is no place for honest young ladies like you. You can’t really blame anyone for —”

In the midst of her scolding, Vanessa suddenly cut herself off.

“...”

“...?”

“.....?”

For some reason, she was stock-still. She was acting so strangely that we were in sync with the guards, all cocking our heads curiously in unison.

“.....”

Yes, for some very strange reason, Vanessa’s mouth was agape and her eyes were open wide. It looked as though she was in shock. The pipe was in danger of falling right through her fingers.

What about us does she find so surprising? No...she’s only looking at...me...?

“Mm?”

“Huh?”

Vanessa then moved with gusto.

“Master!”

“Huh?!”

For some inexplicable, incomprehensible reason, she knelt in front of me.

“Master! It’s been far too long! Have you been well?!”

“Huh? Err? Huh?!”

“I never thought you’d come to see me! I’m moved to tears! Even now, I’ve continued to polish all those techniques you taught me!”

“No, umm...well...?”

What’s wrong with this person?!

Vanessa passionately grabbed my hand. “It’s no exaggeration to say our little

enterprise has only managed to grow this far thanks to you, Master! Please, by all means, spend the day appreciating our matured red-light district!”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Oh, you must be tired from your long journey, Master. Hey! You lot! Tidy up our finest room! On the double!”

“Huh?”

“Er... What’s this all about, boss?”

She sent a stern look to the floundering guards.

“Get to it already! Don’t leave Master waiting!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

“S-Sorry for that.”

They flew off, overpowered by her intimidating aura. The building they rushed into was quite a bit larger, and quite a bit more luxurious than those around it.

“Now, Master. For now, please go in. We can have some tea as we wait for your room to be prepared.”

“N-No, I have no idea what’s going on, so... I’ll have to turn down your offer.”

“Now, now, don’t be so reserved! Please, come right in!”

“Aaaaaah!”

So, still without a clue of what was happening, I was forcefully dragged into a building in the red-light district. The other three followed behind with anxious faces.

Just like that, we had disappeared into the night...

* * * * *

Aina’s plan had been simple.

If she wanted to wound the dignity of that eyesore Liz, then spreading bad rumors was still her best bet. So long as she could spread rumors that Liz had visited the red-light district and gotten up to some debauchery there, she would be able to destroy her reputation within the academy.

So, using the transport circle in the training dungeon, she had whisked her away to the red-light district.

Using a teacher who favored her and a guild employee who was close to her house, Aina had made it so the dungeon's transport circle would malfunction only when Liz was using it. As a result, Liz was now in the midst of the red-light district, timid and flustered to an amusing degree.

Now, Aina was hiding in the shadows of the buildings peeking at them. And, she was taking photos as evidence. She'd just need to get an article in the academy newspaper—an anonymous tip would do it. Then everyone would know that Liz came to play in the red-light district after class. A bit of dramatization wouldn't hurt either.

That alone would be enough to brand her as someone unworthy of her dignified noble lineage.

Aina watched as the four girls were threatened by guards, until a prostitute came up to talk to them.

“Heh heh... Heh heh heh...”

Aina snapped another picture. She couldn't stop laughing.

In the midst of it, she could have sworn the lady got down on her knees and paid some respect to Liz, but surely it had just been her imagination. There was no way something like that would happen.

“Hmm?”

The prostitute was pulling Liz along by the hand.

This was her big chance—once she actually entered the shop, there were no excuses that could get her out of the situation. Aina put a hand over her mouth to hide her smile as she slowly made her approach.

* * * * *

“I think you have the wrong girl,” I told her, flat out.

We were in a room in a brothel. It was very spacious with paintings and furniture that had clearly cost quite a lot of money; for some reason, we were being treated like VIPs.

Seriously, what was this? I did not remember doing anything to deserve this treatment.

“Oh, what are you talking about, Master? You *are* Master Liz, aren’t you? I mean, no matter how I look at you, you’re clearly my master,” Vanessa, the purple-haired beauty, insisted.

She seemed to be a leader of sorts in the district. She exuded a bewitching aura even as she sat simply at ease, and it felt like I would be sucked in if I stared for too long. But why was she calling me *Master*?

I knew nothing. I understood nothing. Why would she lead me off and provide so much hospitality?

I was joined on the sofa by Luna, Satina, and Adeline. Though they trembled anxiously, they were looking at me with hope—the hope that I could get them through this situation.

No, I seriously don’t know what’s going on either...!

“You really aren’t Master Liz? The messiah who spread the 108 Secret Arts to what was a red-light district on the verge of collapse?”

“I don’t know anything about that! Nope! Not at all! Never heard of them before!”

I raised my voice, prompting Vanessa to stare at me, startled.

“You’re not Master Liz? The one who held the Seven-Day-Seven-Night Think Fast or Your Loins Won’t Last Bedtop-Training Tournament from Hell to personally instill the 108 Secret Arts into the five of us?!”

“What sort of pervert does that?! No clue, not me!”

“You’re not the one who tamed wild Carme, the one who impertinently asked, ‘Hmph, why do I have to recognize someone like *you*?’ before you brought her to climax in two seconds flat?!”

“There’s got to be something wrong with that girl you’re talking about! Not my problem! I’ve never heard of, never met, and never want to meet that person in all my life!”

Why do I have to be mistaken for such a pervert?!

Holding her head, Vanessa groaned, “This is ridiculous!”

“That should be my line!”

I’m the one who should be complaining here!

My dear classmate Luna stammered, “W-Wait, Liz, who *are* you really?!”

“I never knew you were a queen of the night...” Satina added.

You have it all wrong! It’s just a misunderstanding.

“Never thought you’d have another face you could never tell yer school friends about...!”

“She usually acts like an honor student! But in reality, she rules over the town at night, leading men around by the nose. The legendary harlot! Is that you, Liz?!”

“Wrong! I am an honest-to-goodness prim, pure, and proper noble lady!”

Why did someone as wholesome as myself have to be subject to such allegations of all things?!

“Cringe.”

“You’re so cruel!”

Adeline was looking at me with cold eyes. *That actually stings!*

“Ahem... Am I really mistaken? You quite clearly look identical to my master, and you even have her voice... But I don’t see any reason for you to lie.”

Vanessa seemed sincerely troubled. So was I.

And as we continued on like that, getting nowhere, the door to the room slid open and a new woman stepped in. “Good grief, you’re as foolish as ever, Vanessa.”

“Ma-Madam!”

The one who entered was a tall woman with black hair pinned behind her head. She looked quite a bit older than Vanessa with some thin wrinkles emerging on her face, but her demeanor was frighteningly elegant. Just one look at her told me she stood at the top of all the harlots. I instinctively knew

she was the head honcho of the entire red-light district.

When she entered, Vanessa immediately stood from her chair. We took after her and did the same.

“Welcome to our humble abode, my fair ladies. I am the senior proprietress around these parts. You may call me Sumire.”

“A...a pleasure...”

Sumire offered us a deep bow.

“My apologies, but could I borrow Vanessa for a moment?”

“Huh? Err, yes... Go right ahead.”

“Pardon me.”

With that, Sumire led Vanessa to a corner of the room.

“Good grief, must you always be so scatterbrained?”

“B-But Madam! That person is clearly our master!”

“You fool, remember what Cain said the last time he passed through? Master suffered a severe injury and lost her powers!”

“Huh?! Do you think that extends to her memory too?”

“It’s plausible. Her power was well beyond the domain of mankind, after all...”

The two of them whispered something in a corner, but we couldn’t quite pick up on what they were saying. Eventually, they returned.

“Due to her misunderstanding, our Vanessa here has said some incredibly rude things to you. You have my humblest apologies, Liz.”

“I’m sorry, Liz.”

“Ah, no... As long as you understand...”

But you’re not going to stop using my nickname, huh?

“We’ve already sent out a messenger to get in touch with the academy. They should have a carriage ready for you soon. Anyways, we’ve already done what we can, so please take it easy and enjoy your tea.”

“Huh?! A-Are you sure?”

“Why, of course.”

I’d never expected it to turn out like this. We weren’t being driven out, and they were even preparing transportation for us.

“Umm... By the way, where are we, exactly?”

“Oh right, you did say you came here by teleportation circle. You’re in Gyauk Down.”

“Oh, Gyauk Down!”

We all nodded at that. We’d heard that name before. The town was around a three-hour carriage ride from the academy and was relatively nearby.

As the nation’s dignity hinged on the learning environment provided by the academy, the closest brothels, gambling houses, and other such facilities had been removed. But that did nothing to lessen the demand for their services, and they remained firmly rooted even after being expelled from Academy Town. It was thus the town of Gyauk Down that rose to fulfill the role.

“So we were in Gyauk Down all along...”

“I’ve never been here before.”

Of course, academy students were forbidden from visiting. That was why we couldn’t tell where we were even after we’d gotten a look around.

“Come to think of it, those guards did know we were from the academy just from lookin’ at our uniforms,” said Adeline.

“We are from the closest school after all,” said Satina. “That explains it.”

They did have a point. Given that information, it shouldn’t have been too difficult to deduce where we were.

Hmm? But didn’t one of those guards say something... Right, they were knowledgeable about uniforms due to “special” circumstances. He also said that we didn’t have to know about it... Special circumstances? Well...whatever.

“But that’s a relief. The malfunctioning circle didn’t send us too far away.”

“Heh heh, I suppose you could have made it home on your own. Did I

overstep my bounds?” Sumire asked.

“Oh no! Not at all! Truly, thank you for everything!”

Would we have been able to return on our own if we knew where we were? No, without a map, we’d have no way of knowing which direction to walk in. And clearly, the red-light district was not so welcoming that we could just go up to people on the street for information.

I didn’t know why she was being so accommodating, but I was sincerely grateful for Sumire’s kindness.

“Pardon me for asking, but...how much of a reward do you think will suffice?”

“I don’t need any payment. Just think of it as an exchange for all the trouble we caused Liz over there.”

Why does this sound too good to be true?!

“B-But...”

“Granted, I understand that this might sound shady to you, doing so much for nothing in return... Then, how about we do it like this? Instead of a reward, why don’t you consult with us a bit?”

“Consult?”

Sumire stuck up her index finger. “Yes, a little over two years ago, our red-light district saw massive reforms and development... But though our scale has increased since then, we have seen little change on a fundamental level. It seems that some people are starting to lose interest.”

I listened in silence.

“Do you know of any new services or business models, any ideas that have never been implemented before?”

“I have absolutely no idea!” It was a far more outrageous consultation than I had anticipated. “No, no, no, umm... Even if you ask me that, I don’t have an answer for you! I mean, I don’t even know what work in the red-light district entails, so of course I can’t come up with any new ideas or improvements!”

“No need to be so humble. With your wisdom, Liz, I’m sure you can come up

with something brilliant.”

“Why do you trust me so much?!”

What is this, I don't even...

“Y-You're not going to drive us out if I can't answer, are you?”

“No, most certainly not, but... Well, I just know you can do it, Liz. If you just think about it a little, I'm certain that the splendid ideas will gush forth like a bountiful spring.”

“Why do you figure?! Madam, who exactly do you think I am?”

I'm just a normal student, you know...

For a while now, it had been nothing but one incomprehensible thing after another. The circle warped us to somewhere strange, and the prostitutes of the red-light district mistook me for their master. Now, the big boss was coming to me with the strangest of discussions...

What is this? What is going on today?

As I clutched my head, fretting, there came a voice.

“Pardon me, I'm coming in.”

“Huh?”

The door to the room slammed open, and one ill-mannered man brazenly sauntered in. He was tall with black hair. And seeing him, our eyes widened.

“Sir...Sir Cain?!”

We stared at each other.

This sudden intruder was none other than Cain.

“Good grief, you fool... Playing around in a place like this...”

As soon as he saw me, Cain heaved a great sigh.

“C-Cain?! What are you doing here?!”

“Are you stupid or something? You went out to have your fun, and I'm here to bring you back.”

“I am not playing around here!”

You suddenly appear out of nowhere and immediately start saying rude things to me. There’s no way I would be playing in a brothel! I am a prim and proper virgin! And wait... Why is the hero going on errands anyway?

“Apologies as always, Sumire. It looks like our resident idiot caused you some trouble.”

Cain greeted the madam as he lit his cigar and breathed out a pillar of smoke.

“Not at all, Cain. I would never call it trouble.”

“How many did she eat up? I’ll pay the fees...”

“Sir Cain! I am not playing around!”

Cain did not seem to have a shred of nervousness about being in a brothel. He was bold and brazen, as if he’d been in them hundreds of times before. Additionally, he seemed to be well acquainted with the madam, as he eschewed his public polite tone for his natural gruff register.

“Sir...Sir Cain? Why did you come to pick us up personally?” I asked him.

“Well, after I got back from *that* dungeon, the guild was going crazy, see. I asked around, and as it turned out, your training dungeon’s transport circle malfunctioned and sent you off to somewhere else, right?”

“Oh, so the guild sent you to investigate? But why did you come here, then?”

“Well of course, when Liz vanishes without telling anyone, it makes sense to check the nearest red-light district, right?”

“What makes you say that?! Why does that make sense?! Cain, what exactly do you take me for...?!”

There was a terrifying disconnect in his line of logic. *I’ll have you know, I’ve never gone to a red-light district! Not once in my life...!*

“But here you are.”

“Indeed I am! I’m definitely here, I admit it!”

But that’s not my fault!

As I spoke with Cain, the three girls beside me began to gossip in quavering voices.

“Th-The hero?! Wh-Wh-Why is the hero personally picking us up?!”

“Hero? Ain’t he actin’ a bit different from usual?”

“Hmm?”

Luna and Adeline still had yet to contain their surprise at the hero’s arrival.

He usually pretended to be polite and pleasant whenever he was in front of people. His rough, unfiltered demeanor came as a bit of a surprise to them. Since Satina was already privy to his normal behavior, she wasn’t as surprised as them.

“You’re Liz’s friends...Luna and Adeline, right?”

“Oh! To think that the hero remembered my name...!”

Luna folded her hands in front of her chest, her face turning red with excitement. She was a huge fan of the hero. Indeed, she had been more excited than anyone when the hero’s party had transferred to our school.

“Oh yeah... I grew up talking like this. It’s my natural self. Don’t you go spreading this around, all right?”

“Is that true?! O-Of course, I won’t tell a soul! I would never do anything the hero didn’t want me to!”

“Hey, are you some kinda bad boy?” asked Adeline.

“Damn straight.”

“You’re a total scam artist.”

“Shut it.”

“I could make a killing, selling this to the papers.”

“You got a death wish or something?”

She was as brazen as ever. Cain defiantly blew out a large puff of smoke.

“Hey, Adeline! You mustn’t cause trouble for Sir Cain! He may forgive you, but I won’t!”

“Ah, Luna’s serious.”

Luna grabbed Adeline by the shoulders and shook her back and forth. It seemed the list of people who knew the true Cain had grown by two.

Turning to Cain, Sumire said, “Cain. I’m currently consulting with Liz on a pressing matter.”

“Hmm? Consulting?”

“I was asking her if she had any ideas for a new service we could run in the red-light district.”

“Yes, that’s right! Did you hear that, Cain?! She’s asking me ridiculous questions! A new service in the red-light district... There’s no way I could think of something like that!”

“Sounds like a job for you. Give it a bit of thought, Liz.”

“Why?! This is *not* a job for me!”

Cain said it as though it was blatantly obvious. Meanwhile, Vanessa poured him a cup of something or another which he downed at once. He was quite sloppy. His *treatment of me* was very sloppy.

“I, or rather, most normal people, have absolutely no connection to the red-light district in the first place...! I mean, can you blame anyone?! You could seriously harm your reputation if you’re seen there... And, well, the red-light district itself is kinda embarrassing... And hard to approach...! Ah...”

“Hmm?” Cain looked right at me.

“Do go on,” Sumire urged.

I felt like I was catching on to something. I placed a hand to my mouth and thought as everyone’s eyes gathered on me.

“If visiting is difficult in and of itself... Why not send out requests by letter or what have you...and have the women go out to visit their houses? You could set up a...delivery system of sorts...”

“...”

“.....”

“J-Just kidding! That’s impossible, isn’t it? Yes, it’s just a layman’s opinion, so p-please laugh it off and forget I ever said it. Ah ha ha ha!”

“...”

“.....”

I waved my arms to play it off. The silence was painful. The professionals—Vanessa and Sumire—had their mouths firmly shut as they stared at me. Although I waved my hands to dismiss my own idea, they showed absolutely no response.

What now? They’re not going to get angry at me for saying something strange, are they...?

“You...”

“Hmm?”

“Y-You...”

“Hmmm?”

“You’re a *genius*!”

“Pardon me?!”

Vanessa and Sumire nearly collapsed over one another. Their chairs toppled over, and their tea spilled as well.

“That’s our master for you! I knew you had it in you!”

“You’re a genius! Our master is a genius! You can always count on the Great Demon God of Eros!”

“Stop it! Please stop it!”

They closed in on me and locked me in a warm embrace. Their faces were red, excited. Although I tried to peel them away, their strength boosted by enthusiasm was immense. I was helpless.

“A notion no ordinary person could think of...! It’s like I’m looking a thousand years into the future! As expected of you, Master!”

“No matter how you end up, you’ll always be our master!”

“Hey! Didn’t we just conclude that you had the wrong person?!”

“Master!”

And as we were locked up like that, the door opened again, and three new women came in.

What’s this all of a sudden?! Who are they?!

“Master! I’ll follow you forever!”

“Huh?! Who are you?!”

“Good going, Master! I’m glad you’re back!”

“Another two seconds! Please train me from the ground up!”

“Master! Please put me in a scorpion deathlock again!”

“Master!”

“Master!!!”

“Master!!!”

“Aaaugh, seriously, what is this?!”

I was surrounded and embraced by five prostitutes. A senseless excitement swirled about the room. But why did these people revere me so?! Today really was an utterly incomprehensible day!

Luna and Satina are looking at me funny!

“Madam! Boss! We spotted someone suspicious in front of the shop!”

“What is it this time...?”

Yet again the door opened, and this time it was the robust guards who entered.

“We’re in the middle of something important right now! It better be important!”

“Sorry about that! We spotted a suspicious woman with a camera loitering around the storefront... So we brought her in!”

“That’s?”

One of the guards entered carrying a thrashing woman over his shoulder. The woman had been wrapped round and round with a rope, restricted so firmly she could only wriggle about like a bagworm. Her pink hair was flying all over the place.

The prostitutes furrowed their brows confusedly as they inspected her, but we—the students of Forst Academy—knew her well enough.

“What are you doing to meee?! Oh, you have it all wrooooong! I am not anyone suspicious! It’s a misunderstanding! Please let go of me!” she cried out in a sweet, flirtatious voice.

“Aina...?”

She was in fact our classmate Aina.

“Geh?! Lisalinde...?!”

“Err, Aina? What are you doing here?”

“Oh, can it! It’s got nothing to do with you!”

I understand that Aina is pretty hostile towards me, but right now it feels more like she’s panicking about something. She dropped her usual act for a moment.

“Madam, how should we punish this girl?”

“Oh nooo! Punishment? Aina hasn’t done anything wrong! Please believe me!”

“Well, we’ll need more than that to go off of. You said she was taking pictures in front of the shop, right?”

“Yep. We got the photos right here.”

The guard lowered Aina to the ground and pulled out a bundle of photographs. They depicted the store’s exterior and the street... But a majority were of *me*. They were mainly photos of me panicking in the middle of the red-light district.



“Is this...me?”

“Photos of Master? Why would you...? No, I get the general idea.”

The madam and the prostitutes glared at Aina sharply. The girl’s face was stiff. A waterfall of sweat poured from her brow.

“Oh, you know. It’s not like I was trying to do anything bad! I-I’m a huge fan of Lady Lisalinde! I am! That’s why I want lots and lots of pictures of her!”

“Madam! We found a notepad in her pocket!”

Aina’s notepad was promptly flipped open.

Big Scoop! Lisalinde of House Lafort Goes Out to Have Fun in the Red-Light District?! The Lewd, Vulgar Face Hidden behind an Honor Student’s Facade!

“Strip all her possessions and sell her off to a foreign brothel.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Nooooo!”

With one authoritative decree from the madam, Aina’s fate was decided. The girl raised a cry of terror.

“N-Now, now. You don’t need to be that harsh... She’s my friend from school. Could you please forgive her?”

“I knew you’d say that, Master! You’re very, very kind!”

“Your heart’s as vast as the sky!”

“Sex is all about kindness! Your words are still carved into my chest!”

“That is a maxim we must pass down to the end of time.”

“I’m telling you, I am *not* this master of yours!” I shouted.

But, as expected... “Master! I’ll follow you forever!”

“I hate this place! I’m never coming back again!”

The prostitutes continued to flatter me, and by the time we left the red-light district, it was late at night and my willpower had been shaved away to near nothing. I felt dead inside. Up until the moment I left, I was showered with a

respect that I had no recollection of earning.

The moment the ropes were undone, Aina took off as fast as her legs would take her. “Don’t think this means you’ve won, Lisalinde!” she cried out, but I felt so exhausted at that point I really didn’t care.

And so, the incident came to an end.

“May I have a moment of your time, Sir Cain?”

“Hmm?”

When the carriage was ready and we were about to leave town, Sumire called out to Cain.

“I want to talk to you about something...”

“What’s up?”

He stopped his feet just short of boarding the carriage and turned to her. I was exhausted, lying limp in my carriage seat. It was a large, luxurious carriage, and not the sort of thing that would be used to see off mere students.

“Lately, the outlaws have been gathering and expanding their forces...”

“Outlaws?” Cain frowned.

“Yes. A gang called Hell’s Outlaws has been growing lately. Apparently, they’re starting to get more active.”

“Hmm, Hell’s Outlaws, huh...”

Cain stuck a cigar into his mouth like this issue didn’t matter much to him. I could see where he was coming from. Even if the civilians considered them a dangerous criminal organization, they were like a group of baby rats to the mighty hero.

“Don’t bother with our little corner. We can protect it on our own. But I hear they’re trying to extend their reach to Academy Town... It hurts to just sit and watch as they go after innocent academy students.”

“Got it. I’ll be on the lookout.”

“Be careful out there.”

Sumire respectfully lowered her head.

“Thank you for the info.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

I see. You can tell how the hero party operates just from these small exchanges. Cain and his comrades did not simply fight battle after battle with the demon lord’s army. They held connections with the surface world and the criminal underworld as well, collecting information far and wide.

Cain would stop by towns like these, build connections, and obtain intel specific to the town. And the town would also benefit by spreading information to the hero.

This time, Sumire wanted to weaken the power of this gang. Simply spreading the information would get Cain’s eyes on the gang’s activity, and the town only stood to profit as a result.

“Hell’s Outlaws is a rising gang. Their members are disorganized, but from what I’ve heard, you should watch out for a woman named Gaujhel.”

“Gaujhel?”

“Yes, she’s the leader holding the gang together. Word on the street is that a number of opposing gangs have already fallen apart at her hands.”

The rise of a powerful gang. What a horrible tale. Perhaps it was nothing to Cain and his comrades, but a perfectly normal girl like me would be done for the moment such dangerous folks set their eyes on me.

“Keep an eye out. Especially for those around you,” Sumire said before lowering her head once more. Her gestures were dignified to the very end.

“Master! Come again soon!”

“We’ll be waiting forever!”

From outside the carriage, I could hear Vanessa and the other seasoned ladies calling out to me. They all insisted their respect towards me was far more important than their jobs, and so they came to see me off.

“I’m not coming back! Never again!”

“Huh?!”

“Please don’t be like that!”

“We’ll be waiting with plenty of girls ready to take you on!”

“I will not come! Even if hell freezes over, I’m not going to come to play in the red-light district!”

The prostitutes burst into giggles as they heard me say that.

“BS! I’ll call it!”

Aaah! Seriously, what is this?!

“Sir Cain! Come on! Let’s get going! It’s already late!”

“Then I’ll stop by some other time,” said Cain.

“Yes, we’ll be waiting.”

“Please don’t make a promise like that!” I whined.

I had a strange feeling that I’d be dragged into the mess again. *Rather, doesn’t Sir Cain have two lovely fiancées already?! Is that really all right?! Should I tattletale on him?!*

The carriage set off. The prostitutes seemed sad to see us go, watching until we were but a speck in the distance.

“Until next time, Master!”

“You have the wrong person!”

My scream faded away, sucked into the starry night sky.

The red-light district. A den of evil that drained men of their money and vitality. I was a woman, and yet for some reason, I was left exhausted all the same. But the stars twinkled beautifully in the sky, all along the ride back.

Chapter 10: Then—The Master of the Red Lights

“Judgment!”

“Aaaannngh!!!”

A woman’s scream echoed through the night air, marking the end of a life-or-death struggle that had been unfolding in the midst of a sleepless town.

“What? You done already?”

“Ah, Cain.”

The door to the room opened, and there was the hero, Cain. He had a cigar in his mouth and a drowsy expression on his face as he peeked in. “Did you win?” he asked.

“Why, of course I won,” answered his companion Liz. “A master on my level would never lose to a low-grade succubus in a sex battle!” She made no attempts to hide her naked body and proudly puffed out her chest as she replied.

“To be honest with you, I don’t really care.”

Cain breathed a weary puff of smoke.

There was one more woman in the room. She was a demon—a succubus—lying limply on the bed, having had all her vitality sucked away by Liz. Her chest rose and fell with each harsh, labored breath.

This scene was unfolding in a particularly run-down red-light district. There had been many bizarre reports of customers dying of emaciation. As rumors spread of the brothels that would drain one’s very life away, their client numbers began to fall.

Catching wind of these rumors, Cain and his party members immediately suspected the involvement of a demon. Their eyes all turned towards their comrade Liz.

“Very well! Suppose I’ll take care of this matter!” Liz proclaimed as she struck

her fist against her chest. She was a succubus herself—or rather, a descendant of one.

By now, her comrades were all quite knowledgeable about succubi and had a rough idea of what was going on. And, as expected, it all stemmed from a single succubus who had infiltrated the red-light district.

Liz found the offender quickly enough and promptly handed down her erotic judgment. Now, the enemy succubus lay immobile, utterly drained.

“Thank you. I’ll never forget the debt I owe you for saving our town.”

“Don’t worry about it, Madam. I’m sure our Liz enjoyed every second of it.”

“Mmm, heh heh...”

The grand proprietress who ran the district, Sumire, gracefully lowered her head as Liz licked her lips like a child who’d sneaked herself a tasty treat.

“We managed to defeat the succubus, but...will this town ever go back to how it used to be?”

“That’s probably...not going to happen. We’ll probably end up as slaves to put our debts in order. That is the only path for those girls with nowhere to go.”

“That’s...tragic.”

Cain furrowed his brow as he breathed another puff of smoke, but he knew there was nothing he could do about it.

“Understood!”

“Hmm?”

“I’ll do something about it!”

There was just one person who seemed as confident as could be: Liz.

“*Something*? What exactly are you...?”

“I’ll need to forcefully teach that succubus lying there how to properly control her draining powers. So, while I’m at it, how about we take some drastic measures?”

“Vanessa...”

The succubus Liz had defeated was named Vanessa. She had been a prostitute of the red-light district who had contributed greatly to the continued existence of the town, but as it turned out, she had also been the cause of its decline.

“Go get five girls who are confident in their stamina! For the next seven days and seven nights, I’ll take you all by the hand and instruct you in everything I know!”

“Pardon...?”

“I’m saying I’ll make a special exception and pass down all 108 of my secret techniques! It’s time to hold the Seven-Day-Seven-Night Think Fast or Your Loins Won’t Last Bedtop-Training Tournament from Hell!” Liz loudly proclaimed. “Once you’ve made these techniques your own, you’ll be flooded with clients! Your customer satisfaction will be unmatched!”

“Err, okay...?”

“What is this girl talking about?”

Despite Liz’s bursting confidence, the others didn’t seem nearly as convinced. That is, except for one of them, who cried out in shock.

“No, this can’t be...” exclaimed the saint. “The 108 Secret Arts...in only seven days?!”

“You know about them, Melvy?”

“E-Even I only learned the last one recently... She’s going to teach five people everything from the ground up, in only seven days... This is going to be hell.” Melvy audibly gulped.

Cain stared at her. “I’m not really seeing what’s so nerve-racking.”

“Lady Melvy, you’ll be moving on to the Thirty-Six Lost Techniques after this. Please prepare yourself.”

“Hngh... Will my body be able to withstand it?”

“Seriously, I don’t get it.”

The stained Saint Melvy “the Horny” was evidently an advanced student.

“Now hold it right there!”

That was when the door to the room violently slammed open. One of the prostitutes—who clearly didn't think so kindly of Liz—stormed in and lorded over her.

"Hmph, why do I have to recognize someone like *you*? I don't know if you're part of the hero's party or whatever, but there's no way some stuck-up brat like you could ever understand the pride or suffering of a... *Ngaaaaaaaah!*"

"Carme?!"

Just as she was in the midst of picking a fight, the woman named Carme let out a shrill cry and fell to the floor. Just before that, Cain had noticed Liz's arm shift three times at lightning speed, touching various spots on the woman's body.

"Carme?! Carme...?! What happened?!"

"Get a grip, Carme!"

Her fellow prostitutes approached her and tried to shake her to her senses.

"She's...already been finished off..."

"That can't be..."

A shock fell over the room. In just a few seconds, Carme's face was red, a heated breath escaping from her lips.

A feverish voice leaked from Carme. "She's...amazing..."

"Hmph, to think that was enough to do you in. I'm concerned for your future," Liz said, her fingers grasping at the air. Then, in a stronger voice, she went on, "Everything that follows from here on will be hell! Now come at me, like your lives depend upon it."

A chill raced through the air. They *would* die if they underestimated her. So thought every prostitute in the room. They all gulped.

Moments later, the hellish training began.

And, seven days later...

"You did well to endure for seven days and seven nights."

“Th-Thank you! Master... I will never forget your teachings!”

The Seven-Day-Seven-Night Think Fast or Your Loins Won't Last Bedtop-Training Tournament from Hell had finally ended. The five prostitutes who had survived the battlefield were all totally exhausted, their cheeks sunken, their bodies quivering.

But they all looked somewhat satisfied, as though there was self-confidence radiating from their bodies. The looks on their faces made it clear—reviving this dying district would be but a simple task for them.

The five harlots were now brave warriors.

In contrast to their exhaustion, Liz was simply brimming with energy.

“M-Master! Thank you...thank you, truly! You gave someone like me a chance to be reborn! I don't even know how I could ever repay!”

It was Vanessa, the succubus who had initially sunk the red-light district, who cried far more than anyone else. Over the course of her training, Liz had thoroughly hammered into her how to properly use her succubus powers. Now, Vanessa had complete control over her energy-draining abilities.

“You worked harder than anyone else, Vanessa. Now you must repent for your sins, repay the red-light district, and put your effort into making it better than ever before.”

“Of coursh... Thank you sho wuch! Mashter! I... I'll do my besht...to repent!” Vanessa wept, snot dribbling from her nose.

“There is just one last thing I have to teach you,” said Liz. Everyone twitched. But they quickly pursed their lips, their eyes glimmering fearlessly. Their backs straightened as they prepared for one final lesson from their master.

“We are blessed, Master!”

“No matter what it is, we will endure and learn!”

“Ah ha ha, it's nothing too drastic. I'm just going to let you in on a certain strategy.” As her disciples steeled themselves, the pervmaster waved it all off with a laugh. “Now listen up. Once you start working again, the first thing you should buy is an academy uniform.”

“Huh?”

“A...uniform, is it?”

Her apprentices stared back at her blankly.

“Yes, a uniform from the nearby Forst Academy, a uniform from the Varlverd School for Knights in the neighboring land, and a uniform from Doyle Noble Academy to the south. You should each buy them.”

“Okay?”

“But why?”

“And buy some nun vestments too. As well as the armor of female knights. And the formal attire of noble ladies. You shall wear them and play out the roles, creating a brand-new experience!” Liz stood and declared. “A new play that involves imagining up situations and environments that would never happen in reality, and wearing the clothing to match... Yes, I see it! If you can offer a new service where your clothes can bring to mind an entirely new image... That will surely become the greatest boon of this red-light district!”

“Oh, Master!”

“How wonderful!”

“It’s like I’m looking a thousand years into the future!”

The students embraced their master. Their strong emotions turned to tears, and as their master proudly puffed out her chest, her students swore to themselves that this was the girl they would follow for the rest of their lives.

“Now do your best, everyone. The future of this district rests on your shoulders!”

“Yes! Master! We will do all we can to live up to your expectations!”

The red-light district *could* be rebuilt. These five brave warriors were already convinced of this. The future was filled with hope and possibilities.

“What’s with this hype?”

Cain, meanwhile, had no idea what he was supposed to say.

And so, the hero’s party had brought peace to yet another town.

This was a piece of hidden history, one that the minstrels would *never* sing songs about.

Chapter 11: Now—Don't Give Up on Youth

"All right, fellows! Next week is our long-awaited outdoors class!" Adeline announced loudly in the classroom in the morning, her black side ponytail swaying about. She smacked her hands against the desk, enthusiastically attempting to transmit her enthusiasm.

"We're girls, though."

She had made this announcement to none other than me and Satina, though for a moment all eyes in the class were on her. But soon, everyone sighed and looked away, realizing it was just another one of her usual outbursts.

She did have a tendency to raise her voice.

"You're way too excited, I tell you. How about you calm down a bit?"

"Argh! Since when did you gals all turn into withered old ladies, huh? What 'appened to all those bright, youthful days we shared?!"

"You only met us a year ago..."

By then, I was already as calm and collected as I was now.

"Say what you want, but we're already second-years, you know."

"I know, right?"

Satina joined in my rebuttal. We were already at the age where we needed to develop a bit of composure.

"Well, I got somethin' I need you two to see. Have a look over there."

"Where?"

I turned my head in the direction she was pointing.

She was pointing straight at Sylphie. The princess was staring heatedly at the guide pamphlet for the outdoors class, her cheeks a bit red with excitement. Perhaps unconsciously, her feet were tapping. It seemed as though she simply couldn't wait for that day to come.

“She’s restless!”

“She’s super restless!”

The princess, who was known as the greatest knight in the country, was as excited as a child.

“Hmm? Oh, it’s you three.”

After noticing our stares, Sylphie raised her eyes from the pamphlet and came over to join the conversation.

“It’s almost time for our outdoors class. It really is a hassle, isn’t it? I need to get all the moves into my head so I can perfectly execute them when the day comes. Incidentally, it wasn’t written in the pamphlet, but do you think that bananas count as eligible snacks? Also, it says we’re not allowed to bring anything unnecessary, but a deck of cards should be perfectly fine, don’t you think? I personally believe that playing cards are absolutely indispensable for such outings, but...”

Her eyes were practically sparkling as she spoke.

She’s blinding to look at! She’s like a kindergartner going on their very first field trip!

“Have a look at that. That right there’s the naive purity expected of all us youths in the modern era. You should take a page outta her book.”

“Huh...”

I found that a little hard to accept.

“Hmm... Do I really look that excited?” She must have picked up on what we were saying. Sylphie’s cheeks turned a little redder as she stuck out her lips in a pout. It was rather cute. “Still, you cannot blame me,” she said. “After all, this is genuinely the first time I have ever been on one of these outings.”

“Huh? Really?”

We cocked our heads, curiously.

“They never had outdoors class at the schools you went to before?”

“No, well, I never went to school in the first place.”

“Huh?”

She went on. “I was very young when my talent for the martial arts was discerned, and ever since, I have done nothing but endless combat training to hone myself as a weapon against the demon lord’s forces. If you think about it from an efficiency standpoint, it was best not to send me to school. And I don’t mean to brag, but I never had any friends either.”

“That’s heavy!”

“What a wild thing to say so casually!”

I was flabbergasted by the princess’s life story.

“Thus, every facet of this school life is new and fresh to me. So...this is what youth feels like... Yes, it is wonderful.”

“She’s radiant!”

“So bright it’s hurting my eyes!”

As she beamed at me, it was like a blinding halo had manifested behind her head.

“Well, the same could be said for all members of the hero party. In exchange for our strength, we’ve mostly had to sacrifice our childhood, and our youthful years.”

“Huh? I-Is that true?”

But, come to think of it, that did explain a lot. They were considered humanity’s strongest at their young ages. It wasn’t strange that they might have had to sacrifice something for it.

“So that’s how it is... You have it rough...”

“Hmm. It feels a bit off when you stare at me with such concern, Liz.”

“Huh? Why?”

For some reason, Sylphie was looking at me wearily. It was almost like her eyes were saying, “You’re in the same boat,” but... No, surely I was misreading.

“So, with all that said, I am really looking forward to our outdoors class! But you should all be careful! If you’re not careful, you could accidentally stay up all

night thinking about it and catch a cold!”

And with that, Sylphie returned to her seat, smiling from ear to ear.

“That was...something.”

“The ultimate innocence...”

“Even doves would be shocked by her purity...”

Seeing the unsullied form of our nation’s princess nearly moved us to tears. As her storm of naive joy swept over us, it felt as if our own crooked hearts had been bent back into shape.

“I guess we really should learn from Sylphie.”

“No, that was my bad. She’s a natural wonder. An endangered species. Don’t try to imitate her.” Adeline retracted her previous statement. “But, what happened to our resident pure girl? She’s gonna miss out on morning homeroom at this rate.”

“Resident pure girl? Do you mean Luna?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

As we sat around a corner of the classroom, we were missing one of our usual members. Luna. She usually arrived at school early just like me. As a member of the disciplinary committee, this was quite rare for her.

“Has she ever even been late to class before?”

“Not that I can remember...”

I had a bad feeling about this, but the homeroom bell chimed before we could do anything about it. The hours passed, from first period to second period, then to third period, and still Luna was nowhere to be seen.

The day finally came to a close, and no Luna.

“She never showed up, huh?”

“Did *she* catch a cold, perhaps?”

We lingered around the classroom chatting after our last class. *Would she come around tomorrow? If she caught a cold, should we go check up on her?*

As we discussed the matter, a teacher entered the room.

“Liz, Satina, and Adeline. Can you come with me for a moment?”

“Mr. Lalo?”

The one who had called us was Mr. Lalo. A man in his fifties who had sprouted a splendid white beard from his chin. He, too, was a member of the hero’s party, having originally been a long-serving sorcerer of the Great Magic Laboratory. Since he really wasn’t the right age to be a student, he had been welcomed in as an academy instructor.

“You girls are close to Luna, aren’t you? Have you heard anything?”

“Hm?”

“About what?”

“Well... About *this*.” Mr. Lalo awkwardly scratched at his brow as he produced a sheet of paper from his pocket. “This was delivered to the school a moment ago.”

“Hmm?”

“This is...”

I took the paper from Mr. Lalo and looked it over—in Luna’s handwriting, it said...

“With...withdrawal notice?!”

“Luna’s dropping out?!”

We were shocked. It felt as though my head had been struck with a blunt weapon.

I stared at the paper, thinking it had to be some sort of mistake, but no matter how many times I read it over, it clearly spelled out Luna’s intent to withdraw from the academy.

“Th-The hell is this...?”

“Luna... Why?”

She wasn’t acting strangely yesterday. We had a carefree, childish

conversation about how she was looking forward to our outdoors class...

"I asked because I thought you three might know something, but...by the look of things, I guess not."

I could say nothing to Mr. Lalo.

This wasn't normal. *This... This is... Something must have happened.*

"Satina, Adeline!"

"Right with you!"

"We gotta go! No question about it!"

We shared a nod and immediately raced off.

"Ah! H-Hey! You three, wait!"

Mr. Lalo called out to stop us, but there was nothing that could hold us back. Leaving our bags behind, we made off in a straight dash for Luna's house. We sprinted with all our might to hear the reason for all this.

And so, we arrived at Luna's house.

"Wh-What's going on...here?"

I struggled to steady my breathing as I looked at the house. There was a strange, unpleasant feeling looming in the air, unlike anything I was accustomed to. A number of people dressed in black had infiltrated the premises, and the house, which usually gave off a feeling of calm refinement, was restless and noisy. People who were clearly not servants were prancing around as though they owned the place, fishing through every cupboard.

For some reason, all the expensive furnishings and valuable antiques were being carried off and loaded into a wagon parked in front of the gate.

This didn't look like a typical move. It was confusing and unsettling, almost like she had gotten herself into debt and had been forced to sell off all of her assets.

"Ah, that person there!"

"Auntie!"

When I squinted, I could make out the sight of Luna's mother kneeling in the yard. Her head hung low and it seemed like she was in a trance. We stepped onto the grounds uninvited and raced over to her.

"Auntie! What exactly is happening here?! Who are these people?!"

"Oh... You're..."

She turned to us slowly, her eyes barely registering us. Her face was pale; her eyes were hollow.

"Auntie... What is this?"

"Th-This... We..."

"..."

"...*Hic*... Waaaaaaaah...!"

Auntie's voice quivered as she desperately tried to piece words together, but as the tears overtook her, she could no longer speak. It was clear that something terrible had happened. We swallowed our breath.

"What's this? Hey, you lot. No outsiders allowed."

That was when a voice called out from behind us. It was a woman's voice, but low, heavy, and intimidating. We turned around and came face-to-face with a woman wearing an eye patch and sporting bright red hair.

"Who are you?"

"Hmmm? I could ask the same of you, dammit. Now get lost already."

We'd stooped down to speak with auntie, so the woman towered above us. She wore a black leather coat and had a gold necklace dangling from her neck. The scar on her face only made her even more terrifying to look at.

"Well, whatever. My name is Gaujhel. Leader of this here gang—of Hell's Outlaws, y'hear?"

"A gang?!"

We flinched as she introduced herself as the leader of Hell's Outlaws, Gaujhel. I remembered the name. Sumire, the proprietress of the red-light district, had

warned Cain about her. This was a gang that had lately been rapidly extending its reach. This violent organization had now gotten itself involved with Luna's house.

"Wh-What's a gang doing in Luna's house?"

"Well, you see, little lady. The stupid masters of this house got themselves in a heap of debt, y'hear? Have a look at this."

Gaujhel produced two sheets of paper from her breast pocket. The first, a written acknowledgment of a debt, and the second, a document laying out Luna's father's joint liability on someone else's guarantee. That explained how Luna's father had been burdened with such debt.

"We were cheated!"

"Auntie..."

Luna's mother raised a tormented cry.

"The debtor was in cahoots with these people! In just a few days! Before we knew it, here we are now!"

"Hey, now, you're making me sound like the bad guy, dammit. This here's an official contract that you guys agreed to sign on, y'hear?"

"Guh... Urgh... *Sniff*...!"

Gaujhel mockingly waved the two papers around in the air, and Luna's mother couldn't say a thing. Once again, she collapsed to the ground, her wails filling the air.

That was when the door to the house burst open.

"Ah!"

"Luna!"

The one who came out was Luna. She teetered forward, pale-faced. She was clad in plain brown attire instead of her usual casual clothes. Two gang members stuck close to her—one on each side—likely to prevent her from running away.

"W-Wait, please..." A loud voice escaped from behind her as a man raced out

of the house. Luna's father. "Not my daughter! Please, leave her out of this! Luna has no responsibility to bear!"

"Shut it, you old fogey!"

"Guh!"

"Father!"

Luna's father let out a painful groan as one of the gang members kicked him. He could only weep and watch.

"Stop this at once!"

"Hmm?"

As Luna crouched down by her father's side, we raced forth, barging between her and the gang members.

"You're..."

"L-Liz?! Satina, and Adeline too..." Luna raised her voice in surprise.

"Get away from Luna! I cannot forgive such violence!"

"Blasted gang! You ain't gettin' off lightly if you lay a hand on our friend!"

"Right on! What they said!"

We yelled our piece. I was fearful and nervous, my heart pounding away in my chest. Luna stared back at us with teary eyes.

And the gang members took one condescending look at us and laughed.

Their leader, Gaujhel, stepped out front. "Stupid. You're all stupid, the lot of you. Forgive? Why would I need your damn forgiveness? As long as we've got these papers right here, there ain't a thing you brats can do."

"Grr!"

Once again, Gaujhel held out the two sheets. Sure enough, that was a power we could not fight against. The papers were, after all, most certainly signed with Luna's father's name.

"What's going to happen to Luna?"

"Well, the usual stuff. She'll be sold off overseas as collateral. She's a noble's

daughter, so she'll fetch a fine price, I'd wager."

"There's no way I can permit that!"

"You and what army? I'm saying I have the agreement right here, stupid!"

"Grr!"

I gritted my teeth. The paper spelled out a massive monetary sum, and there was no way any of us could do anything against such a number. But if we didn't do anything, Luna really would be sold off somewhere.

What do I do? What can I do? What options do I have to get through this?

"Hmm?"

As I pondered the matter, I felt a slight tug on my sleeve.

"It's all right... I've already come to terms with it..."

"Luna..."

Luna was trying to reassure me. Her shoulders were scrunched and she spoke in a soft, feeble voice.

"This is a problem for our house to handle. I cannot allow you to get wrapped up in it."

"But Luna..."

Without waiting for me to finish, Luna slowly stood up and walked forth. Her face was still anxious, her legs quivering, yet she walked her way to Guajhel and her cronies. Then, turning, she softly said, "This may be the end of my youth, but everyone, please live a fulfilling school life without me..."

She smiled. Her clothes billowed slightly in the breeze. It was a resolute, courageous smile.

I felt an aching in my skull.

Huh?

"Now let's get going, dammit."

"Yes..."

With Gaujhel urging her on, Luna was off again. She was heading for the

wagon in front of the gate. Once she was aboard it, she would probably never return.

We were all feeling anxious, frustrated, and helpless, knowing there was nothing we could do about it. The gang members cackled away. It was clear who had won and who had lost—and they knew it.

But within all of this, a different thought crossed my mind.

“You know something? I never really had a proper childhood...”

Who said that? My mind was filled with words I couldn’t recall ever hearing before. They wouldn’t leave my head.

“But, it just goes to show, we were never meant to have an adolescence.”

More words I was sure I had never heard. Yet for some reason, they were called up from the very depths of my memory. And for some reason, the face that came with the words belonged to Cain. I could even remember the tone of his voice as he said it, and the self-deprecating laugh that followed... But there was no way. I couldn’t recall ever having that conversation with Cain.

“Well, the same could be said for all members of the hero party. In exchange for our strength, we’ve mostly had to sacrifice our childhood, and our youthful years.”

Next came Sylphie’s words. These ones, I remembered. It was from our conversation that morning.

Was it the same for Cain? To become the strongest hero, to fulfill his mission to slay the demon lord, did he sacrifice himself? Family, friends, the normal happiness enjoyed by a normal person... Did he have to live without all of it? For instance...his youth. Did he ever get to feel like a boy at the height of it? Did he have to sacrifice it all?

Yes, that’s right, whispered the memories that never happened. *We cannot give up on our youth that easily.*

“But we won’t be young forever. How about we all do something adolescent-ish next time?”

Another voice echoed in my head. This one was me—my voice. I was recalling

things I had never said before.

“What does adolescent-ish even mean?”

“Well, let’s see...”

Within these memories, everyone had a gentle smile on their faces.

“That’s a good question. What do you think would be nice...?”

I was definitely smiling when I said that. I had a serene smile on my face as I imagined a youth spent with my precious friends. I yearned for that youth. I prayed for it.

I looked around. Everyone’s attention was focused on Luna. There wasn’t a single eye on me. This was my chance.

“Please wait!”

I raised my voice as loud as I could. This startled everyone around me, causing them to jerk. Luna stopped just short of entering the wagon and turned towards me.

“I challenge you to a game of cards!”

“Huh?”

Their eyes were on me now. I boldly puffed out my chest and walked right up to their leader Gaujhel.

“If I win, please release Luna! If I lose, you can do whatever you want with me!”

“Huh?”

“Liz?”

I faced Gaujhel head-on. She looked down at me—a tall, intimidating presence. But I could not look away, I could not back down.

“So what? You wanna make a bet with us, basically?”

“Yes. I am the daughter of Marquis Lafort. Shouldn’t I be worth just as much as Luna?”

“Pfft.”

A beat later, all the members of the gang were laughing their heads off. A chorus of mocking laughter echoed through the yard.

“Gya ha ha ha! She’s a complete dumbass!”

“She’s got a few screws loose! Gya ha ha ha ha!”

“Do you even understand?! Selling your body’s a veeery scary thing, you know! What an oblivious little lady!”

Paying no mind to the surrounding laughter, I focused only on Gaujhel. She placed a finger to her chin and grinned.

“Hmm, the daughter of a prestigious house, huh... I’ll admit it, you’d be worth a pretty penny, mm-hm.”

I continued staring at her.

“Do you know how to play poker, little lady? I’ll make an exception just this once. Usually I’d never agree to a high-stakes game like this, y’hear? Are you in?”

“Thank you.”

I gulped and accepted her proposition.

“You can’t, Liz!” Satina cried out, tugging my arm from behind. I turned to see she had a very anxious look on her face and she was shaking her head.

“Come over here for a second...”

She dragged me away, a short distance from Gaujhel.

“What are you thinking?!” she demanded. “Are you stupid?! Liz...?!”

“She’s right! Challenging them outlaws to gamblin’s as good as sayin’ ‘Please make me a slave’!”

Satina and Adeline both tried to stop me. They closed in on me with anger and concern.

“Liz, do you even have any experience gambling?”

“No, not at all...”

“Then why’d you go and challenge ’em to that?! Did you think this through,

Liz?! There's no way you can win!"

"That's right! Listen to Adeline! You can't challenge cheaters to gambling!"

There were veins rising on their foreheads as they scolded me.

Taking a careful look around, I saw that the gang members were watching from a good enough distance. They probably wouldn't be able to catch what I said if I kept it to a whisper.

Bringing my face closer to theirs, I said, "Please keep your voices down... I never intended to win this bet from the start."

"Huh?"

Their angered faces quickly changed, and they now looked as startled as pigeons shot with peashooters.

"Back when everyone's attention was on Luna, I cast detection magic on myself," I explained. "There are now waves of mana being emitted from my body, and it will be possible to determine my location from afar."

"Detection magic?"

"Yes. I will purposely allow myself to be captured by the gang. That way, I'll be there with Luna. I'll make a situation where it's possible to track her down."

"Wha?!"

Satina's and Adeline's mouths were agape. By putting my own safety on the line, I was going to prevent Luna from completely disappearing off the map.

"As long as I can broadcast our location, we'll never have to give up on being rescued. The debt paperwork is probably legitimate, but I'm sure there was at least a little funny business before it was signed. As long as we can expose that, I just know we can save Luna."

I took Satina's hand in a feigned emotional gesture and inscribed a spell on it. Once it was activated, she would know where I was at any and all times.

"So please, expose that fraudulent contract and save us."

They were dumbfounded. But I'd said all I had to say. All that was left was to take action.

“W-Wait! Hold on!” But Satina stopped me again. “You...you can’t! It’s too dangerous! Far too dangerous...”

“Sh-She’s right, Liz. Who knows what these guys’ll do once they’ve got their grubby hands on you?! What if it’s all too late? You could go through somethin’ terrible the moment you lose!”

They were desperate to stop me. But I shook my head.

“It does not matter what terrible disgrace I suffer. Even if it’s too late, even if I am sold... I will not give up on my friend’s youth.”

“Liz...”

I wonder why... Cain’s face just won’t disappear from my head. I don’t remember ever having that conversation, but his words—knowing he never got to live his youth—they’re instilled deep within me.

We’ve all been gifted this blessed life at the academy. I don’t want to give up on anyone’s youth.

“I’ll definitely return someday. With Luna.”

“Liz...”

I tried to muster a powerful look in my eyes as I said this. And, ignoring their concerned looks, I turned my back to them.

I walked forward, facing Gaujhel and her smug smile.

“Finished saying goodbye to your friends, dammit?”

“You are the one who is going to regret this.”

“You’ve got spirit, I’ll give you that.” Gaujhel pulled a deck of playing cards out of her pocket. “But you’re not even worth my time—I’ll have you up against three of my young ones. And since you’re so kind and gentle, you wouldn’t get your friends wrapped up in this, right? So you’ll be facing all three of them alone, y’hear?”

“Naturally.”

“Good for you, right? As long as you can keep winning, you’ll be snatching money from three people at once. This is your big chance, y’hear?”

As Gaujhel said this, her gang members burst into laughter. Each and every one of them knew that I had no chance of winning, no matter what I did. As soon as cards were dealt, it was over for me.

“Then let’s begin. It’s the first and last game of your life.”

With that, she began talking towards the manor. I walked after her. Behind me, Luna was crying out for me to stop, but I went without looking back.

The front door opened with a dull creak. This was the same old house I knew—the house of a friend. Yet its doorway had become the gates of hell.

I gulped. But even so, I didn’t back down.

Even if a terrible fate awaited me, I would not give up.

Making my resolve, I set forth on a bet with my life on the lines.

Around an hour had passed since the game began.

“Stop! Enough already!”

“This is too cruel! How could you!”

“Help! Someone, please help!”

Cries of agony echoed through the living room. Many tears were shed as this hell was dealt hand by hand. The dwindling pile of money faded away under the watch of regretful eyes.

What played out was a one-sided slaughter. No miracle occurred; no turnabout was permitted. Stripped of money—and clothing, once that ran out. Forced to immodestly expose everything...

A head hung in misery. A sob. A wail. Cursing the heavens was the only recourse.

But...

“What the hell is wrong with this woman?!”

“She wasn’t just a brat?!”

The ones crying out in lament were the gang members. Their money was

visibly going down, their funds piling up in front of me. All the men at the table continued to face loss after loss against me, and they were ultimately left in nothing but their underwear, crying and sobbing with pale faces.



It was an overwhelming victory—for me. An unsatisfying, anticlimactic victory.

Luna and Satina stared blankly, wide-eyed, with their mouths agape. This would have been a good time for them to start dancing for joy, but the members of Luna's household were so confused they couldn't even do that.

Even Gaujhel, the leader, could only stare.

"Huh?"

In fact, even I had to cock my head a bit. There was a strange sensation coming over me.

It was like the cards would become an extension of me, and manipulating them came as easily to me as breathing. I could easily make it look like I was drawing a card from the top of the deck while actually pulling from the bottom or center. As I turned my cards in at the game's end, I found I could all too easily sneak a few of those discarded cards off with me.

Hiding them up my sleeve and pretending to draw them—all manner of cheating techniques just came perfectly naturally to me.

"Huh?"

It was a very strange sensation. I had never cheated at cards before—in fact, I had never even gambled in my life. The only card games I'd ever played had been fun and laid-back games with my friends.

But... *Huh?*

"Well, that's a straight flush."

"Nooooooooo!"

Skills great enough to slaughter all these gang members just came rolling out of me. And it wasn't just cheating. I knew exactly how to get my opponents to bet bigger. When to call and when to fold. My body was instilled with all the tricks to a game I'd never played before.

Huh? This is strange... I'm...having fun...

"And that's a full house."

"I don't want this anymore!"

“But, how?!”

Their destruction was panning out right before their eyes. Hearing these cries of despair from these men... *Heh heh heh...* A sadistic desire was bubbling up deep within me. *No, wait, that's wrong! I do not have any sadistic tendencies! This has to be some sort of mistake!*

“H-Hey, dammit! Are you a hundred percent certain she's not cheating...?!”

“Leader! We thought so too, so we've been watching closely, but...we haven't seen anything!”

It seemed that none of my cheating had come to light. I was just too good at it.

Unluckily for the gang, we were not in a proper gambling house. A gambling house would have ensured that the guests handled the cards as little as possible; the entire place would be arranged to prevent cheating at all costs.

But this was simply the living room of an ordinary noble. The rules were lax, and I could tamper all I wanted. I could palm cards as I pleased. If my guess was right, they had set it up like this so their gang members had an easier time cheating against me, but I was the one reaping all the benefits.

The more we went at it, the more my money went up. *Heh heh heh, this is a riot. I want to cheat. I want to keep winning...*

“Hey, don't let that woman touch the cards anymore! You! You deal the rest of it!”

“G-Got it, boss!”

She tried to put up countermeasures, but it was already too late. By then, there were already cards hidden all around my clothing, and even without them, there were still all sorts of other ways to cheat.

One of the gang's men cut the deck and began to pass out the cards.

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

“Did you really think that would fool me? Quit bottom dealing.”

“What?!”

I immediately saw through their gambit. The dealer had stacked the deck, sneakily placing all the necessary cards on the bottom. While making it look like he was dealing from the top, he was actually pulling them from the bottom. This ensured we all had the hands he wanted us to have. But unfortunately, I had seen through it.

“If you’re caught cheating the usual punishment is to have a finger cut off, isn’t it?”

The man turned pale.

“But I’d feel too bad for you, so I’ll forgive you for a million gold. Just this once, okay?”

His expression turning to despair, he placed a million gold’s worth of chips in front of me. *Hee hee hee, another win.*

“Wh-What’s even...? Is she...?” Gaujhel muttered, sweat pouring down her brow. My foe was trembling with fear, terrified as a disaster unfolded before her.

“L-Liz? What exactly...?”

“This is gettin’ dicey...”

“She’s scaring me...”

No, that was a little wrong. Even my friends were scared of me. *How strange. I mean, I’m just enjoying myself normally here.*

“Ah yep, there we go. That’s a royal flush.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“Save me! Get me out of here already!”

“Just stop... Haven’t you had enough?!”

The gang members collapsed in tears. The room was filled with cries of agony. I spent a whole fun hour doing whatever I wanted.

Chapter 12: Then—The Master Gambler and the Sleepless Town

The streetlights were so dazzling that they drowned out the stars—it was hard to imagine something like this in the darkness of night. There were thousands of lanterns illuminating the place as all sorts of people strutted about with a pep in their voices.

This street knew no sleep. The moon was but a second sun to them, the night an extension of the day. It was a lively, boisterous place of merriment and madness.

This was the casino row.

It was a massive place, where the masses would run through money like water, just for a night—a single moment of joy. They found themselves entranced, engaging in tense contests of chance and skill, their bags stuffed with cash. Some delighted from their wins, others mourned their own losses, while others yet wagered themselves into ruin.

“You’re telling me there’s a demon army executive here?”

“Yes, that’s what all signs are pointing to.”

The hero Cain and his comrades were currently in town. Upon their arrival, they came across a rumor that the gambling district had come under the control of a demon. The Gamblemaster, a peculiar entity who could apparently bolster their own powers by converting money into mana, was said to lurk somewhere in these dazzling halls.

Allegedly, this Gamblemaster could even drain the souls of humans as they drained their purses. So many people had now been driven to ruin that the rumor mill was running full tilt.

So, Cain and his comrades, surmising that this Gamblemaster was one of the demon lord army’s executives, got to work.

The team consisted of Cain, the noble knight Mitter, and the sorcerer Lalo. Together, the three headed off to battle to defeat the Gamblemaster.

They entered Number Star, the largest casino in town, where the most money changed hands. Hopefully, if they could win big here, they would be able to drag the Gamblemaster out into the open.

The game was blackjack—a game where players tried to get the total sum of their cards as close to twenty-one as possible. This was a game where Lalo could work his brain to the fullest.

By tallying all the cards played in the previous games, it was possible to surmise whether a high-or low-value card was going to be dealt next—this was a technique called card counting. Normally, a card counter would only need to keep a running tally, but Lalo was different. He was able to remember every single card that had been played, and he could use this data to deduce with a very high likelihood the exact card that was coming. This was usually inconceivable, but the brain of Lalo, a researcher at the Great Laboratory, made it possible.

Their funds were not limited to what they had earned along the journey. They had the financial support of Sylphonia, a princess of a massive nation, and Mitter, who was from a prominent noble house. With plenty of assets, there was hardly any reason for them to lose.

“All right, we won again,” Cain chuckled.

Just as planned, they achieved win after win, their massive victory pool causing a stir on the casino floor.

“Sir...” That was when one of the casino’s attendants called out to Cain. “Our town’s Gamblemaster wishes to issue you a challenge.”

“Hmm...”

They all stiffened up at this. It was finally time.

The casino’s large doors slowly opened with a dull, grating tone. From behind the door that was reserved for only a select few VIPs, a single woman leisurely revealed herself.

“You’re finally here, my dear heroes...”

A beautiful, almost intoxicating voice filled the air. The woman wore a black, provocative dress with a large slit in it, revealing her sizable chest. Her red high heels clacked against the floor as she approached them. She hid her mouth behind a fan, her wavy blonde hair swaying elegantly behind her. She was a beguiling sight.

“Wha?!”

Cain and his party members could not conceal their surprise at the sight of the Gamblemaster. It was an individual they knew all too well.

“Wait... Liz?!”

Indeed, the Gamblemaster revealed herself to be their comrade Liz.

“You did well to reach me! Gallant heroes! Now, how about we have a match?”

“The hell are you doing, idiot?”

“Oww?!”

Cain lowered a fist onto Liz’s head.

“Ha ha, ≡ you can’t do that, Cain. I’m standing before you as the Gamblemaster right now. ≡ Please don’t turn me into the masoking. ≡”

“No seriously, what are you doing?” Cain asked with a frown. His comrades, Mitter and Lalo, didn’t seem to understand what was going on either.

“Wah ha ha! I am Liz, the Gamblemaster! Gallant heroes! I shall bring you to ruin by my hand!” Liz struck a pose as she spat out lines that clearly sounded rehearsed.

“Hey, listen to me.”

“How much are you going to wager? My recommendation is the Exhilarating Life-Ruining Course.”

“The hell is that?”

“Oh dear, Sir Cain... ≡ It’s the menu item where you bring me to ruin, ignoring my protests as you play with my body for the rest of my life... ≡” Liz’s face was

touched with red as she wriggled her body.

“Seriously, listen to me.”

“I defeated the former Gamblemaster, who was indeed from the demon lord’s army. The day before yesterday, actually, when I was out to have a bit of fun.”

“Huh?!”

“You defeated him?!”

She admitted it like it was nothing.

“You gotta report stuff like that, idiot!”

“Ouch... ≡”

Cain once again lowered a fist on her head. Liz seemed delighted.

“Stop it! You ruffian! What do you think you’re doing to the new Gamblemaster?!”

“Wh-What now?!”

Suddenly, the casino’s female employees, all dressed in black suits, arrived, as though to shield Liz.

“Our new Gamblemaster took down the old one and did away with all his cruel, evil ways. She is a wonderful individual—our savior!”

“It is outrageous that you would even think to raise a hand against the Gamblemaster who liberated us and gave us hope!”

“Insolent one! Know your place!”

“Looks like you’re super popular here!”

The residents of this place all looked at Liz with love and respect.

“Now, gallant heroes!” crowed Liz. “Have a match with me!”

“Huh?”

And so raised the curtain on the (completely meaningless) game between Cain’s party and the Gamblemaster.

“Yes, it’s my win again!”

“Dammit! Why!”

“Something isn’t adding up!”

As Liz trivially flipped over the cards, Cain and his comrades held their heads.

It was another crushing victory for Liz. Lalo was still running his calculations, but owing to Liz’s rampant cheating, the cards still in play did not match up with what had already been played.

“How could there be another ten...?!”

“Pfft... Bwa ha ha!”

Thus, Lalo’s predictions were completely meaningless. Liz was toying with all of them.

“Heh...heh...*heh*! The cheating skills I’ve tempered for the sole purpose of messing with Cain, now they finally show their true worth!”

“Hey! You just admitted it, you bastard!”

And yet, even with Cain’s world-class dynamic vision and perceptive skills, he had been unable to even register her cheating. If, hypothetically, Liz were to ever go up against normal street thugs, they would surely lose without even seeing through a single movement.

A mountain of chips was piled before the Gamblemaster, while Cain and his party members were stripped down to nothing but their underpants.

“Ha...ha...ha...*ha*! And the debt will, of course, be paid with Cain’s body!”

“Hey!”

“I’ll wring out a hundred thousand gold’s worth in one go!”

“Stop it!”

They’d already piled up thirty-two hands worth of losses.

“Now, now, Sir Cain! Isn’t it about time we headed to the bedroom?! A night of sensual ruination awaits you!”

“H-Hey, wait! Lalo, Mitter! Don’t just stand there! Save me!”

As Cain pleaded for help, they both looked away. *Better him than us*, they both thought.

“Ah yes, the sweet scent of the Exhilarating Life-Ruining Course...”

“S-Stooooop!”

And Cain, in Liz’s firm embrace, was dragged off like a puppy, unable to resist. The hall’s large, thick doors opened, and the two of them disappeared into the darkness beyond.

Eventually, the door closed behind them. Whatever happened in there, it was now a completely isolated world from everything that happened outside. Cain’s screams never leaked through.

The hero’s body had been swallowed up by the ravenous abyss that was gambling.

“We should...get going.”

“Yeah...”

Left behind, Lalo and Mitter exited the casino with a spring in their step and made their way back to the inn.

The countless lights nearly blinded them, illuminating the sleepless city seeped in desire. Around them, some laughed, some cried, some suffered. Yet none could escape the magic of money, flipping their cards over with quivering hands.

Another night passed in the town where everything glittered in gold, its denizens staring the devil named desire in the face. The casino row was now free from the rule of a demon army executive. The darkness that lurked had been purified by the efforts of our brave heroes.

And the only cost had been Cain’s noble sacrifice.

Chapter 13: Now—How to Love More

It was the worst sight imaginable: all the gang members at the table had stripped down to their underpants, in such a daze it looked as though their souls were leaving them. The other members turned pale as they watched their gang's funding drift away.

Some sobbed and others let their gazes wander through space as they refused to look reality in the eye. All those who had lost it all to the table were left in a stupor in Luna's living room.

I had completely crushed the gang in our little match.

"I did it! Luna! You're free now!"

There was a massive stack of money in front of me. Luna's debt had completely vanished now, and there was no longer any reason she would need to be sold off.

We had come out on top. The tragedy caused by the gang had been vanquished, and justice had prevailed.

Naturally, Luna was crying in delight.

"Y-Yeah..."

Err, no, scratch that. She looked a bit weirded out. Apparently, my winning streak had frightened her. When I looked over, I saw that Luna's parents were completely out of it, unable to process the situation.

"Liz... You're bad news."

"You're a gamblin' beast, you are."

My friends were all pulling back from me. *You're all terrible! I did my best here. Well, whatever.*

"...Ha ha ha ha."

"Hmm?"

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha!”

That was when the leader, Gaujhel, suddenly exploded into laughter.

“Ha ha ha ha! Aha ha ha! Man, who’d have thought it would come to *this*?! This is interesting stuff!”

“What?”

“I never thought a noble girl who looked like she couldn’t hurt a fly would try to take us for a ride! I mean, shit, who coulda expected that?!”

She laughed so hard she was gripping her sides. Although it sounded like she was praising me, there was something ominous about her. It didn’t look like she had simply snapped out of desperation.

There was sweat on Luna’s brow. The gang members looked fearfully at their leader.

I readied myself.

“Phew...” After she’d finally stopped laughing, Gaujhel took a deep breath. She faced me, head-on.

“A fine performance, I’ll give you that. There was a real monster hidden behind that cute face of yours, eh?”

I held my tongue.

“But you know something...” She cracked her neck left and right. I grew even more wary. “You won a bit too much, y’hear?”

“I...won too much?”

“I’m saying you got carried away, dammit.”

Gaujhel seemed perfectly calm. This was not the attitude of someone who had just lost a massive sum of money.

“You need to learn a bit more about society, girly. Everything comes in moderation. Go beyond that, and you’re gonna end up waking the scariest monster in the world.”

“The strongest monster...in the world?”

“That’s right, dammit. Meaning you’ve rendered our little gambling match completely meaningless.”

I furrowed my brow at those words. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Are you telling me you’re going to revoke our agreement?”

“Hah! You’re still wet behind the ears! Promises, see, they’re blown away like scraps before that monster. Every adult knows about it. That’s why they find the right balance in life to make sure it never comes out. That’s how we adults do it.”

Gaujhel put a hand to her face. She looked to the heavens in a theatrical display. Her eyes were not laughing. From the gaps between her fingers peeked the gaze of a carnivorous beast.

“The strongest monster in the world. Is it money? No. Contracts? Not even close. Betting? Definitely not...”

I listened in silence.

“The greatest power to silence someone...” All of a sudden, Gaujhel drew the sword at her waist. “Is violence!”

She came at me with tremendous force.

“Ah!”

With the explosive strength of her legs, Gaujhel closed the distance between us in an instant. She was out to invalidate the results of our bet by force.

“Looks like this lesson’s gonna be an expensive one for you!”

She approached with a savage smile on her face, her sword at the ready. Everyone screamed as they imagined me being sliced through. But in that instant, a certain thought crossed my mind.

That’s right. I know a way to silence people. I’ve silenced my enemies countless times; I’ve used that method countless times before. It wasn’t something as petty as violence.

The memories I didn’t remember were shaking.

“It’s over, dammit!”

Gaujhel swung her sword with a smile. Its blade was sure to slice through my body. And yet, the blade phased through me.

“What?!”

My body shifted like smoke and vanished.

I’d created an illusory clone of myself. Her swing hit far from the real me.

Gaujhel was so surprised she froze.

“Don’t tell me... An illusion?”

She noticed a moment too late. In that time, I had already gotten right up beside her. I took a firm hold of her shoulder and drew her close. I didn’t even have to think about it—the motions came completely naturally to me. I knew how to silence my enemies... It was a method that involved a lot more love.

I kissed Gaujhel on the lips.

“Mmm?!”

“Mmmnh...”

Her eyes opened as wide as they could go, more shock on her face than ever before. As my tongue infiltrated her mouth, her body quivered and her eyes swam in chaos and confusion.

“...”

“...Huhh?”

“...What?”

“...Huuuuuuuuuuuuuh?!”

After a moment of silence, the peanut gallery cried out in shock. But that was none of my business.

Wrapping my arm around the back of Gaujhel’s head, I pressed our lips even harder together. I felt the womanliness in her lips, which were far softer than they looked. My tongue gently stroked her from within.

“Mmm...! Mm...?! Mm...mm!”

Twitch. Twitch. She shook as her body filled with feverish heat. She tried to

pull back, to pull away from me. But there was no way she could escape from my kiss. I tampered with her insides, toying with her, forcing all sorts of new stimuli upon her, and all she could do was let her face get redder and redder.

“Wh-Whoa?”

The gang members watched, their faces flushed too. The powerful woman who ruled over them through fear was now squirming and whimpering, all her dignity blown away.

“Pah! Y-You little?! What do you think you’re...? Mm?! Mmmmm?!”

The moment our lips parted, she tried to curse me. But my lips soon sealed hers again. On top of the arm I had around her head, I wrapped one around her hip too. This was the end.

“Mmm! Mnff, mm! Mwah!”

As I forcefully stirred my tongue throughout her mouth, the moans leaking from her turned sweeter by degrees. I continued to tease her so hard, so *deeply* that neither of us could breathe. Before I knew it, her hands, which had been fidgeting around in the air, now had a firm grasp on my clothes.

“Mm! Mnnn...! Nwah?! Mmm... Mff... Mff... Mmmah! Mmm!”

She closed her eyes. Finally, her tongue made its way into my mouth. Had she finally given in? She was beginning to accept her fate.

Good. I’ll give you a kiss sweeter than honey.

“Huh.”

“What the shit?”

My school friends gasped in confusion, yet their eyes were fixed on us, their cheeks red as could be. Luna’s eyes were being covered up by her mother, but Luna was still staring intently through the gaps in her fingers. Her face was bright red.

“Mmmmmmm!”

Gaujhel’s body quivered. She let out a groan as though something had given out within her. Our beautiful time was at its end. I parted my lips from hers, and

she collapsed down, her face vacant.

“Hah... Gwosh...you’re amayshing...” she said before ascending to heaven.

She lay flat on the ground, looking up at us. She no longer had any will to resist; being aggressive with me was now the furthest thing from her mind.

The battle was decided.

“I win,” I declared, licking my lips.

Everyone was looking at me dumbfounded, enemy and ally alike. At the very least, it seemed that the gang had lost any hostility they had towards me. They no longer had the will to do anything to Luna’s house.

Luna, meanwhile, had her mouth agape—and so did everyone else. There was practically steam rising from their feverish faces.

Such innocent girls showing off their lovable naivete.

I... I...

.....

.....

“Huh?! What am I doing?!”

Then, I regained my sanity.

It was like a haze had cleared from my head, and I fretfully looked around. Everyone was red with embarrassment, and Gaujhel was lying right next to me, twitching on the ground.

Umm...

“...”

What did I just do? I put a finger to my forehead and thought. When an enemy attacked me... I would kiss them?

...?

“No, why...?!” I asked myself.

Why did I kiss someone trying to kill me?! How would I know how to do this?! What even is this...?!

What had come over me?!

“Umm, err, um um um um...!”

I was stunned by my own actions.

It would have been one thing if I fought back, but why a kiss?! That's what I want to know! For a while now, the inner workings of my own mind have been a complete mystery to me!

“H-Huh?! Wh-Why? Why?!”

I'm scared! No, more than scared, I'm terrified! What just happened to me?! I've never even kissed a gentleman before!

“N-No, you have it wrong? This is some sort of mistake...” I stammered. When I turned my eyes to my dear school friends, they all took a step back.

“I-It's not like that... You all understand that, right? I'm sure I was being controlled by a demon of some sort...”

“Hey, Liz. Don't come this way.”

“So mean!”

Adeline's upfront words hurt me. When I tried to inch my way closer, they all inched their way back.

“No, no... Why are you running away...? Satina...?”

“No, no, no... Why are you coming this way, Liz?”

“W-Well, you know... I want to celebrate this victory with everyone...”

“R-Right, of course... Ha ha ha. Hip. Hip. Hooray...”

We were both dripping with cold sweat, the tension in this strained room rising even higher.

What is this? Why is still there a kill-or-be-killed vibe in the air when I've already defeated the gang?

“Umm, Liz...”

“Wh-What is it, Luna...?”

“From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for saving my family. No matter

what I do, it will never be enough to repay you...”

“Please don’t back away as you say that...”

Although her mouth offered words of gratitude, her body was more honest.

“You made her break down with a kiss,” said Adeline. “You a succubus or something?”

“Of course not!”

I could never be a succubus!

“Whoa!”

“Eep!”

“P-Please wait!”

When I tried to run towards them, they all scattered and ran, screams rising. *This is too cruel! Like this, it’s almost like I’m a scoundrel who goes around assaulting women!*

“Hey, kiss demon! Don’t get any closer...!”

“You’re all so mean!”

Adeline brazenly spoke the sentiment that everyone else had been dancing around. My heart was greatly wounded.

“You’re wrong! That back there had to have been some sort of mistake! That wasn’t the real me! Please believe me!”

“Eep!”

“Stay back!”

The fight was supposed to be over, yet the scene in the mansion was still hellish. Everyone was growing increasingly desperate.

“Nobody move!”

“Huh?! ”

“Who...?! ”

All of a sudden, someone slammed the door open and rushed in.

“Wait, S-Sir Cain?!”

“Liz...”

It was the refreshing man with the black hair, Cain. Behind him was Lalo, as well as a good number of the town’s guards.

“C-Cain... What are you doing here?”

“There was a report. Apparently, gang members have been loitering around this property these past few days. And when I headed out to investigate, I bumped straight into Lalo...”

“Oh!”

That was enough for me to understand what was going on. Lalo had indeed sensed the criminality underlying Luna’s withdrawal notice and had immediately mobilized the guard. He ran into Cain, who was in the middle of investigating the gang.

At this point, there was no longer anything the gang could do. The hero and the guards would tie them up. They’d be rounded up, the lot of them. That would bring a swift end to the case.

I pressed my hand to my chest, relieved.

“...Cain?”

And yet, Cain was warily surveying the room.

The evidence left behind—the gang members stripped to their tighty-whities, the massive stacks of cash, my friends all red in the face, and Gaujhel, whose chest heaved with breath as she lay on the ground, dead to the world.

“Ha-*chah*!”

“Oww?! ”

Cain mercilessly brought a fist down on my head.

“H-Huh? Why did you just hit me?”

“Because there’s no one else in the world who could have produced a scene like this!”

“Huuuh?!”

Don't just conclude that I was the one who created this mess! I mean, I was, but that's beside the point!

“You...! I'm always telling you not to bully the weak!”

“Huh?! I'm really getting scolded right now?!”

“Of course you are! Every single time, you always go around complicating things!”

“Rather... By weak, are you referring to these gang members?! Isn't that downright strange?!”

“They're weak compared to you!”

“Huuuh?!”

This is completely unreasonable!

The guards apprehended the gang members one by one. Gaujhel was gently lifted off the ground and slowly moved off the premises.

As she passed by me, I exclaimed, “L-Look right there! Cain, she's the gang's leader, Gaujhel! The ringleader behind this whole incident! It's not my fault—it's hers!”

I pointed at her, and Gaujhel lifted her face to look at me. Her cheeks turned red. “Err... Yes. Boss didn't do anything wrong. That was on me... I won't do bad things anymore, so don't bully the boss...”

“Huuuh?!”

She's kinda behaving like a respectable human being?!

Closing her damp eyes, she went on, “Boss... N-Next time...please be gentle...”

“Huuuuuh?!”

Next time?! There won't be a next time!

“See that? You left a woman like that, and you're still going to insist you did *nothing* wrong, Liz?”

“I-I don’t know anything! I don’t know what’s going on, myself!”

“At least say sorry, how about it...?”

“But why?!”

Cain pushed down my head, forcing me to give an apologetic bow. Almost like he was my guardian or something, he lowered his own head alongside me. Gaujhel’s eyes were still moist and pleading like a puppy as she was carried out of the room.

And seeing me lowering my head like that, for some reason, my friends were nodding along as though that was the proper way things should be.

I don’t accept this at all!

“Whyyyyyyyy?!”

As all the problems were getting resolved, my scream faded away, fading into the spring sky. It was a clear sky, blue from end to end.

And like so, a peaceful moment slowly passed by.

Chapter 14: Then—The Dreams of Youth

He walked down a dark corridor. He could hear the breathing of monsters around him.

The boy suppressed the sound of his own breath as he walked, alert as a beast. He was inside a cave, surrounded by stone walls, and that alone made it far too easy for sound to echo and spread. He took care not to make any sounds with his footsteps as he trudged along the craggy rock floor.

If he let his guard down for a mere moment, he would immediately bring about his own death. If he made even the slightest sound, the monsters would quickly surround him.

Within this dungeon rampant with monsters, the boy continued to press on.

Cain had still been very young then. He hadn't even been five years old when he had been forced to risk his life in this place.

His house was in the countryside, far from any major cities. It was surrounded by mountains, a great expanse covered by fields and teeming with greenery. It was a perfectly ordinary countryside town, but Cain's household was unique.

His house maintained a role as the guardians of the sacred blade. They defended the holy sword in preparation for the crisis that would befall the world someday. For many long years, they had continued to keep watch over the dungeon where it had been sealed away.

And the prophesized moment finally came just as Cain was born into the world. He was thus forced to take the trial to become the wielder of the holy blade. He would venture into the dungeon where it was enshrined alone, and bring it back with him—that was the full extent of the trial.

Cain was sent into the dungeon starting at the age of three. This was part of his training, and to accustom him to all the dangers ahead. At the same time, it came with the very real risk of losing his life.

The young boy would have to face down the monsters of this wicked dungeon

all on his own. There wasn't a safe place to be found, and he could not relax his guard for even a moment. He was tormented by anxiety, filled with fear, and overcome with suffering. But even so, he soldiered on.

He'd been cornered more times than he could count. Yet still, he overcame these crises with the few weapons he carried with him. Like this, he would polish his power and, bit by bit, become a person worthy of the holy sword.

“...”

Hiding behind in the shadows of the rocks, the young boy rested without sleeping. He fearfully stifled his breath, not knowing when the next monster would pass by. He felt like the darkness of the cave would drive him mad as he honed his eyes and ears, making himself as small as he could.

Countless scars had been carved into his body. He had spent the most part of his life within this dungeon.

After he'd made a certain amount of progress, he would be able to return to the surface with a teleportation circle installed within. The time he spent aboveground was the only peace he got, and it always felt far too short for him.

“...”

He hardly ever met the kids who lived in his neighborhood and never had the chance to play with them. Even when he was on the surface world, his family forced him into training.

He lived his life alongside the dungeon. As he grew stronger, so did the monsters within. And all his childhood, he was nothing more than a lonesome boy, struggling to survive.

Ultimately, Cain somehow managed to clear the trial and become the wielder of the holy sword Andros. Thirteen years had gone by since he first set foot in that accursed dungeon.

“So yeah, I never really had a proper childhood... Nor an adolescence, I guess,” Cain said as he let a large cloud of cigar smoke escape his mouth.

They were in the common room of an inn. He was surrounded by the

members of the hero party, who all listened intently to the tales of his past.

Night had set in, and everyone had sat down by the fire in the warm conference room to tell a few stories. It had started with small, inconsequential things, but as the time drew on, a few rather dreadful tales entered the mix.

“Oh... Umm...”

“That’s tragic...”

Inevitably, Cain’s story had left everyone feeling rather down.

“And hold up,” said Cain. “It ain’t just me. When we agreed to bring up some lighthearted childhood stories, not a single one of you had a decent story to tell.”

“Oh, right...”

Young as they were, they were all some of the strongest in the world. But the path to reach this strength had come at the sacrifice of a great many things.

Princess Knight Sylphie had essentially lived a life of confinement where she was forced to spend every waking moment on combat training. Saint Melvy had lived under the harsh doctrine of her church, killing any shred of her true self.

Some were worse than others, but they had all lived twisted childhoods.

“But, well...”

Everyone listened in silence.

“...It just goes to show, we were never meant to have an adolescence,” Cain muttered with a stream of cigar smoke.

His comrades all cast their eyes down a bit and shut their mouths. The haze of the smoke lifted into the air, drifting through the window and dissipating into the sky.

“The few years before I met Cain were nothing but depressing.”

“Liz...”

Then, it was Liz who spoke up, with a dark look on her face.

“My succubus powers were gradually growing... I wanted to live an honest,

upfront life, but the lust within me was taking over, driving me to madness. My adolescence was spent in torment and self-loathing...”

No one said anything.

“But within all of that, Sir Cain saved me. He told me I didn’t need to hide who I was, that I could just be *me*. His words were my salvation.”

She flashed a smile like a noble, blooming flower. Cain was almost entranced—here before him was a graceful woman whom he had saved from her own tragic youth.

“So I think I understand a little... If possible, I want to help you all out. But there’s a limit to what I’m capable of.”

“Liz...”

“In fact, pervy stuff is about all I’m capable of. Yes, at best, we can all do lewd things together!”

“...Huh?”

The trajectory of the conversation was all of a sudden looking dubious.

“You heard it here, folks! Yes, indeed! Let’s get it on! Now, everyone! You know how it’s done!”

Liz swiftly removed a layer of clothing.

“Idiot!”

“Oof!”

Cain quickly delivered a smack to her cheek. Her body was blown away, thudding against the wall.

“I thought you were being serious for once in your life.”

“Aww. ≡”

When Liz was involved, any and all subjects turned to sex. For how serious she was before she reached that point, her comrades only felt that much more disappointed. With weary faces, their shoulders dropped exhaustedly. The air grew lax in but a moment’s time.

“All right, meeting adjourned.”

“I guess I’ll go to bed...”

Since the conversation had reached its end (thanks to Liz), everyone got ready to go. The sensitive atmosphere had been completely ruined. Everyone yawned as they rose from their seats.

That was when Liz—still embedded in the wall—opened her mouth. “But you know...”

“Hmm?”

“This journey *has* been pretty fun.”

“Yeah.”

Everyone offered a slight nod at that.

Their journey had been a harsh one; their lives were constantly being shaved away as they fought against the powerful forces of evil. They trudged on, wounded and scarred, but they needed to save humanity.

Yet, the time they all spent together was enjoyable. For the heroes, it was a joy they had never experienced in all their lives.

“Yeah...”

“I guess so...”

Not a single objection was raised. To them, this journey was like a sort of unconventional adolescence.

“But we won’t be young forever. How about we all do something adolescent-ish next time?” Liz proposed as she lifted her head out of the wall.

“What does adolescent-ish even mean?”

“Well, let’s see...” She tried to think about it. “That’s a good question. What do you think would be nice?”

Liz showed a loose, carefree smile. Almost like she was a child pondering her own birthday present. It was a smile that radiated hope and joy.

“I’ll try to think of something.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“Glad to hear it!”

She was now smiling childishly from ear to ear. And seeing that, the rest mustered mild smiles of their own. An adolescence they could spend alongside their comrades. Just imagining it lit a warmth deep in their chests.

Someday, let’s all regain our lost youth together. The promise was tacitly carved in their chests as they exchanged a nod.

“Oh, but there is one thing that comes to mind!” said Liz.

“Oh, what’s that? Out with it.”

“Sex!” Liz declared while removing another layer. “Now let’s enjoy youthful sex together! Now, everyone! Let it out to your heart’s content!”

“Hrah!”

“Gyah!”

Cain heaved the pervmaster out the third-story window. She flew and flew, farther and farther, until finally, she was imperceptible, but another speck among the lights of the stars twinkling in the night sky.

The smoke of his cigar flowed out and faded into the air.

Their days were filled with nothing but fighting, but this was a time spent on youth—as far as they saw it.

Epilogue

A comfortable wind blew. It passed through the tree-lined hiking course and out onto the open plains beyond. We were at a rather high elevation where the air was sweet and refreshing. It was time for our outdoorsmanship class.

“All right, everyone, split into your teams and start preparing lunch.”

“Okay.”

Today, we were going to be making curry at the campsite. All our classmates began sluggishly moving their bodies—worn out by the climb—to cook according to schedule.

The sky seemed so endlessly vast. There was nothing to interrupt it; a clear blue without a single cloud.

“Hey! Hey! Liz! Field trips sure are nice, aren’t they?! Yes, it’s like, everything’s a little different from usual! Exciting, isn’t it?!”

Sylphie, who had been walking beside me, spoke with sparkles in her eyes. Her cheeks were flushed, the childish joy overflowing from every pore on her body. As she had never gone to school before, she could hardly contain herself during these school events.

“Oh... Sylphie’s dazzling...”

Dazzling. Blinding, even. She was so pure and innocent that I couldn’t bring myself to look straight at her. She’d apparently been looking forward to this class so much that she hadn’t slept much the night before. Well, one sleepless night was nothing in the face of her boundless stamina.

“Yes, indeed! This must be what *youth* feels like!”

“Sylphie...”

“I’m looking forward to the delicious curry, Liz!”

And giddily, she returned to her own station. Her pure heart was...too much for me. She was an endangered species—a natural wonder.

“Tsk. This sucks. What a drag.”

“And here we have a weary hero, huh...”

In contrast to Sylphie’s unadulterated awe, there was Cain, who clicked his tongue as he got to work nearby. He squatted down, flapping a fan around to lift the flame beneath the cooking pot.

“Is there even any point in this? With magic, we’d have a nice fire going with the snap of a finger.”

“Apparently, this class is meant to teach the value of our comrades and of nature through joint activities done the natural way.”

“Ah, so they’re just doing this to annoy us, eh? All talk, no substance—it really is just irritating.”

“Ah ha ha, that’s a twisted way of looking at it...”

At the moment, only Melvy and I were in earshot of him—as we were chopping up the curry ingredients. The boy who usually put on the honor student act in front of others was exposing his true self. A true self that did nothing but complain.

It was forbidden to use magic to start the fire. We were supposed to go through all the troubles typically involved, everyone working together to make a single dish. That was the foundational principle of this class.

“As the representative put it, this event is supposed to have us *share in our understanding of the wonder of nature*. Apparently.”

“Right?” Melvy said with a chuckle.

She was incredibly adept at cooking. Perhaps she had received professional training at some point? Anyway, I was certain she would be a lovely wife someday.

“Ah, shut it. Just shut up.”

But though he was complaining, Cain never did stop waving the fan. He kept on saying he hated it, but he was still an earnest worker who made sure to do his job right.

“Aaah, I hate this. What a pain. What’s the point of doing all this in the mountains?”

“...”

“Hah, a drag. A *pain*. A pain...”

“...”

“A pain... I say...”

“Hmm?”

Each time he opened his mouth, he was talking less and less. I glanced over to see Cain staring fixedly into the flames, wholeheartedly working the fan. He was completely concentrating on the steady growth of the fire.

Don’t tell me...he’s starting to enjoy it?

By now, he’d completely forgotten to complain as he focused on raising the fire. He would swing the fan this way, then that way as he methodically tested to see which method would contribute most to the fire’s growth.

And, once he found a method that was better than his previous best, he seemed truly delighted. He was like a child brimming with curiosity. Wholeheartedly devoting himself to the fire, he was beginning to enjoy camping—despite everything he said.

What’s with him? Even when he was just complaining... It’s kinda cute...

“Heeey! Liz!”

“Yes?”

Someone was calling my name from afar. *Based on the voice, is it Cain’s comrade Rachel?*

I popped my head out of the cooking area and saw those purple pigtailed buns bouncing all over the place as she ran.

“What’s wrong, Rachel?”

“I got some extra meat! You can never have enough meat, right?”

“Meat?”

“Yeah, I hunted a stray dragon!”

“Huh?!”

As she cheerfully bragged about it, I noticed the twenty-meter-long dragon (small by dragon standards) she was dragging behind her.

“Wh-What’s that?! That dragon!”

“Toss it in the curry!”

“You want dragon curry?!”

Rachel was demanding something outrageous.

“N-No, wait. Wait a second... Where did you even get that thing?!”

“Well, I guess it wandered off from the pack. It was in the area, so I hunted it.”

That sounds pretty haphazard.

“No, no, no! I can’t! There’s no way I could possibly cook a dragon!”

“Huh? You used to do it all the time, Liz.”

“I most certainly did not!”

Rachel said something quite incomprehensible. More importantly, there was a chance of there being more dragons around. *Shouldn’t we be evacuating?!*

“Oh, Liz’s dragon curry? It’s been too long!” Sylphie said as she suddenly appeared with a cherubic smile.

“Not you too!”

“I can’t wait to have some of Liz’s dragon curry.”

“Right?”

“No, no! I can’t do it! There’s no way I can make dragon curry!”

“Aww.”

“Aww...”

Rachel and Sylphie both sounded like disappointed children. But no way, no how. How could anyone make dragon meat into a curry? They could look at me

with those hopeful eyes all they wanted. But cooking dragon was simply impossible.

This is just not normal!

“I’m not making you any dragon curry, and that’s that!”

Thirty minutes later...

“I...made it...”

I was in a bit of a daze as I stood before the large bubbling pot.

I made it. I had managed to use dragon meat in a curry. The thick earthy smell permeated the area, stimulating all our appetites.

There was absolutely nothing strange about the smell. I had given it a taste a moment ago, and surprisingly, I had perfectly managed to incorporate the strong and quirky flavor of dragon. It was a good match for the curry.

Other than that, I had also whipped up dragon-herb steak, ginger dragon stir-fry, dragon burgers, and many more. They were all...delicious.

“I’m starting to understand myself...less and less.”

But why? When I had stood before the dragon meat, for some reason, it had suddenly been second nature to me. I knew exactly how best to cook it and season it—my hands moved so smoothly it was like I had completely mastered the craft.

I held my head. *What is this sensation? It’s not normal to be able to cook up a dragon...*

“See? You can do it if you try.”

“Grrrr...”

Rachel came up to me with a gluttonous look on her face. I was happy that she seemed to hold me in such high regard, but after I’d insisted so strongly that it couldn’t be done, the fact that I managed to do it kinda made it feel like I’d been defeated.

“Oh, are you done cooking, Liz?”

“Umm, umm, it smells good.”

Their noses seemed to tell them that the dishes had reached completion. The members of the hero party were gathering around the pot.

“Liz’s home cooking, huh? I’ve been looking forward to this!”

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”

“Hmm? A while?”

“No, it’s nothing. Nothing at all,” Rachel nonchalantly replied as she ladled curry onto her plate.

A special curry filled with ample dragon meat. There was so much meat, in fact, that it seemed less like curry, and more like meat with a bit of sauce poured over it.

“Whoa! Curry! Liz’s curry!”

“Hey, don’t take too much! Rachel! You’re gonna take our share at this rate!”

“It’ll be fine. Just look at how much we have!”

“Aren’t you all being a bit too greedy?”

The members of the hero’s party had flocked to my curry. Why did they all look so desperate? Were they all starved for home cooking?

Evidently, my questions had made their way to my face. As she stirred the pot, Rachel provided an explanation.

“Cooking is very important, Liz. Whether or not you have someone who knows how to cook—that can completely change the quality of the journey!”

“Is that how it works?”

“Meals are indispensable if you want to keep your body in top condition, and having good food is a real motivation booster!”

“Hmm.”

When she put it like that, that did explain a few things.

“So who was in charge of cooking for your party? I can tell Melvy’s pretty good.”

“Melvy and Sylphie are both quite skilled. But our best cook’s been away from the front lines for about a year now.”

“Hmm...”

Is it someone I don’t know, then?

“Although her cooking’s put us through hell a few times, I’ll admit.”

“Hell?”

“Yeah, that’s right. She mixes a few things in, from time to time.”

Err, mixes what in?

“Did something bad happen?”

“Ha ha ha...I never thought the day would come when you’d be asking me that, Liz.”

“Umm, umm, let’s not talk about it. You can’t undo the past...”

“Hm?”

For some reason, everyone’s eyes were gradually turning empty, lifeless. It must have been quite a terrible thing that had occurred. I couldn’t even surmise what had happened to these girls.

“Yes, just know it was terrible...”

“That’s right, it was...”

“Hell...”

“...”

“Hmm?”

What now? Their faces were all turning grim. These are...looks of suspicion?

Their eyes turned dubious as they stared at the curry I’d made.

What? It’s like they’re sensing danger from my curry.

“Is this...going to be all right? There’s not anything funny in this curry, is there?” Cain muttered.

After a beat, for some reason, everyone began to back away from me and the

curry, fearful looks on their faces.

“H-Hey, Rachel. How about you take the first bite?”

“Huh?! You eat it, Cain!”

“L-Lookie here, Sir Cain. It’s your beloved Liz’s home cooking. Shouldn’t you be the first one to eat it?”

“D-Don’t screw with me. Hey, quit pushing.”

Curiously, they all began whispering about something. Their voices were too faint for me to pick up on.

“Y-You go, Melvy. Isn’t she your master?!”

“Not me, not me! If I expose myself here, I won’t be able to go to school anymore...!”

“Show your manliness, Sir Cain!”

“Stupid! Stupid Sylphie! What are you gonna do if I end up showing my *manliness* in a different way?!”

What? They seem afraid of something. What’s gotten into them?

“Hey, what are the heroes doing?”

“Who knows?”

As they huddled and chatted in front of the curry, the other students began to gather and look at them dubiously.

“Yay! Curry made by Lady Lisalinde! This is going to be a treat!”

“H-Hey! You lot! Wait! That’s dangerous! That curry is hell!”

For some reason, Cain personally stopped another student from ladling any of my curry. *What do you mean dangerous? Huh?*

“What are they talking about, I wonder?”

“Lady Lisalinde’s curry is dangerous? I don’t really get it...”

“Stupid! Fool...! Don’t drop your guard! It was made by Liz—that Liz, you know!”

Yeah, Liz who? What Liz are you talking about? Certainly not me.

“A-At this rate, that poison is going to spread around the student body...!”

“That’s a disaster waiting to happen...!”

“Umm, umm! If everyone here goes into heat... I-It will be chaos...*cough-cough!*”

“Seriously, what are you all talking about?”

I couldn’t comprehend a word of what they were saying. What was so scary about the curry?

“Oh, that’s right...” It was then that I recalled something. I pulled a large sack out of my bag. “I baked some cookies before coming here. We can all have some after we’re done eating.”

“You’ve shown your true colors, Liz!”

“Huh?!”

The moment I showed my sack of handmade cookies, for some reason, the wariness of the hero’s party peaked.

“Those handmade cookies must vanish from this world!”

“But why?! Cain?!”

“Sir Cain, you have my full support!”

“Even you, Sylphie?!”

Cain and Sylphie picked up their swords and raised the concentration of mana in their bodies.

Why?! Why do they look prepared for war?!

“Oh! To think, I can eat Lady Lisalinde’s handmade cookies! Today is a good day indeed!” cried a student.

“You fools! Do none of you sense the danger?! Do you want to die?!” Cain scolded them.

But why?!

“Oh, um um um... Err, umm! I need to set up a barrier!”

“Melvy too?!”

Why a barrier?!

“I mean, once the handmade cookies come out... It’s already a battlefield!”

“When it comes to handmade cookies, there’s no telling what’s inside of them...”

“Are you saying I poisoned them?!”

Even though I insisted I would never do such a thing, they weren’t believing a word of it.

Why?! Why do they have so little trust in me?!

“Everyone! You must leave the area immediately! You must run!” Mr. Lalo began to evacuate everyone from school. It was a complete panic.

“Be careful! Let your guard down, and those cookies will move on their own and force themselves into your mouth!”

“Those sorts of cookies don’t exist!”

“It’s happened more than once!”

Just what sort of cookies have the hero’s party encountered?! I don’t understand their experience!

“Here we go! My comrades! We must erase those cookies from existence!”

“On it!”

“I know!”

“You’re all in perfect sync!”

They directed murderous intent at the bag of cookies lying on the table. The holy sword let off a magnificent light as everyone mustered their strength to let out the greatest attacks in their arsenals.

“Begone!”

The heroes all smashed their most powerful skills into the cookies. It was like they were fighting the demon lord himself; their expressions were as serious as could be as they endeavored to erase my handmade cookies from the mortal

plane.

Their hearts were as one. They showed splendid teamwork.

“Gooooooooo!”

“Whyyyyyyyy?!”

Their attacks merged into a massive beam of light. The cookies were no more. Looks of triumph and satisfaction flashed across the heroes’ faces, as though they had just vanquished a great evil. The students stared blankly.

And so, the hero and his party members enjoyed their outdoorsmanship class.

They were all scolded by the teachers afterwards.

* * * * *

In the middle of the night, I suddenly opened my eyes. I could hear someone sleeping soundly nearby in the pitch-black room. My head hazy, I vaguely recalled that I was still in the mountains.

“...”

I rubbed my sleepy eyes and slowly sat up. In the unlit room, I could only see the twinkling stars through the window.

Gradually, my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and I managed to make out everyone’s sleeping forms. Melvy and Luna were well-mannered sleepers, nicely contained under their covers. Meanwhile, Rachel and Adeline were far from it—their pajamas were disheveled, and I could see a bit of their bellies.

It was chilly inside the cottage. When I shifted my blanket a bit, I could feel the cold air permeating my exposed skin. The entire building was made of wooden logs, giving off a refreshing and comforting scent.

“Bathroom...”

Taking care not to wake anyone, I put on a coat, and quietly made my way to the door. I slipped on some shoes and quickly did my business in the bathroom outside. The water I used to wash my hands was freezing.

Heading farther into the wilds, I stretched out.

“The stars are beautiful...” I muttered.

There was a full starry sky spanning over me. Countless motes of light scattered across the darkness, faintly illuminating the world. The high-altitude winds blew all around me, causing me to shudder. The trees swayed; their leaves rustled against one another.

There was a large moon floating in the sky. Waning, ever so slightly—it was beautiful, but it also felt a bit lacking.

In the vast expanse of nature, I alone was staring up at the moon and the stars.

“Huh?”

No, I was not. It seemed someone had arrived before me.

“Hmm? Liz?”

There was a lone man atop a rock on the grassy plain. It was Cain. He sat cross-legged, his head turned towards me as he waved. I jogged up to him.

“Cain, you were awake?”

“I’ve never needed too much sleep. Two hours is enough for me to function.”

“Hmm, that’s impressive.”

“So what are you awake for, Liz? Having a hard time sleeping?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right...”

It was a bit embarrassing to say I woke to use the restroom, after all. He was patting the rocky spot beside him, so I took him up on that. I sat beside him.

“Do you drink?”

“Huh?”

On closer inspection, I saw a bottle and a cup nearby. He was holding another empty cup out to me. As it turned out, he had been enjoying a drink by the moonlight.

“Umm... I’ve hardly ever drunk any alcohol before. So, I think I’m a lightweight.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“So, just a little bit, please,” I said as I took the cup from him.

“You? A lightweight? Don’t kid yourself. Here.”

“Aaaaah?!”

Cain filled my glass up to the brim.

Hey! I said I just wanted a little!

“What are you going to do if I g-get drunk?! If I drink myself under the table, it’s going to be a detriment to all our activities tomorrow!”

“I just can’t imagine you being a lightweight.”

“What do you know about me?!”

Even I didn’t know how I fared with alcohol. There was no way Cain could possibly tell!

“Ha ha ha!” Cain laughed like a mischievous brat.

I puffed out my cheeks a bit to show him I certainly wasn’t happy with this. But he simply continued to laugh and drink.

“Phew.”

I took a deep breath before taking a drink of my own. A hot buzz passed through my throat.

Under the moonlight, we sat shoulder to shoulder and drank. The wind was comforting; the stars were beautiful.

And suddenly, I thought, *Aren’t I incredibly blessed right now?* I was looking up at the stars, sharing drinks with the hero who was admired by the world around. This thought caused my heart to race just a little bit. My face grew hot with nerves.

“It’s been a month, huh...”

“Hmm?”

Cain suddenly muttered something.

“Just saying it’s been only a month since we transferred in. I can’t tell if it was short or long. It kinda feels like both—it’s strange.”

“Is that so?”

He gulped down the last of his cup, and I refilled it for him.

“I’m sure that’s because it was a very fulfilling time for you.”

“I see... You may be right...”

“Have you been enjoying your time at school?” I asked.

He furrowed his brow and raised a finger to rub his nose. “It’s been decent... Yeah, just decent,” he said as if it were nothing.

But I knew him better than that. Those were the motions he made when he was lying to cover up his embarrassment. Surely he was too embarrassed to say it was fun. That came as a joy to me. It seemed that Cain really was enjoying his time at the academy, and knowing that filled me with an indescribable sense of glee.

“Huh?”

“Liz?”

Huh? That’s strange. Why do I know what Cain does when he lies? It’s only been a month... And we aren’t particularly close... But...

“Cain, you and the others...” My mouth began moving on its own. “You, and all your comrades... You’re all...people who never got to live a good childhood...”

“...”

“So, to know you’re enjoying your school life... That you’re finally living out your adolescence... I’m happy...”

“Liz...”

For some reason, my head was starting to spin. It was almost like something within me was rattling my brain.

“Huh? Did I ever talk to you about that before?”

Cain didn’t answer.

“Why did I know that again? I shouldn’t know about you, or anyone’s

childhood...”

I was struck by a dizzy spell as the question came over me.

I wonder why...

Cain, Sylphie, Melvy... When I saw them enjoying a fulfilling school life, it felt as though their joy was my own. I felt blessed to see them living a good youth, and I felt like I had to protect it no matter what.

Even though we weren’t especially close. Even though I’d only known them for a *month*.

“Hey, Liz.”

“Huh...?”

As I was swaying back and forth, Cain suddenly, violently ruffled up my hair.

“Wah! Wah?!”

“Don’t let it get to you.”

“Huh?”

His hand threw my hair into a mess. His eyes were staring straight into my mind—his gaze was telling me to calm down.

“I don’t want you to do anything crazy. It’s still too soon for any of that. Don’t think too hard about it.”

“Cain...”

“Just take it slowly, okay? Slowly.”

I blinked.

I couldn’t quite understand what he was talking about. What was *getting to me*? What was it *too soon* for? It was all nonsense—yet again. I didn’t understand. I didn’t, but...

“All right...”

I softly nodded.

His hand on my head was giving me a sense of relief. *Maybe it would be all right to stay like this a little longer*, I thought. And as I thought this, the dizziness

softened.

I caught my breath. His warmth had saved me from the fog within my head.

“Want another drink?”

“Yes... I’ll take one.”

Cain poured some more from his bottle into my cup.

We stared at the moon together. The scattered stars filled the sky with a faint light along with the slightly waning moon. I could see a little bit of me in this sky—I sensed it somewhere in my chest.

“The moon is beautiful,” Cain muttered.

I turned to look at him.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“...”

My heart had just skipped a beat. Was my face red? I couldn’t tell. But as I stared at him with shock, he only cocked his head.

“Seriously, what?”

“N-No...it’s nothing... Nothing at all...”

I was starting to feel embarrassed at myself. Fiddling with my hair, I turned away. He didn’t understand the other meaning of what he’d just said. I could feel my body heating up a bit. Even though I knew he hadn’t said it intentionally, he’d managed to sway my heart.

The moon is beautiful... It had another meaning that I knew. It meant *I love you*.

But Cain didn’t know—I knew he didn’t, but it was still embarrassing. It still made my face heat up. It made my chest throb.

“Cain... I think you need to study a bit more... At school...”

“Now you’re lecturing me out of nowhere.”

My heart was faintly throbbing. My chest was slowly heating up.

No matter how many times I’m reborn, I will still love you—this was a line I’d

often read in stories. These were the words that came to me at that moment.

It wasn't as though I'd been reborn. It wasn't as though I'd ever met Cain before.

But I could feel something. A premonition.

My pulse wasn't overpowering just yet. This was not the heated emotion of love. Like the faint twinkle of stars in the sky, it was small and subdued—but my chest quivered nonetheless.

I knew—I would probably fall in love with him. And perhaps after that, I'd fall in love with him again and again. However many times it took. In this adolescence, this youth...

"Cain..."

"Hmm?"

It was a bit embarrassing, but I looked him in the eye and smiled.

"I hope we continue to get along."

"Yeah." He took a swig of his drink. "Same here."

And with a smile, he was back to looking at the moon.

I watched the side of his face—his fine features lit up by the pale moonlight. The wind blew softly, causing my long blonde hair to flutter. The branches of the trees quivered and shook. And amid it all, the strong alcohol I drank alongside him stoked a heat inside my body.

Our school life had only just begun. I was going to spend far more time with him.

Under the beautiful moon, I felt a premonition of love.



Extra: Now—The Three Girls and the Great Bookstore

The place was as noisy and crowded as ever. A great many people held large shopping bags as they came and went down the wide street. Indeed, many would pass through as they searched for the shops they were looking for.

The flow of traffic surged forward like a wave.

“Wow! There’s a bunch of people!”

“Indeed. This prosperity rivals that of the royal capital! Right, Liz?!”

Melvy and Sylphie raised their voices in admiration.

“Yes, it’s said that there’s nothing you can’t find in this massive shopping district.”

I’d guided them to the greatest shopping street in Academy Town.

High-roofed buildings lined both sides of the street, continuing so far into the distance we couldn’t even see the end of them. Energetic voices rang out from the shops we passed by. The street was quite wide, and despite the open market being on such a grand scale, there were enough visitors to completely fill the space.

This shopping district was an absolutely indispensable place for all students. This was where we could get everything we needed for daily life, and even magical and alchemical reagents you wouldn’t usually find in other places.

However, the items I’d brought the two girls here for were far more directly related to their classes.

“Yes, and if you look to your left, you will see the largest bookstore in Academy Town.”

“Ooooooooooh!” they cheered.

Before us towered a massive building that looked like a mansion owned by

someone incredibly rich. It was three to four times larger than any of the buildings around it, and it exuded the greatest sense of presence of all the shops on the road.

Books were important for studies and research. This bookstore was constructed with Academy Town's dignity on the line, and it was at a scale that couldn't even be found in the royal capital. It was one of the town's landmarks.

The pair's eyes lit up—they were avid learners.

We stepped through the doors. The large bookshelves were nearly bursting with books. Alongside the advancement of printing technology came the production of books so cheap and plentiful that the people of the past could have never imagined it.

There were treatises on magic, reference material for each class, and manuals on martial arts—but that wasn't all. There was fiction, nonfiction, and picture books for children. Any and all genres were contained within these walls.

"It seems like...we won't ever be troubled by books while we're attending school."

"Umm, ohh... I want to live in this town!"

"You already live here, Melvy."

Their breathing grew rough as they cracked open a magical text. We'd come to buy textbooks for our academy classes.

"By the way, are you sure it was all right to not invite your comrade Rachel?"

"Yes... Well, we did invite her, of course..."

"When we said we were buying textbooks, she said she wasn't interested."

"Oh..."

Rachel, the warrior—I could imagine her saying that.

"I'll look after her to make sure she doesn't get failing grades..."

"Please do..."

I see... So Rachel is a candidate for failing school...

The three of us looked around. They wanted to get a good feel for the whole place first, so we were pretty much wandering aimlessly. We stopped by the popular books corner, the magazines that had just been released that week, the corner with books on making sweets, and so forth. We gazed at various books with no real plan in mind and chatted all about them. Quite some time was spent in the process.

However, once we reached a certain area, we froze up.

The porn corner...

“...”

“.....”

“.....”

Photos of naked women were generously plastered all over the covers. It was shelf upon shelf of nothing but such books.

We’d wandered into quite a terrible place.

We froze for a moment, and in the next, our faces all turned a little red. We shared a nod—*That was a little mishap*, we all agreed. With a slight smile, we immediately took our leave.

I could feel my sense of shame acting up. It had been a simple mistake that we wandered into that area, but after seeing that sort of stuff, I just couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d gone and done something bad.

In the first place, while Sylphie and Melvy were both engaged to Cain and were experienced in that sort of thing, I was completely inexperienced myself.

I was a pure and naive school girl.

“Ah ha ha...”

We shared a laugh to play it off. We laughed and went straight to the textbook area.

Our workbook kindly listed out the recommended textbooks. As long as we drilled the contents of those books into our heads, we wouldn’t have to struggle on any of the tests. Sylphie and Melvy were quite eager to learn, so I

couldn't imagine that they would trip themselves up in their schoolwork—or at least, not at the start.

The problem was Rachel, who showed absolutely no interest in textbooks.

“I'll buy one for Rachel too.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Sylphie and Melvy shared a slight nod.

Once we finished going through textbooks, we were all free to roam around. Sylphie went to the combat manuals, while Melvy had some interest in the studies done on holy magic. They both went off to flip through their preferred texts.

I myself searched for a guide to illusions. Ever since I'd first pulled it off on my sparring match with Sylphie, I'd begun to put some effort into studying the field. Using illusions just seemed right for me, and I felt I'd be able to reach the next level if I studied up on the tactic a bit more.

“Oh?”

When I was searching for a book on my own, I caught a glimpse of Melvy's back.

Is she looking for a book too? I wondered. But she was acting a bit strangely for that. She nervously looked around, her caution on full display as she darted about.

She's giving off a rather shady vibe...

“Hm?”

I hid in the shadows of a shelf as I watched her. With the way her eyes were moving, it didn't seem like she was scanning for books—no, she was scanning for people.

Don't tell me...she's shoplifting?!

No, that couldn't be the case. Not for Saint Melvy of all people—but I grew worried and continued to follow her.

There was no hesitation in her steps. She knew exactly where she was going,

and indeed, she did not seem to be searching for a particular book. *Then what is it?* I swallowed my spit as I watched.

And, she finally came to a stop at her destination.

“Hmm?”

The porn corner.

Once again, she turned her head left and right to scan for people. But she didn't seem to notice me. *Do I, perhaps, have a talent for espionage?*

And timidly, she picked a book off the shelf.

Her eyes were glistening, brimming with curiosity as she properly appreciated every page contained within. Her pale porcelain skin turned red and a heated breath escaped her mouth. A sweet, petite girl with spellbound eyes flipped the pages with quivering hands.

She was beautiful enough to take my breath away. The sight of the beautiful girl flush with such heat was great enough to charm a fellow woman like me.

However, the book she was reading was porn.

As soon as she'd been left to her own devices, she had been drawn to the porn corner like a moth to a flame. The forbidden fruit, the guilty pleasure had evidently shaken her to the core. Yet again, she lifted her head and looked around.

“Ah...”

She spotted me. I'd poked my head out, my mouth agape—and I'd ended up petrified in that position. I'd made myself quite easy to find. There wasn't much I could do about it. Seeing her like that, I simply spaced out in shock.

“Wha?!”

“Err...”

Her body twitched as she realized I'd been watching her. A waterfall of sweat began to pour from her brow; her eyes began to spin. Resigning myself, I stepped out from behind the bookshelf and walked over to her.

“H-Hey... Melvy...”

“...”

“Wh-What were you reading?” I asked, scratching my head.

Hey... I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this stuff either.

“Mm!”

Melvy's face was as red as a ripe apple. Her eyes were teary, and she was letting off so much heat that I half expected steam to start rising off of her. Her mouth opened and closed without any words. She was so clearly flustered, and even that seemed adorable. Even so, despite her incredible dismay, she still kept a firm grip on the porn mag in her hand.

“You...”

“You?”

“You have it all wrong!”

Melvy frantically cried out.

“Umm, umm! It's not like that! It's not like that at all, Liz! This is, umm...! It's some sort of mistake! I am definitely not that sort of person! It's true!”

“Somehow, those lines hit really close to home!”

“A-Ah! Wh-What's this...?! This was a porn book?! I only saw the cover, so I never noticed!”

“You're really pushing it with that one!”

I just saw you staring at those pages like crazy.

“Waaaaaaaah! I'm going hoooooooooome!”

Melvy pushed the porn book onto me and took off with tears in her eyes. I watched her in a daze.

I don't blame her... Anyone would be like that if someone they knew saw them...in that position. Is Melvy...a closeted pervert, perhaps?

In any case, it was almost time to reunite with Sylphie. I went to the register and paid for all the books I wanted, then waited for her at the entrance. *Melvy went home first. Please don't ask about the reason. That's what I'll tell her.*

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Liz.”

“Sylphie.”

We were safely reunited.

“Hmm...? Liz, you bought a porno mag?”

“Huh?”

For a moment, I didn’t know what Sylphie was saying. I looked down at the books in my possession and found that Melvy’s tome had been mixed in among my various books on illusions.

Huh...? Did I buy it unconsciously?

We both stood dumbfounded. “Waaaaaaaah! I’m going hoooooooooome!”

“Ah, hey, wait! Liz!”

I ran away in tears.

The sinking evening sun was awfully harsh on my eyes.















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I Could Never Be a Succubus! Volume 1

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私はサキュバスじゃありません 1

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